

The Boy Scouts of the Eagle Patrol eBook

The Boy Scouts of the Eagle Patrol

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SCOUTS ON THE TRAIL

The dark growth of scrub oak and pine parted suddenly and the lithe figure of a boy of about seventeen emerged suddenly into the little clearing. The lad who had so abruptly materialized from the close-growing vegetation peculiar to the region about the little town of Hampton, on the south shore of Long Island, wore a well-fitting uniform of brown khaki, canvas leggings of the same hue and a soft hat of the campaign variety, turned up at one side. To the front of his headpiece was fastened a metal badge, resembling the three-pointed arrow head utilized on old maps to indicate the north. On a metal scroll beneath it were embossed the words: "Be Prepared."

The manner of the badge's attachment would have indicated at once, to any one familiar with the organization, that the lad wearing it was the patrol leader of the local band of Boy Scouts.

Gazing keenly about him on all sides of the little clearing in the midst of which he stood, the boy's eyes lighted with a gleam of satisfaction on a largish rock. He lifted this up, adjusted it to his satisfaction and then picked up a smaller stone. This he placed on the top of the first and then listened intently. After a moment of this he then placed beneath the large underlying rock and at its left side a small stone.

Suddenly he started and gazed back. From the distance, borne faintly to his ears, came far off boyish shouts and cries.

They rose like the baying of a pack in full cry. Now high, now low on the hush of the midsummer afternoon.

"They picked the trail all right," he remarked to himself, with a smile, "maybe I'd better leave another sign."

Stooping he snapped off a small low-growing branch and broke it near the end so that its top hung limply down.

"Two signs now that this is the trail," he resumed as he stuck it in the ground beside the stone sign. "Now I'd better be off, for they are picking my tracks up, fast."

He darted off into the undergrowth on the opposite side of the clearing, vanishing as suddenly and noiselessly as he had appeared.

A few seconds later the deserted clearing was invaded by a scouting party of ten lads ranging in years from twelve to sixteen. They were all attired in similar uniforms to the leader, whom they were tracing, with but one exception they wore their "Be Prepared" badges on the left arm above the elbow. Some of them were only entitled to affix the motto part of the badge the scroll inscribed with the motto. These latter were the



second-class scouts of the Eagle Patrol. The exception to the badge-bearers was a tall, well-knit lad with a sunny face and wavy, brown hair. His badge was worn on the left arm, as were the others, but it had a strip of white braid sewn beneath it. This indicated that the bearer was the corporal of the patrol.

As the group of flushed, panting lads emerged into the sandy space the corporal looked sharply about him. Almost at once his eye encountered the “spoor” left by the preceding lad.

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"Here's the trail, boys," he shouted, "and to judge by the fresh look of the break in this branch it can't have been placed here very long. The small stone by the large one means to the left. We'll run Rob Blake down before long for all his skill if we have good luck."

"Say, Corporal Merritt," exclaimed a perspiring lad, whose "too, too solid flesh" seemed to be melting and running off his face in the form of streaming moisture, "don't we get a rest?"

A general laugh greeted poor Bob or Tubby Hopkins' remark.

"I always told you, Tubby, you were too fat to make a good scout," laughed Corporal Merritt Crawford, "this is the sort of thing that will make you want to take some of that tubbiness off you."

"Say, Tubby, you look like a roll of butter at an August picnic," laughed Simon Jeffords, one of the second-class scouts.

"All right, Sim," testily rejoined the aggrieved fat one, "I notice at that, though, that I am a regular scout while you are only a rookie."

"Come on, cut out the conversation," exclaimed Corporal Crawford hastily, "while we are fussing about here, Rob Blake must be halfway home."

With a groan of comical despair from poor Tubby, the Boy Scouts darted forward once more. On and on they pushed across country, skillfully tracking their leader by the various signs they had been taught to know and of which the present scouting expedition was a test.

Their young leader evidently intended them to use their eyes to the utmost for, beside the stone signs, he used blaze-marks, cut on the trees with his hunting knife. For instance, at one place they would find a square bit of bark removed, with a long slice to the left of it. This indicated that their quarry had doubled to the left. The slice to the right of the square blaze indicated the reverse.

Suddenly Corporal Crawford held up his hand as a signal for silence. The scouts came to an abrupt stop.

From what seemed to be only a short distance in front of them they could hear a voice upraised apparently in anger. Replying to it were the tones of their leader.

"Seems to be trouble ahead of some kind," exclaimed Crawford. "Come on, boys."

They all advanced close on his heels—guided by the sound of the angry voice, which did not diminish in tone but apparently waxed more and more furious as they drew

nearer. Presently the woodland thinned and the ground became dotted with stumps of felled timber and in a few paces more they emerged on a small peach orchard at the edge of which stood Rob Blake and a larger and older boy. As Crawford and his followers came upon the scene the elder lad, who seemed beside himself with rage, picked up a large rock and was about to hurl it with all his might at Rob when the young corporal dashed forward and held his hand up to stay him.

"Here, what's all this trouble?" he demanded.

"You just keep out of it, Merritt Crawford," said the elder lad, a hulking, thick-set youth with a mean look on his heavy features. "I'm just reading this kid here a lesson. This orchard is my father's and mine and you'll keep out of it in future or suffer the consequences, understand?"

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"Why, we aren't doing any harm," protested Rob Blake heatedly.

"I don't care what you are doing or not doing," retorted the other, "this is my father's orchard and you'll keep off it. You and the rest of you tin soldiers. I don't want you stealing our peaches."

"I guess you are sore, Jack Curtiss, because you couldn't get a boy scout patrol of your own! I guess that's what the trouble is," remarked Tubby Hopkins softly, but with a meaning look at the big lad.

"You impudent little whipper-snapper," roared Jack Curtiss, "if you weren't such a shrimp I'd lick you for that remark, but you're all beneath my notice. All I want to say to you is keep away from my orchard or I'll give you a trimming."

"Suppose you start now," said Rob Blake quietly, "if you are so anxious to show what a scrapper you are."

"Bah, I don't want anything to do with you, I tell you," rejoined Curtiss, turning away, with a rather troubled expression, however, for while he was a bully the big lad had no particular liking for a fight unless he was pretty sure that all the advantage lay on his side.

"It was too bad you didn't get that patrol of yours, Jack," called the irrepressible Tubby after him as the big youth strode off across the orchard toward the old-fashioned farmhouse in which he lived with his father, a well-to-do farmer. "Never mind; better luck next time," he went on, "or maybe we'll let you into ours some time."

"You just wait," roared the retreating bully, shaking his fist at the lads, "I'll make trouble for you yet."

"Well," remarked Rob Blake, as Jack Curtiss strode off, "I guess the run is over for to-day. Too bad we should have come out on his land. Of course he feels sore at us; and I shouldn't wonder but he will really try to do us some mischief if he gets a chance."

As it was growing late and there did not seem much chance of restarting the "Follow the Trail" practice, that day at least, the boys strolled back through the woodland and soon emerged on a country road about three miles from Hampton Inlet, where they lived.

While they are covering the distance perhaps the reader may care to know something about the cause of the enmity which Jack Curtiss entertained toward the lads of the Eagle Patrol. It had its beginning several months before when the boys of Hampton Inlet began to discuss forming a patrol of boy scouts. They all attended the Hampton Academy, and naturally the news that Rob Blake was going to try to organize a patrol soon spread through the school.

Jack Curtiss, as soon as he heard what Rob—whom he considered more or less a rival of his—intended doing he also forwarded an application to the headquarters of the organization in New York. As Rob Blake's had been received first, however, and on investigation he was shown to be a likely lad for the leader, he was appointed and at once began the enrollment of his scouts.

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The bully was furious when he realized that he would be unable to secure an authorized patrol, and he and his cronies, two lads about his own age named Bill Bender and Sam Redding, had been busy ever since devising schemes to “get even” as they called it. None of these, however, had been effective and the encounter of that day was the first chance Jack had had to work off any of his rancor on Rob Blake’s patrol.

Young Blake was the only son of Mr. Albert Blake, the president of the local bank. His corporal, Merritt Crawford, was the eldest of the numerous family of Jared Crawford, the blacksmith and wheelwright of the little town, and Tubby Hopkins was the offspring of Mrs. Hopkins—a widow in comfortable circumstances. The other lads of the Patrol whom we shall meet as the story of their doings and adventures progresses were all natives of the town, which was situated on the south shore of Long Island—as has been said—and on an inlet which led out to the Atlantic itself.

The scouts trudged back into Hampton just at twilight and made their way at once to their armory—as they called it—which was situated in a large room above the bank of which Rob’s father was president. At one side of it was a row of lockers and each lad—after changing his uniform for street clothes—placed his “regimentals” in these receptacles.

This done the lads broke up and started for their various homes. Rob and his young corporal left the armory together, after locking the door and descending the stairs which led onto a side street.

“I wonder if that fellow Curtiss means to carry out his threat of getting even?” said Crawford as they made their way down the street arm in arm, for their homes were not far apart and both on Main Street.

“He’s mean enough to attempt anything,” rejoined Rob, “but I don’t think he’s got nerve enough to carry out any of his schemes. Hullo!” he broke off suddenly, “there he is now across the street by the post office, talking to Bill Bender and Sam Redding. I’ll bet they are hatching up some sort of mischief. Just look at them looking at us. I’ll bet a doughnut they were talking about us.”

“Shouldn’t wonder,” agreed his companion. “By the way, I’ve got to go and see if there is any mail. Come on over.”

The two lads crossed the street and as they entered the post office, although neither of them had much use for either of the bullies’ two chums, they nodded to them pleasantly.

“You kids think you’re pretty fine with your Eagle Patrol or whatever you call it, don’t you,” sneered Bill Bender, as they walked by. “I’ll bet the smell of a little real powder would make your whole regiment run to cover.”



“Don’t pay any attention to him,” whispered the young corporal to Rob, who doubled up his fists and flushed angrily at the sneering tone Jack Curtiss’ friend had adopted.

Rob restrained his anger with an effort, and by the time they emerged from the post office the trio of worthies—who, as Rob had rightly guessed, had been discussing them—had moved on up the street.

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"I had trouble with those kids myself this afternoon," remarked Jack Curtiss with a scowl, as they wended their way toward a shed in the rear of Bill Bender's home, which had been fitted tip as a sort of clubroom.

"What did they do to you?" incautiously inquired Sam Redding, a youth as big as the other two, but not so powerful. In fact he was used more or less as a tool by them.

"Do to me," roared the bully, "what did I do to them, you mean."

"Well what did you do to them then?" asked Bill Bender, as they entered the clubroom before referred to and he produced some cigarettes, which all three had been strictly forbidden to smoke.

"Chased them off my land," rejoined the other, lighting a paper roll and blowing out a cloud of smoke, "you should have seen them run. If they want to play their fool games they've got to do it on the property of folks who'll let them. They can't come on my land."

"You mean your father's, don't you?" put in the unlucky Sam Redding.

"Sam, you've got a head like a billiard ball," retorted the bully, turning on the other, "it'll be mine some day, won't it? Therefore it's as good as mine now."

Although he didn't quite see the logic of the foregoing, Sam Redding gave a sage nod and agreed that his leader was right.

"Yes, those kids need a good lesson from somebody," chimed in Bill Bender.

"I think we had better be the 'somebodies' to give it to them," rejoined Jack Curtiss.

"They are getting insufferable. They actually twitted me this afternoon with being sore at them because I didn't get my patrol—as if I really wanted one. That Blake kid is the worst of the bunch. Just because his father has a little money he gives himself all kinds of airs. My father is as rich as his, even if he isn't a banker."

"I've been thinking of a good trick we can put up on them, but it will take some nerve to carry it out," announced Bill Bender, after some more discussion of the lads of the Eagle Patrol.

"Out with it, then," urged the bully, "what is it?"

In a lowered tone Bill Bender sketched out his scheme in detail, while Jack and Sam nodded their approval. At length he ceased talking and the other two broke out into a delighted laugh, in which malice as much as merriment prevailed.

"It's the very thing," exclaimed Jack. "Bill, you're a genius. We'll do it as soon as possible. If that doesn't take some starch out of those tin soldiers nothing will."

Half an hour later the three cronies parted for the night. Sam went to his home near the waterfront, for his father was a boat builder, and Jack started to walk the three miles to his father's farm in the moonlight. His way took him by the bank. As he passed it he gazed up at the windows of the armory on which was lettered in gilt: "Eagle Patrol of the Boy Scouts of America."

"That's a slick idea of Bill's," said the bully to himself, "I can hardly wait till we get a chance to carry it out."

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CHAPTER II

A CRUISE TO THE ISLAND

"Whatever are you doing, Rob?"

It was the morning after the consultation of Jack Curtiss and his cronies, and Corporal Crawford was looking over the fence into his leader's yard.

Rob was bending over a curious-looking apparatus, consisting of a bent stick held in a bow-shape by a taut leather thong. The appliance was twisted about an upright piece of wood sharpened at one end—which was rotated as the lad ran the bow back and forth across it.

Presently smoke began to rise from the flat piece of timber into which the point of the upright stick had been boring and depositing sawdust, and Rob, by industriously blowing at the accumulation, presently caused it to burst into flame.

"There I've done it," he exclaimed triumphantly, arising with a flushed face from his labors.

"Done what?" inquired young Crawford interestedly.

"Made fire in the Indian way," replied Rob triumphantly.

"I thought they made it by rubbing two sticks together."

"Only book Indians do that," replied Rob, "I'll tell you it took me a time to get the hang of it, but I've got it now."

"It's quite a stunt, all right," commented the corporal admiringly.

"You bet, and it's useful, too," replied Rob. "I'll put the bow and drill in my pocket, and then any time we get stuck for matches we'll have no trouble in making a signal smoke or lighting cooking fires."

"Say, I've got some news for you," went on young Crawford, "did you know that Sam Redding has entered that freak motor boat he's been building in the yacht club regatta? He's out for the club trophy."

"No, is he, though?" exclaimed Rob, keenly interested. "Then the crew and skipper of the Flying Fish will have to look alive. I know that Sam's father helped him out with that boat and put a lot of new wrinkles in it. I didn't think, though, he'd have it ready in time for the races."

The boys referred to the coming motor-boat races which were to take place shortly on the inlet at Hampton. Like most of the other lads in the seashore town, Merritt and Rob had a lot of experience on the water and some time before had built a speedy motor boat from knock-down frames. The Flying Fish, as they called her, was entered for the main event referred to, the prize for which was a silver cup, donated by the merchants of the town. There were several other entries in the race, but Rob and his crew, consisting of Merritt and Tubby Hopkins, confidently expected the Flying Fish to easily lead them all.

"I wonder if the Sam Redding can show her stern to the Flying Fish?" mused Rob. "I'd like to take a good look at her."

"Let's go down to Redding's boat yard," suggested Merritt; "she's lying there on the ways. I don't suppose any one would object to our sizing her up."

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Rob hailed the suggestion as a good one.

"We can call in for Tubby on the way," he said, as he darted into the house after his hat.

The boys dropped in at Tubby's house on their way to the water-front, and received from the stout youth some additional details regarding Sam's boat.

"She's a hydroplane," volunteered Tubby, "and Tom Jennings, down at the yard, says she's as fast as a race horse."

"A hydroplane?—that's one of those craft that cut along the top of the water like a skimming dish, isn't it?" asked Merritt.

"That's the idea," responded Rob. "They're supposed to be as speedy as anything afloat in smooth water."

Thus conversing they reached the boat-building yard of Sam Redding's father and were greeted by Tom Jennings, a big good-natured ship carpenter. "Hullo, Tom! Can we see that new boat of Sam's?" inquired Rob,

"Sure, I guess there's no objection," grinned Tom, "come right this way. There she is, over there by that big winch."

Report had not erred apparently as to the novel qualities of Sam Redding's speed craft. She was about twenty-five feet long, narrow and painted black. She was perfectly flat-bottomed, her underside being deeply notched at frequent intervals. On the edge of those notches she was supposed to glide over the water when driven at top speed.

"She certainly looks like a winner," commented Rob, as he gazed at her clean, slender lines and sharp bow.

"She's got wonderful speed," Tom Jennings confided. "We tried her out the other night when no one was around. But I don't think that in rough water she'll be much good."

"No, I'd prefer the Flying Fish for the waters hereabouts," agreed Rob, "it's liable to come on rough in a hurry and then a chap who was out in a dry-goods box, like that thing, would be in trouble."

"What are you calling a dry-goods box?" demanded an indignant voice behind them, and turning, the lads saw Sam Redding with a menacing look on his face. A little way behind him stood Bill Bender and Jack Curtiss.

"Oh, I beg your pardon, Sam," said Rob. "I really admire your hydroplane very much, and I think it will give us a tussle for the trophy, all right; but I don't think she'd be much good in any kind of a sea-way."

"That's my business, you interfering little runt," snapped Sam, who, with Bill Bender and Jack Curtiss to back him, felt very brave; though ordinarily he would have avoided trouble with the young scouts. "What are you doing spying around the yard here, anyhow?" he went on insolently.

"We are not spying," indignantly burst out Merritt. "We asked Tom Jennings if we couldn't look at your hydroplane, as we were naturally interested in her, and he gave us permission."

"Well, he had no business to," growled Sam; "he ought to be attending to his work instead of showing a lot of nosy young cubs my new boat."

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"They are capable of stealing your ideas," chimed in Jack Curtiss, "and putting them on their own boat."

"That's ridiculous," laughed Rob, "as I said I wouldn't want to have anything to do with such a contrivance except on a lake or a river."

"Well, you keep your advice and your ideas to yourself, and get out of this yard!" roared Sam, waxing bolder and bolder, and mistaking Rob's conciliatory manner for cowardice. "I've a good mind to punch your head."

"Better come on and try it," retorted Rob, preparing for the immediate onslaught which it seemed reasonable from Sam's manner to expect.

But it didn't come.

Muttering something about "young cubs," and "keeping the boat-yard gate locked," Sam turned to his chums and invited them to come and try out his new motor in the shop.

As the three chums had no desire to "mix it up with Sam on his own place," as Tubby put it, they left the yard promptly, and walked on down the water-front to the wharf at which lay the Flying Fish, the fastest craft in the Hampton Motor Boat Club. Rob's boat was, to tell the truth, rather broad of beam for a racer and drew quite a little water. She had a powerful motor and clean lines, however, and while not primarily designed solely for "mug-hunting," had beaten everything she had raced with during the few months since the boys had completed her. The money for her motor had been given to Rob by his father, who was quite indulgent to Rob in money matters, having noticed that the lad always expended the sums given him wisely.

"Let's take a spin," suddenly suggested Tubby.

"Nothing to prevent us," answered Rob; "we've got plenty of time before dinner. Come on, boys."

The lads were soon on board and examining the gasoline tank, to see how much fuel they had on hand, and oiling up the engine. The fuel receptacle proved to be almost full, so after filling the lubricant cups and attending to the batteries, they started up the engine—a powerful, three cylindered, twelve-horse affair capable of driving the twenty-two foot Flying Fish through the water at twelve miles an hour or better.

Just as Rob was casting off the head-line there came a hail from the wharf above them.

"Ahoy, there, shipmates! Where are yer bound fer this fine, sunny day?"

The lads looked up to see the weather-beaten countenance of Captain Job Hudgins, one of the characters of the vicinity. He was a former whaler, and lived on a small

island some distance from Hampton. On his little territory he fished and grew a few vegetables, “trading in” his produce at the Hampton grocery stores for his simple wants. He, however, had a pension, and was supposed to have a “snug little fortune” laid by. His only companion in his island solitude was it big Newfoundland dog named “Skipper.”

The animal stood beside its master on the dock and wagged its tail at the sight of the boys, whom it knew quite well from their frequent visits to the captain’s little island.

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"Hullo, captain!" shouted Rob, as the veteran saluted his three young friends. "Where's your boat?"

"Oh, her engine went—busted, and I had to leave her at the yard below fer repairs," explained the captain. "I wonder if yer boys can give me a lift back if yer goin' near Topsail Island?"

"Surest thing you know," rejoined Rob hastily. "Come right aboard. But how are you going to get off your island again if your motor is laid up here to be fixed?"

"Oh, I'll use my rowboat," responded the old mariner, clambering down into the Flying Fish. "Say, this is quite a right smart contraption, ain't she?"

"We think she is a pretty good little boat," modestly replied Rob, taking his place at the wheel. "Now, then, Merritt, start up that engine."

"Hold on a minute!" shouted Tubby. "We forgot the dog."

Sure enough, Skipper was dashing up and down the wharf in great distress at the prospect of being deserted.

"Put yer boat alongside that landin' stage at the end of the wharf," suggested his master. "Skipper can get aboard from there, I reckon."

Rob steered the Flying Fish round to the floating landing, to which an inclined runway led from the wharf. Skipper dashed down it as soon as he saw what was happening, and was waiting, ready to embark, when the Flying Fish came alongside.

"Poor old Skipper, I reckon yer thought we was goin' ter maroon yer," said Captain Job, as the animal jumped on board with a bark of "thanks" for his rescue. "I tell yer, boys, I wouldn't lose that dog fer all the money in Rob's father's bank. He keeps good watch out an the Island, I'll tell yer."

"I didn't think any one much came there, except us," said Rob, as the Flying Fish headed away from the wharf and began to cut through the waters of the inlet.

"Oh, yes; there's others," responded the old man. "That Jack Curtiss lad and his two chums are out there quite often."

"Bill Bender and Sam Redding, I suppose you mean," said Tubby.

"Those their names?" asked the captain. "Well, I don't know any good uv any uv 'em. Old Skipper here chased 'em away from my melon patch the other day. I reckon they thought Old Scratch was after them, the way they run; but they got away with some melons, just the same."

The old man laughed aloud at the recollection of the marauders' precipitous flight.

That Jack Curtiss and his two cronies had made a rendezvous of the island was news to the boys, and not agreeable news, either. They had been planning a patrol camp there later on in the summer, and the bully and his two chums were not regarded by them as desirable neighbors. However, they said nothing, as they could not claim sole right to use the island, which was property that had been so long in litigation that it had come to be known as "No Man's Land" as well as by its proper name. The captain was only a squatter there, but no one cared to disturb him, and he had led the existence of a semi-hermit there for many years.

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The Flying Fish rapidly covered the calm waters of the inlet and was soon dancing over the swells outside.

"I'm going to let her out a bit," said Rob suddenly; "look out for spray."

"Spray don't bother a brine-pickled old salt like me," laughed the captain. "Let her go."

The Flying Fish seemed fairly to leap forward as Merritt gave her the full power of her engine. As Rob had said, it did indeed behoove her occupants to look out for spray. The sparkling spume came flying back in sheets as she cut through the waves, but the boys didn't mind that any more than did their weather-beaten companion. As for Skipper, he barked aloud in sheer joy as the Flying Fish slid along as if she were trying to live up to her name to her utmost ability.

"This is a good little sea boat," remarked the captain, as they plunged onward. "She's as seaworthy as she is speedy, I guess."

"She'll stand a lot of knocking about, and that's a fact," agreed Rob.

"Well," remarked the old man, gazing about him, "it's a good thing that she is, fer, if I'm not mistaken—and I'm not often off as regards the weather—we are goin' ter have quite a little blow before yer boys get back home."

"A storm?" asked Tubby, somewhat alarmed.

"Oh, no; not what yer might call a storm," laughed the captain; "but just what we used to term a 'capful uv wind.'"

"Well, so long as it isn't a really bad blow, it won't trouble the Flying Fish," Rob assured him.

"Hullo!" exclaimed the old man suddenly. "What queer kind uv craft is that?"

He pointed back to the mouth of the now distant inlet, from which a curious-looking black craft was emerging at what seemed to be great speed.

"It's that hydroplane of Sam Redding's, for a bet!" cried Rob. "Here, Tubby, take the wheel a minute, while I put the glasses on her."

The lad stood up in the heaving motor craft, steadying himself against the bulwarks by his knees, and peered through his marine-glasses.

"It's the hydroplane, sure enough," he said. "By ginger, but she can go, all right! Sam and Jack and Bill are all in her. They seem to be heading right out to sea, too."

“Say!” exclaimed Tubby suddenly, “if it comes on to blow, as the captain said it would, they’ll be in a bad fix, won’t they?”

“In that ther shoe-box thing,” scornfully exclaimed the old captain, who had also been looking through the glasses, “why, I wouldn’t give a confederate dollar bill with a hole in it fer their lives.”

CHAPTER III

BOY SCOUTS TO THE RESCUE

“Hadn’t we better put back and warn them?” suggested Merritt rather anxiously, for he was alarmed by the confident manner in which the old seaman prophesied certain disaster to the hydroplane if the weather freshened.

“No; see, she’s heading toward us. I guess they want a race,” cried Rob. “We’ll slow down a bit and let them catch up.”

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In a few moments the hydroplane was alongside. The yellow hood over her powerful engines glistened with the wet of the great bow-wave her speed had occasioned, and her powerful motor was exhausting with a roar like a battery of machine guns.

Crouched aft of the engine hood was Sam Redding, who held the wheel. Jack Curtiss and Bill Bender were in the stern. They sat tandem-wise in the narrow racing shell.

"Want a tow rope for that old stone dray of yours?" jeered Jack Curtiss, as the speedy little racer ranged alongside.

He did not know that the Flying Fish was slowed down, and that although the hydroplane appeared to be capable of tremendous speed, she was not actually so very much faster than Rob's boat.

"Say, you fellows," warned Rob, making a trumpet of his hands, "the captain says it's coming on to blow before long. You'd better get back into the inlet with that craft of yours."

"Save your breath to cool your coffee," shouted Sam Redding back at him, across the fifty feet or so of water that lay between the two boats. "We know what we are about."

"But you're risking your lives," shouted Merritt. "That thing wouldn't live ten minutes in any kind of a sea."

"Well, we're not such a bunch of old women as to be scared of a little wetting," jeered Jack Curtiss. "So long! We've got no time to wait for that old tub of yours."

Before the boys could voice any more warnings, the hydroplane, which had been slowed down, dashed off once more.

"I don't know what we are to do," spoke up Merritt. "We can't compel them to go in, and, after all, the captain may be mistaken."

"No, I'm not, my son," rejoined the veteran. "I can smell wind—and see them 'mare's tails' in the sky over yonder. They're as fall uv wind as a preacher is uv texts."

"Well, we've done our best to warn them," concluded Rob. "If they are so foolhardy as to keep on, we can't help it."

In half an hour more the boys had landed the captain at the little pier he had built on his island, and to which his rowboat was attached, and were ready to start back, good-bys having been said.

"Hark!" exclaimed the captain, as Rob prepared to give the order to "Go ahead."

The boys listened, and heard a low, distant moaning sound, something like the deepest rumbling notes of a church organ.

“That’s the wind comin’,” warned the captain. “Yer’d better be hurryin’ back.”

With more hasty good-bys, the lads got under way at once. As they emerged from the lee of the island they could see that seaward the ocean was being rapidly lashed into choppy, white— crested waves by the advancing storm, and that the wind was freshening into a really stiff breeze.

“Those fellows must be wishing they took our advice now if they are fools enough to have kept out,” said Merritt, as he slowed down the engine so as to permit the Flying Fish to ride the rising seas more easily.

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"Yes, I guess they're doing some tall thinking," agreed Tubby, as a wave caught the little Flying Fish "quartering" on her port bow, and sent a white smother of spray swirling back over her occupants.

"That's the time we got it," laughed Rob, from the wheel, peering straight ahead. Suddenly he uttered a shout and pointed seaward.

"Look there!" he shouted at the top of his voice. "There are those three fellows, and they're in trouble, from the looks of it."

The others looked, and beheld, half a mile or so away, on the roughening waters, the hull of the hydroplane. She was tossing up and down like a cork, and apparently was drifting helplessly, with her motor broken down, in the heavy sea. Her occupants seemed to be bailing her; but as they caught sight of the Flying Fish they stood up and waved frantically.

"Yes, they're in trouble, all right," agreed Tubby. "And I suppose we've got to go and get them out of it."

Rob had already put the Flying Fish about and headed her for the distressed craft. As they drew near, Sam Redding began shouting:

"Help, help! We're sinking, we're sinking!"

Jack Curtiss and Bill Bender, drenched to the skin with spray and white with fright, said nothing, but a look of great relief came over their faces as the chums' boat ranged alongside.

"I don't want to risk ramming my boat by coming right alongside," shouted Rob. "You'll have to jump for it. Don't be scared. We'll pull you aboard."

The three youths on the water-logged hydroplane looked somewhat alarmed at the prospect, but Rob knew that Jack and Bill could swim. He was not sure of Sam, but assumed, from the fact that he had lived by the sea all his life, that he was equally at home in the water.

The hesitation of Jack Curtiss and his chum was over in a minute, as the hydroplane gave a plunge that seemed as if it would be her last. Lightly dressed as they were, in canvas trousers, sleeveless jerseys and yachting shoes, it was no trick at all for them to swim the few feet to the Flying Fish. As they leaped overboard, Sam lingered.

"Come on, Sam," shouted Jack, as the boys lugged the two dripping, sputtering castaways on board.

"I—I can't swim. You'll have to come alongside for me," stuttered the badly-scared Sam.

"All right. Hold on, and we'll do what we can," hailed Rob, starting to carry out the risky maneuver of getting alongside the plunging hydroplane in the heavy sea.

In some never-to-be-explained manner, however, the frightened Sam suddenly lost his balance in the tossing racing boat, and, clawing desperately at her bulwarks to save himself, shot over the side.

"He'll drown!" shouted Jack Curtiss. "He can't swim, and he'll drown."

"If you knew that, why didn't you stand by him?" truculently growled Tubby.

Without an instant's hesitation, Merritt threw off the jacket he had put on when it started to blow, and slipped off his shoes. He was overboard and striking out for the drowning boy before those in the Flying Fish even realized his purpose.

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With swift, powerful strokes he got alongside Sam just as the owner of the hydroplane was going down for the third time.

As the brave boy seized the struggling, frightened youth he felt himself gripped by the panic-stricken Sam in a frenzied hold of desperate intensity. His arms were pinioned by the drowning wretch, and they both vanished beneath the waves.

As they went under, however, Merritt managed to get one hand free, and recalling what he had read of what to do under such conditions, struck the other boy a terrific blow between the eyes. It stunned Sam completely, and, to his great relief, Merritt felt the imprisoning grip relax. He could then handle Sam easily, and as they shot to the surface he saw the Flying Fish bearing down on them, with four white, strained faces searching the tumbling waters.

In a few moments the unconscious lad and his rescuer were hauled on board, and Rob, after congratulations, headed the Flying Fish for the mouth of the inlet, which was still some distance off.

Tubby and Bill Bender laid Sam on his stomach, across a thwart, and started to try to get some of the salt water, of which he had swallowed great quantities, out of him. He soon gave signs of returning consciousness, and opened his eyes just as Jack Curtiss was demanding to know if the Boy Scouts weren't going to take the hydroplane in tow.

"Not much we're not," responded Rob. "I'm sorry to have to leave her; but this sea is getting up nastier every minute, and there's no way of getting a line to her without running more risk than I want to take. We've had one near-drowning and we don't want another."

"If this was my boat, I'd pick Sam's boat up," sullenly replied the bully.

"You ought to be mighty glad we came along when we did," indignantly spoke up Tubby. "You'd have been in a bad fix if we hadn't. Instead of being thankful for it, all you can do is to kick about leaving the hydroplane."

An angry reply was on the other's lips, but Bill Bender checked it by looking up and saying: "I guess the kid's right, Jack. Let it go at that."

The bully glowered. He felt his pride much wounded at having been compelled to seek the aid of the boys whom he despised and hated.

"I suppose you'll go and blab it all over town about how you saved us," he sneered, as the Flying Fish threaded her way through the tumbling waters at the mouth of the inlet and began making her way up it.

"I don't think we shall," replied Rob quietly. "I mean to recommend Merritt, though, to headquarters for his Red Honor."

"Oh, you mean that cheap, bronze medal thing on a bit of red ribbon!" sneered Jack. "Why, that isn't worth much. You couldn't sell it for anything but old junk. Why don't they make them of gold?"

"That 'bronze medal thing,' as you call it, is worth a whole lot to a Boy Scout," rejoined Rob in the same even tone. "More than you can understand."

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On their arrival at the yacht-club pier the boys were overwhelmed with questions, and a doctor was summoned for Sam, who, as soon as he found himself safe, began to groan and show most alarming symptoms of being seriously affected by his immersion.

The boys were not able to conceal the fact that they had accomplished a brave rescue, and were overwhelmed with congratulations. Merritt especially came in for warm praise and commendation.

"You will certainly be granted your Red Honor," declared Mr. Wingate, who, besides being commodore of the Yacht Club, was one of the gentlemen whom Rob had persuaded to act as Scout Master for the new patrol.

Merritt escaped from the crowd of admiring motor-boat men and boys as soon as he could, and hastened home for a change of clothes. On the arrival of Dr. Telfair, the village physician, he pronounced that there was nothing whatever the matter with Sam but a bad fright, and prescribed dry garments and hot lemonade.

"Don't I need any medicine?" groaned Sam, determined to make the most out of his temporary notoriety.

"No, you don't," growled the doctor; "unless," he added to himself, "they put up 'courage' in bottles."

"I suppose those boys will be more stuck up than ever now," said Jack to Bill Bender, as, having perfunctorily thanked their rescuers, they started for home with the almost weeping Sam.

"Sure to be," rejoined Bill. "It's all your fault, Sam, for taking us out in that fool hydroplane."

"My fault! Well, I like that," stuttered out Sam. "You asked me to come, and you know I wanted to come back when the boys told us it might come on to blow; but you called me a 'sissy,' and said I was too timid to own a boat."

"Um—er—well," rejoined Bill, somewhat confused, "that's so. But anyhow, to return to what we were talking about, it's given those kids a great chance to set up as heroes."

"Well, we can work that scheme we were talking about last night on them just as soon as you're ready," suddenly remarked Jack. "That will give them something else to think about."

"Oh, say, Jack, cut it out, won't you?" pleaded Sam. "I don't like the kids any better than you do, but one of them saved my life to-day, and I'm not going into anything that will harm them."

“Hear him rave!” sneered Jack. “Why last night, when we talked it over, you thought it would be a prime joke. It isn’t as if it would hurt them. It’ll just give them something to study up, that’s all. They think they’re such fine trailers and tracers that it would be a shame not to give them a chance to show what they can do.”

“That’s right, Sam,” cut in Bill; “it’s more of a joke than anything else.”

“Well,” agreed Sam weakly, “if you put it in that way, I suppose it’s all right; but I tell you I don’t like it.”

“Why, you’ll have the laugh of your young life after we’ve pulled the stunt off,” remarked Bill. “When will we do it, Jack?”

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"Not to-night, that's certain," responded the other. "I've had enough excitement for one day."

"What's the matter with to-morrow night, then?"

"I'm agreeable. How about you, Sam?"

"I wish you fellows would leave me out of it," rejoined the bully's timid chum.

"Like they left you out of their patrol, eh?" sneered Bill, knowing that he was touching the other on a tender spot.

"All right, to-morrow night suits me," snapped Sam, flushing angrily at Bill's remark—as that worthy had intended he should. "Here's my house. We'll meet at Bill's 'boudoir.'"

"Right you are," chuckled Jack. "Oh, say, it's going to be the joke of the century!"

CHAPTER IV

SAM IN DIRE STRAITS

"Kree-ee-ee!"

Merritt paused the next morning in front of Tubby's home, and gave the "call" of the Eagle Patrol with a not uncreditable resemblance to the scream of a real eagle.

The cry was instantly echoed—though in a rather thicker way— from inside the house, and in a minute Tubby, who knew that some one of the patrol must have uttered the call, appeared at his door, munching a large slice of bread and jam, although it was not more than an hour since breakfast.

"Say, you, did you ever hear an eagle scream with his mouth full of bread and jam?" demanded Merritt, as the stout youth appeared.

"Eagles don't eat bread and jam," rejoined Tubby, defending his position. "Have some?"

"Having had breakfast not more than an hour ago, I'm not hungry yet, thank you," politely rejoined the corporal; "besides, I'm afraid I'd get fat."

Dodging the stout youth's blow, the corporal went on:

"Heard the news?"

"No—what news?" eagerly demanded the other, finishing his light repast.

“Why, the Dolphin—you know, that fishing boat—picked up Sam’s hydroplane at sea and towed it in. It’s in pretty good shape, I hear, although the engine is out of commission and it was half full of water.”

“He’s a lucky fellow to get it back.”

“I should say so,” replied Merritt; “but it will cost him a whole lot to reclaim it. The captain of the Dolphin says he wants fifty dollars for it as salvage.”

“Gee! Do you think Sam’s father will give him that much?” said Tubby, with round eyes.

“I don’t know. He can afford it all right. He’s made a lot of money out of that boat-building shop, my father says; but he’s so stingy that I doubt very much if he will give Sam such a sum.”

“Why, here’s Sam coming down the street now,” exclaimed the good-natured Tubby. “I wonder if he’s heard about it. Hullo, Sam! Get all the water out of your system?”

“I’m all right this morning, if that is what you mean,” rejoined the other, with dignity.

“Heard the news about your boat?” asked Merritt suddenly.

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"No; what about her? Is she safe? Who picked her up?"

"Wait a minute. One question at a time," laughed Merritt. "She's safe, all right. The Dolphin picked her up at sea. But it will cost you fifty dollars to get her."

"Fifty dollars!" gasped Sam, turning pale.

"That's what the skipper of the Dolphin says. He had a lot of trouble getting a line fast to her, he says, and he means to have the money or keep the boat."

"Oh, well, I'll get it from my father easily enough," said Sam confidently, preparing to swagger off down the street. "I've got to get my boat back and beat Rob's Flying Fish, and that hydroplane can do it."

"Can you match that?" exclaimed Merritt to the fat youth, as Sam strolled away. "Here he was saved from drowning by the Flying Fish only yesterday, and all he can think of this morning is to promise to beat her. What makes him so mean, I wonder?"

"Just born that way, I guess," rejoined the stout youth; "and as for the Flying Fish saving him, if it hadn't been for a certain Corporal Crawford, he—"

"Here, stow that," protested Merritt, coloring up. "I heard enough of that yesterday afternoon,"

As the boys had surmised, Sam's father was not at all pleased when he learned that his son wanted fifty dollars. In fact, he refused point blank to let him have it at all.

"That boat of yours has cost enough already, and I'm not going to spend any more on it," he said angrily, as he turned to his work.

"But I can't get the hydroplane back if I don't pay it," urged Sam. "I've seen the captain of the Dolphin, and he refuses absolutely to let me have her unless I pay him for his trouble in towing her in."

"I can't help that," snapped the elder Redding. "What have I got to do with your boat? Look here!" he exclaimed, turning angrily and producing a small memorandum book from his pocket and rapidly turning the leaves. "Do you know how much I've given you in the last two months?"

"N-n-no," stammered Sam, looking very much embarrassed, and shuffling about from one foot to the other.

"Then I'll tell you, young man; it's exactly—let me see—ten, twenty, five, three, fifteen and eight. That's just sixty-one dollars. Do you think that money grows on gooseberry bushes? Then there'll be your college expenses to pay. No, I can't let you have a cent."

“That means that I will lose my boat and the chance of winning the race at the regatta!” urged Sam gloomily.

“Well, you should have had more sense than to take that fool hydroplane out into a rough sea. I told you she wouldn’t stand it. There, go on about your own affairs. I’m far too busy to loaf about, arguing with you.”

And with this the hard-featured old boat builder—who had made his money literally by the sweat of his brow—turned once more to his task of figuring out the blue prints of a racing sloop.

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Sam saw that it was no use to argue further with his father, and left the shop with no very pleasant expression on his countenance.

"I'll have to see if I can't borrow it somewhere," he mused. "If only I was on better terms with Rob Blake, I could get it from him, I guess. His father is a banker and he must have plenty. I wonder—I wonder if Mr. Blake himself wouldn't lend it to me. I could give him a note for it, and in three months' time I'd be sure to be able to take it up."

With this end in view, the lad started for the Hampton Bank. It required some courage for a youth of his disposition to make up his mind to beard the lion in his den—or, in other words, to approach Mr. Blake in his office. For Sam, while bold enough when his two hulking cronies were about, had no real backbone of his own.

After making two or three turns in front of the bank, he finally screwed his courage to the sticking point, and timidly asked an attendant if he could see the banker.

"I think so. I'll see," was the reply.

In a few seconds the man reappeared, and said that Mr. Blake could spare a few minutes. Hat in hand, Sam entered the ground-glass door which bore on it in imposing gilt letters the word "President."

The interview was brief, and to Sam most unsatisfactory. The banker pointed out to him that he was a minor, and as such that his note would be no good; and also that, without the permission of his father, he would not think of lending the youth such a sum. Much crestfallen, Sam shuffled his way out toward the main door of the bank, when suddenly a voice he recognized caused him to look up.

"A hundred and twenty-five dollars. That's right, all shipshape and above board!"

It was the old captain of Topsail Island, counting over in his gnarled paw one hundred and twenty-five dollars in crisp bills which he had just received from the paying teller.

"You must be going to be married, captain," Sam heard the teller remark jocularly.

"Not yet a while," the captain laughed back. "That ther motor uv mine that I left ter be fixed up is goin' ter cost me fifty dollars, and the other seventy-five I'm calculating ter keep on hand in my safe fer a while. I'm kind uv figgerin' on gettin' a new dinghy—my old one is just plum full uv holes. I rowed over frum the island this mornin', and I declar' ter goodness, once or twice I thought I'd swamp."

Sam slipped out of the bank without speaking to the captain, whom, indeed, since the episode of the melon patch, he had no great desire to encounter.

As he made his way toward his home in no very amiable mood, he was hailed from the opposite side of the street by Jack Curtiss and Bill Bender.

“Any news of the boat?” demanded Jack, as he and Bill crossed over and slapped their crony on the back with great assumed heartiness.

“Yes, and mighty bad news, too, in one way. She’s safe enough. The Dolphin—that fishing boat—found her and towed her in. But—here’s the tough part of it—it’s going to cost fifty dollars for salvage to get her from the Dolphin’s captain, the old shark!”

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"Phew!" whistled Jack Curtiss. "Pretty steep. But I suppose your old man will fork over, eh?"

"That's just it," grumbled Sam; "he won't come across with a cent. I suppose, if I don't pay for the hydroplane's recovery pretty soon, she will be sold at auction."

"That's the usual process," observed Bill.

"Isn't there any way you can raise the wind?"

"No, I've tried every one I can think of. I don't suppose either of you fellows could—"

"Nothing doing here," hastily cried Jack, not giving the other time to finish.

"I'm cleaned out, too," Bill also hurriedly assured the unfortunate Sam.

"It looks like everybody but us has coin," complained that worthy bitterly. "While I was in the bank trying to get old man Blake to take up a note of mine for the sum I need, who should I see in there but that old fossil of a captain from Topsail Island."

"Who grows such fine, juicy melons and keeps such a nice, amiable pet dog," laughed Jack, roaring at the recollection of the piratical expedition of which the island dweller had told the boys.

"Ha, ha, ha!" shouted Bill in chorus. "We'll have to give him another visit soon."

"But what about the old land crab, Sam?" demanded Jack the next minute. "What was he doing in the bank?"

"Why, drawing one hundred and twenty-five dollars. Just think of it, and we always figured it out that he was poor."

"A hundred and twenty-five dollars! I wonder what he's going to do with it?" wondered Jack, with whom money and its spending was always an absorbing topic.

"Why, I overheard that, too, as I passed by," rejoined Sam. "He's going to spend some of it for the repairing of his motor, which broke down yesterday, and the rest he's going to keep by him."

"Keep it on the island, you mean?" demanded Jack, becoming suddenly much interested.

"That's what he said—keep it in his safe," replied Sam. "But what good does that do us?"

“A whole lot, maybe,” was the enigmatic reply. “See here, Sam, you can win that race if you get your hydroplane?”

“I’m sure of it.”

“You are going to bet on yourself, of course.”

“Sure. I’ve got to raise some money somehow.”

“Well, I’ve thought of a way you can borrow the money to get your boat back, and when you win the race you can return it. Come on, let’s go to Bill’s den, and we’ll have a smoke and talk it over.”

CHAPTER V

THE BULLY SPRINGS A SURPRISE

That afternoon, in reply to a notice sent round by a runner, the lads of the Eagle Patrol assembled at their armory, and on Leader Rob’s orders “fell in” to hear the official announcement of the coming camping trip. As a matter of fact, they had discussed little else for several days, but the first “regimental” notification, as it were, was to be made now.

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The first duty to be performed was the calling of the roll after “assembly” had been sounded—somewhat quaveringly—by little Andy Bowles, the company bugler.

Beside Rob Merritt, Tubby and Andy, there were Hiram Nelson, a tall, lanky youth, whose hands were stained with much fussing with chemicals, for he was a wireless experimenter; Ernest Thompson, a big-eyed, serious-looking lad, whose specialty in the little regiment was that of bicycle scout, as the spoked wheel on his arm denoted; Simon Jeffords, a second-class scout, but who, under Rob’s tutelage, was becoming the expert “wig-wagger” of the organization; Paul Perkins, another second-class boy, but a hard worker and a devotee of aeronautics; Martin Green, one of the smallest of the Eagle Patrol, a tenderfoot; Walter Lonsdale, also a recruit, and Joe Digby, who, as the last to join the Patrol, was the tenderest of the tenderfeet.

Rob’s announcement of the program for the eight days they were to spend on the island was greeted with cheers. The news that turns were to be taken by two scouts daily at washing dishes and cooking did not awaken quite so much enthusiasm. Everybody cheered up again, however, when Rob announced that the Flying Fish would be at the disposal of the boys of the patrol.

Corporal Merritt took Rob’s place as orator then, and announced that each boy would be assessed one dollar for the expenses of the camp, the remainder of the money necessary for the providing of tents and the provisioning of the camp having been donated by Rob’s father, Mr. Wingate, of the yacht club, and the other representative citizens of Hampton who composed the local scout council.

Further excitement was caused by the announcement that following the camp the local committee would pass upon the applications for promotions and honors for the lads of the Patrol, and that it was likely that another patrol would be formed in the village, as several boys had expressed themselves as anxious to form one. The gentlemen having charge of the local scout movement, however, had decided that it would be wiser to wait and see the result of one patrol’s training before forming a second one.

“I’m going to try for an aviator’s badge,” announced Paul Perkins, as Rob declared the official business at an end.

“Say, Rob, what’s the matter with our fixing up a wireless in the camp? I’m pretty sure I can make one that will catch anything in a hundred-mile radius.”

“That’s a good idea,” assented Rob; “if you can do it we can get a lot of good out of it, I don’t doubt.”

“What’s the good of wireless when we’ve got wig-wagging and the semaphore code,” spoke up Simon Jeffords, who was inclined to doubt the use of any other form of telegraphy but that in which he had perfected himself.

As for Martin Green, Walter Lonsdale and Joe Digby, they contented themselves with hoping that they might receive their badges as second-class scouts when the camp was over.

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"I can take the whole tests except cooking the meat and potatoes in the 'Billy,'" bemoaned young Green, a small chap of about thirteen. "Somehow, they always seem to burn, or else they don't cook at all."

"Well, cheer up, Martin," laughed Rob. "You'll learn to do it in camp. We'll make you cook for the whole time we're out there, if you like—that will give you plenty of practice."

"No, thank you," chimed in Andy Bowles. "I've seen some of Mart's cooking, and I think the farther you keep him from the cook fire, the better for the general health of the Eagle Patrol."

At this moment there came a rap on the door.

"Come in!" shouted Rob.

In reply to this invitation, the door opened and a lad of about fifteen entered. His face was flushed and he bore in his hand a long sheet of green paper.

"Hello, Frank Farnham," exclaimed Rob glancing at the boy's flushed, excited face. "What's troubling you?"

"Oh, hello, Rob. Excuse me for butting in on your ceremonies, but I was told Paul Perkins was here."

"Sure he is, Frank," exclaimed Paul, coming forward. "What's the matter? It's much too warm to be flying around the way you seem to have been. Come in under this fan."

He indicated an electrically driven ventilator that was whirring in a corner of the room.

"Quit your fooling, Paul," remonstrated Frank, "and read this circular. Here."

He thrust the green "dodger" he carried into the other's hand.

"What do you think of that, eh?" demanded Frank, as Paul skimmed it with delighted eyes.

The circular contained the announcement of a lecture on aeronautics by a well-known authority on the subject who had once been a resident of Hampton. To stimulate interest in the subject, the paper stated that a first prize of fifty dollars, a second prize of twenty-five, and a third prize of ten dollars would be given to the three lads of the town making and flying the most successful models of aeroplanes in a public competition. To win the first prize it would be necessary for the model to fly more than two hundred feet, and not lower, except at the start and end of the flight, than fifty feet above the ground. The second prize was for the next best flight, and the third for the model approaching the nearest to the winner of the second money.

“Now, Paul, you are an aeronautic fiend,” went on Frank, “So am I, and Hiram has the fever in a mild way. What’s the matter with you two fellows forming a team to represent the Boy Scouts, and I’ll get up a team of village boys, to compete for the prizes.”

“That’s a good idea,” assented Hiram Nelson. “I’ve got a model almost completed. It only needs the rubber bands and a little testing and it will be O.K., or at least I hope so. How about you, Paul?”

“Oh, I’ve got two models that I have got good results from,” replied the boy addressed. “One is a biplane. She’s not so speedy, but very steady; and then I have a model of a Bleriot. I’m willing to enter either of them or both.”

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"And I've got a model of an Antoinette, and one of a design of my own. I don't know just how well it will work," concluded Frank modestly, "but I have great hopes of carrying off that prize."

"Let's see who else there is," pondered Hiram.

"There's Tom Maloney. He'll go in, I know; and Ed Rivers and two or three others, and then, by the way, I almost forgot it, I met Sam Redding, Jack Curtiss and Bill Bender, reading a notice of the competition, just before I came up. Of course, as there is a chance of winning fifty dollars, Jack is going to enter one, and Bill Bender said he would put one in, too."

"What do they know about aeroplanes?" demanded Paul.

"Not a whole lot, I guess; but Jack said he was going to get a book that tells how to make one, and Bill said he'd do the same."

"How about Sam?" inquired Rob.

"Oh, I guess he's got troubles enough with his hydroplane," responded Rob, whose father had told him at dinner that day of Sam's vain visit to the bank.

"It would be just like those fellows to put up something crooked on us," remarked Paul, who had had much the same experiences with the bully and his chums as his schoolmates generally.

"Oh, there'll be no chance of that," Frank assured him. "A local committee of business men is to be appointed to see fair play, and I don't fancy that even Jack or Bill will be slick enough to get away with any crooked work."

"How long have we got to get ready?" asked Hiram suddenly.

"Just a week."

"Wow! that isn't much time."

"No; my father told me that Professor Charlton, whom he knows, would have given a longer time for preparation but that he has to attend a flying meet in Europe, and only decided to lecture at his native town at the last moment. Lucky thing that most of us have got our models almost ready."

"Yes, especially as this notice says," added Paul, who had been reading it, "that all models must be the sole work of the contestants."

"If it wasn't for that it would be easy," remarked Hiram. "You can buy dandy models in New York. I've seen them advertised in the papers."

"Well, come on over now and put your name down, as a contestant. The blanks are in the office of the Hampton News," urged Frank.

"I guess we're all through up here, Rob, aren't we?" asked Hiram.

"Yes," rejoined the young leader; "but you study up on your woodcraft, Hiram, and devote more time to your signaling. You are such a bug on wireless that you forget the rest of the stuff."

"All right, Rob," promised Hiram contritely. "By the time we go camping I'll know a cat track from a squirrel's, or never put a detector on my head again."

Piloted by Frank, the two young scouts made their way to the office of the local paper, which had already placed a large bulletin announcing the aeroplane model competition in its window. Quite a crowd was gathered, reading the details, as the three boys entered.

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They applied for their application blanks and walked over to a desk to fill them out. As they were hard at work at this, Jack Curtiss and his two chums entered the office.

"You going into this, too?" asked the proprietor of the paper, Ephraim Parkhurst, as Jack loudly demanded two blanks.

"Sure," responded Jack confidently, "and we are going to win it, too. Hullo," he exclaimed, as his eyes fell on the younger lads, "those kids are after the prize, too. Why, what would they do with fifty dollars if they had it? However, there's not much chance of your winning anything," he added, coming up close to the boys, with a sneer on his face. "I think that I've got it cinched."

"I didn't know that you knew anything about aeroplanes," responded Paul quietly. "Have you got a model built yet?"

"I know about a whole lot of things I don't go blabbing round to everybody about," responded the elder lad, with a sneer, "and as for having a model built, I'm going to get right to work on one at once. It'll be a model of a Bleriot monoplane, and a large one, too. I notice that there is nothing said in the rules about the size of the machines."

Soon after this the three chums left the newspaper office together.

"Say," remarked Paul, in a rather worried tone, "I don't believe that there is anything said about the size of the models. Bill may build a great big one and beat us all out."

"I suppose that the big machines would be handicapped according to their power and speed," rejoined Frank. "However, don't you worry about that. I don't believe that Jack Curtiss knows enough about the subject to build an aeroplane in a week, and anyhow, I think it's all empty bluff on his part."

"I hope so," replied Paul, as they reached his front gate. "Will you be over to-night, Hiram, to talk things over? Bring your models with you, too, will you?"

"Sure," replied Hiram; "but I've got to do a few things at home after supper. I'll be over about eight o'clock or half-past."

"All right. I'll be ready for you," responded Paul, as the lads said good-by.

A few minutes later Jack Curtiss and his chums emerged from the newspaper office, the former and Bill Bender having made out their applications. Sam seemed more dejected than ever, but there was a grin of satisfaction on Jack Curtiss' face.

"Well, we sent the note, all right," he laughed under his breath, to his two chums. "He'll have got it by this time, and will be in town by dark. You know your part of the program, Sam. Don't fail to carry it out, or I'll see that you get into trouble."

“There’s no need to worry about me, Jack,” rejoined Sam, with an angry flush. “I’ll get the boat as soon as he lands, and keep it out of sight till you’ve done the trick.

“Nothing like killing two birds with one stone,” grinned Bill Bender. “My! what a time there’ll be in the morning, when they find out that there’s been a regular double cross.”

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"Hush! Here come those three kids now," warned Sam, as Rob, Merritt and Tubby came down the street. After what had passed they did not feel called upon to give the bully and his companions more than a cold nod.

"Well, be as stuck up as you like to this after-noon!" sneered Jack, after they had gone by, taking good care, however, that his voice would not carry. "I guess the laugh will be on you and your old friend of the island to-morrow."

CHAPTER VI

AN ISLAND MYSTERY

"Hullo, Hiram; where are you bound for?"

It was Rob who spoke, as Hiram hastened by his house in the early darkness.

"Oh, hullo, Rob," responded the other. "I was wondering who that was hanging over the gate. Why, I'm going to Paul's house. I'm going to talk over that aeroplane model contest with him. I think that we stand a chance to win if Jack Curtiss doesn't make good his boast."

"What was that?" inquired Rob.

"Oh, he says that he is going to build an aeroplane that will beat us all."

"And have it ready in a week?" was Rob's astonished query.

"That's what he says," responded Hiram. "It all looks kind of suspicious to me. Fifty dollars is a large enough sum to tempt Jack to do almost anything. Well, so long. I've got to hurry along. I'm late now."

And the lad hastened away to keep his appointment.

Rob was about to go into the house and get a book, when his attention was arrested by a figure coming up the street at a smart pace whose outlines somehow seemed familiar to him. The next minute his guess was confirmed, when a hearty voice hailed him:

"Waal, here I am, lad—all shipshape and in first-class trim. Now, what is it? What do yer want? Yer didn't explain in the note, but old Captain Job Hudgins'll always stand by a shipmate in distress."

"Why, whatever do you mean, captain?" exclaimed Rob, amazed, and thinking that the captain must have taken leave of his wits. "Who do you mean is in distress?"

“Mean?” echoed the captain, in his turn, it seemed, surprised. “Why, that note yer sent me. Here it is—all written on one uv them new-fangled machines.”

Rob took the crumpled paper the old seaman drew out of his coat and scanned it hastily by the light of the street lamp. The following note met his puzzled gaze.

“Dear captain: Please come over and see me at once. Something serious has happened at the bank. I need your aid and advice.

“Yours,

“Rob Blake.”

“Hum! The signature is typewritten, too,” mused Rob. “What kind of a joke is this? I don’t know, but I’ll bet anything that Jack Curtiss is at the bottom of it.”

“Well,” demanded the captain, “what is it, a bit of gammon? I’ll keel-haul the man as did it if I can find him.”

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"It looks like a hoax of some sort," admitted Rob, sorely puzzled; "but I can't for the life of me see the object of it. Come into the house a minute, captain, and we'll try to figure it out."

Seated beneath the lamp in the library of his home, Rob scrutinized the letter closely, but could find absolutely no indication about it to betray who could have typewritten it.

"How did you come to receive it?" he asked suddenly.

"Why, old Hank Handcraft come out in that crazy launch uv his and guv it ter me," rejoined the captain. "I ought ter hev told yer that in the first place, but I was all took aback and canvas a-shiver when yer tole me yer never wrote it."

"Hank Handcraft," repeated Rob. "He's that queer old fellow that lives in a hut away down the beach?"

"Yes, and a bad character, too," replied the captain. "He used ter be a smuggler, and done a term in jail fer it."

"Well, it's pretty certain that he didn't write this," said Rob. "He couldn't get hold of a typewriter, even if he could use one. What did he tell you about it? Did he say who gave it to, him?"

"No, he just handed it ter me, and says: 'A young party in Hampton says ter give yer this and hurry.' I was just gettin' my supper when I heard his hail of 'Island, ahoy!' I hurried out, and there he was in that old teakettle uv his, at the end uv my wharf."

"And he left before you read the note?"

"I should say. He hurried right off ag'in."

"Well, I don't see any way to get at the bottom of this mystery but to go and see old Hank himself," mused Rob, after a period of thought. "What do you think, captain?"

"That's the tack ter go about on, youngster," agreed the man of Topsail Island; "but if yer are goin' down ter his place at this hour uv night, we'd better take somebody else along. He's a bad character, and I'm only a feeble old man and yer are a lad."

"I'll go round by Merritt Crawford's house," proposed Rob; "then we'll pick up Tubby Hopkins. I guess we can handle any trouble that Hank wants to make, with that force on hand."

"I guess so," agreed the old man. "I must say I'd like ter get ter the bottom uv this here mystery. 'All fair and above board' is my motto. I don't like these secret craft."

The two young scouts were both at home, and after brief explanations the four started off at a lively pace for Hank Handcraft's hut, which was situated about two miles along the beach. As they hastened along, Rob explained to the others in more detail the nature of their mission, but though they were as much mystified by the sudden summons of Captain Hudgins as Rob and the captain himself, they could hit upon no plausible explanation for it.

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It was a little over half an hour before they reached the dilapidated hut where old Handcraft, a beach-comber, made his dwelling place. A short distance off the shore they could see by the moon, which had now risen, that his crazy old motor boat lay at anchor. This was a sign that Hank was at home. Lest it be wondered that such a character could have owned a motor boat, it may be explained here that the engine of Hank's old oyster skiff had been given him by a summer resident who despaired of making it work. Hank, however, who was quite handy with tools, had fixed it up and managed to make it drive his patched old craft at quite a fair speed—sometimes. When it broke down, as it frequently did, Hank, who was a philosopher in his way, simply got out his oars and rowed his heavy craft.

As an additional indication that the hut was occupied, light shone through several of its numerous chinks and crannies, and a knock at the door brought forth a low growl of: "Who's there?"

"We want to see you," said Rob.

"This is no time of night to call on a gentleman; come to-morrow and leave your cards," rumbled the gruff voice from inside the hut.

"This is serious business," urged Rob. "Come on, open that door, Hank. This is Rob Blake, the banker's son."

"Oh, it is, is it?" grumbled the voice, as the clank of the door-chains being taken off was heard from within. "Well, I ain't had much business deals with your father lately, my private fortune being somewhat shrunk."

With a muffled chuckle from the speaker, the door slowly opened, and Hank, a ragged figure, with an immense matted beard, long tangled hair and dim blue eyes, that blinked like a rat's, stood revealed.

"Come in, come in, gentlemen," he bowed, with mock politeness. "I'm glad to see such a numerous and representative party. Now, what kin I do you for?"

He chuckled once more at his little jest, and the boys involuntarily shrank from him.

There was nothing to do, however, but enter the hut, and Hank accommodated his guests with a cracker box apiece as chairs. On a table, roughly built out of similar boxes, a battered old stable lamp smoked and flared. A more miserable human habitation could not be imagined.

"Hank," began the captain, "speak me fair and above board, mate—who give yer that letter ter bring ter me ter-night?"

"What letter?" blankly responded Hank, a look of vacancy in his shifty eyes.

“Oh, yer know well enough; that letter yer give me at supper time.”

“Captain, I’ll give you my davy I don’t know what you’re talking about,” returned the beachcomber.

“What!” roared the captain: rising to his feet and advancing threateningly. “Yer mean ter tell me, yer rascalion, that yer don’t recall landin’ at Topsail Island earlier ter-night and givin’ me a note which says ter come urgent and immediate ter see young Rob Blake here?”

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"Why, captain," calmly returned Hank, with an indulgent grin, "I really think you must be gettin' childish in your old age. You must be seeing things. I hope you ain't drinking."

"You—you scoundrel, you!" roared the old captain, almost beside himself with rage, and dancing with clenched fists toward Hank.

The beach-comber's filthy hand slipped into his rags in a minute, and the next instant he was squatting back on his haunches in the corner of the hut, like a wildcat about to spring. In his hand there glistened, in the yellow rays of the lamp, a blued-steel revolver.

"Don't get angry, captain. It's bad for the digestion," grinned the castaway. "Now," he went on, "I'm going to tell you flat that if you say I came to your island to-night, you're dreaming. It must have been some one else."

"Come on, boys," directed the captain, with an angry shrug. "There's no use wastin' time on the critter. I'm inclined ter think now that there's somethin' more than ordinary in the wind," he added, as they left the hut, with the half-idiotic chuckles of its occupant ringing in their ears.

CHAPTER VI

SOME STRANGE DOINGS

It was not far from midnight when the boys, sorely perplexed, once more reached Hampton. The main street had been deserted long since, and every one in the village had returned to rest.

The boys left the captain by the water-front, while they headed up the Main Street for their respective homes. Rob remained up, pondering over the events of the evening for some time, without arriving at any solution of them. He was just about to extinguish his light when he was startled by a loud:

"His—s—st!"

The noise came from directly below his open window, which faced onto the garden.

He put out his head, and saw a dark figure standing in the yard.

"Who is it?" he demanded.

"It's me, the captain, Rob," rejoined the well-known voice. "I wouldn't have bothered yer but that I saw a light in yer window."

"What's the trouble, captain?" asked the boy, noting a troubled inflection in the old man's voice.

"My boat's gone!" was the startling reply.

"Gone! Are you sure?"

"No doubt about it. I left her tied ter the L wharf when I come up from the island, and now there ain't hide nor hair uv her there."

"I'll bet anything that that fellow Curtiss is at the bottom of all this," cried Rob. "I remember now I heard some time ago that he was thick with that Hank Handcraft."

"I don't know what ter do about it at this time uv ther night," went on the distressed captain, "an' I can't go round waking folks up ter get another boat."

"Of course not," agreed Rob. "There's only one thing for you to do, captain, and that is to put up here to-night, and in the morning we'll see what we can do."

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"That's mighty fair, square, and above board uv yer, lad," said the captain gratefully. "Punk me anywhere. I'm an old sailor, and can always find the softest plank in the deck."

"You won't have to do that," said Rob, who had slipped downstairs by this time and opened the door; "we've got a spare room you can bunk in to-night. I'll explain it all to father in the morning. Perhaps he can help us out."

"Gee whiz! almost twelve o'clock," exclaimed Hiram Nelson, looking up at the clock from the dining-room table in Paul Perkins' house. The chamber was strewn with text books on model aeroplane construction and littered with figures and plans of the boys' own devising. "How time flies when you're on a subject that interests you."

"Yes, it's a good thing it's vacation time," agreed Paul. "We wouldn't be in much shape to work at our books to-morrow, eh?"

"I should say not!" rejoined Hiram with conviction. "Well, so long, Paul. I guess we've got it all figured out now, and all that is left to do is to go ahead."

"That's the idea," responded Paul. "We'll get the prize for the glory of the Eagle Patrol, or— or—"

"Bust!" Hiram finished for him.

Hiram's way home lay past the bank, and as he walked down the moonlit street he thought for a minute that he perceived a light in the windows of the armory.

Almost as he fancied he glimpsed it, however, it vanished, and the lad was convinced that he must have been mistaken, or else seen a reflection of the moonlight on the windows.

"Queer, though," he mused. "I could almost have sworn it was a light."

Another curious thing presently attracted his attention. As he neared the bank a dark figure seemed to vanish into the black shadows round the corner. Something familiar about it struck Hiram, and the next moment he realized why.

"If that wasn't Bill Bender, I'm a Dutchman," he muttered, his heart beating a little faster. "But what can he be doing round here at this time of night?"

As he put the question to himself, Bill Bender, walking rapidly, as if he had come from some distance, and had not dodged round the corner a moment before, suddenly appeared from round the angle of the bank building.

“Good evening, Bill,” said Hiram, wondering if his eyes were not playing him some queer tricks; “wasn’t that you just went round the corner?”

“Who, me?” blustered Bill. “You need to visit an oculist, young man. I’ve just come from a visit to my aunt’s. It was her birthday, and we had a bully time. Sat up a little too late, though. Good night.”

And with a great assumption of easiness, the crony of Jack Curtiss walked rapidly off up the street.

“I guess he’s right,” mused Hiram, as he hurried on home. “But if that wasn’t Bill Bender who walked round that corner it was his ghost, and all the ghosts I ever read about don’t wear squeaky boots.”

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If Hiram had remained he would have had further cause to be suspicious and speculative.

The lad's footsteps had hardly died out down the street before Bill Bender cautiously retraced his way, and, going round to the side street, upon which the steps leading to the armory opened, gave a cautious whistle. In reply a sack was lowered from a window to him by some person invisible above.

Although there was some little light on the Main Street by reason of the moon and the few scattering lamps along the thoroughfare, the spot in which Bill now stood was as black as the proverbial pocket.

"Is the coast all clear?" came down a voice from the window above.

"Yes; but if I hadn't spotted young Hiram Nelson coming down the street and warned you to put out that light, it wouldn't have been," responded Bill in the same cautious tone.

"Well, we're safe enough now," came back the voice above, which any of his acquaintances would have recognized as Jack Curtiss'. "I've got the rest of them in this other sack. Here, take this one when I drop it."

Bill made a bungling effort to catch the heavy receptacle that fell following Jack's warning, but in the darkness he failed, and it crashed down with quite a clatter.

"Look out!" warned Jack anxiously, "some one might hear that."

"Not in this peaceful community. You seem to forget that eleven o'clock is the very latest bedtime in Hampton."

After a brief interval Jack Curtiss himself slipped out of the side door of the armory and joined his friend on the dark sidewalk.

"Well, what's the next move on the program?" asked Bill.

"We'll sneak down Bailey's Lane—there are no lights there—to Hank's place. Sam will be waiting off there with the boat," rejoined Jack.

"Yes, if he hasn't lost his nerve," was Bill's rejoinder as they shouldered their sacks and slipped off into the deep blackness shrouding the side streets.

"Well, if he has lost it, he'll come near losing his head, too," grated out Jack, "but don't you fear, he wants that fifty too badly to go back on us."

Silently as two cats the cronies made their way down the tree-bordered thoroughfare known as Bailey's Lane and after a few minutes gained the beach.

"Say, that's an awful hike down to Hank's gilded palace," grumbled Bill, "why didn't you have Sam wait for us off here?"

"Yes, and have old man Hudgins discover him when he finds his boat is gone," sneered Jack, "you'd have made a fine botch of this if it hadn't been for me."

The two exchanged no further words on the weary tramp along the soft beach. They plodded along steadily with the silence only broken by a muttered remark emanating from Bill Bender from time to time.

"Thank heaven, there's the place at last," exclaimed Bill, with a sigh of relief, as they came in sight of the miserable hut, "I began to think that Hank must have moved."

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Jack gave a peculiar whistle and the next instant the same light the boys had seen earlier in the evening shone through the chinks of the hovel.

"Well, he's awake, at any rate," remarked Jack with a grin, "now to find out where the boat is."

As the wretched figure of the beach-comber appeared Jack hailed him roughly.

"Where's that boat, Hank?"

"Been cruising off and on here since eleven o'clock," rejoined the other sullenly, "ah! there she is now off to the sou'west."

He pointed and the boys saw a red light flash twice seaward as if some one had passed their hands across it.

"All right, give him the answer," ordered Jack. "We've got to hurry if we're to be back before the captain and those brats of boys get after our trail."

Hank at Jack's order dived into the hut and now reappeared with the smoky lantern. He waved it four times from side to side like a brakeman and in a short time a steady "put-put!" told the watchers that a motor boat was approaching.

"Now for your dinghy, Hank," urged Jack, "hurry up. You move like a man a hundred and ninety years old, with the rheumatism."

"Well, come on, then," retorted Hank, "here's the boat," pointing to a cobbled dinghy lying hauled up above the water line, "give me a hand and we'll shove off."

The united strength of the three soon had the boat in the water and with Hank at the oars they moved steadily toward the chugging motor boat.

"Well, Sam, you're on the job, I see," remarked Jack as the two craft ranged alongside and Sam cut off the engine.

"Oh, I'm on the job all right," rejoined Sam, feeling much braver now that the other two had arrived, "have you got them all right?"

"Right here in this bag, and some more in this, my bucko," chuckled Jack as he handed the two sacks over to Sam.

"Ha! ha! ha!" chortled Bill under his breath as he climbed out of the cobble into the motor boat, "won't there be a fine row in the morning."



"Well, come on; start up, Sam. We've no time to lose," ordered Jack as he and Bill got aboard, "good night there, Hank."

"Good night," rejoined Hank quietly enough, as the motor boat moved swiftly off over the moonlit sea. He added to himself, "It won't be a very 'good night' for you, my lad, if you don't pay me as handsomely as you promised."

And chuckling to himself till his shoulders shook, Hank resumed his oars and rowed back to the miserable shanty he called home.

CHAPTER VIII

THE STOLEN UNIFORMS

Rob and his old friend lost no time the next morning in getting down to the water-front to make inquiries about the captain's missing boat. To their astonishment, however, almost the first craft that caught their eyes as they arrived at the L wharf to begin their search was the old sailor's motor dory, to all appearances in exactly the same position she had occupied the preceding night when the captain moored her.

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"Have I clapped deadlights on my optics, or am I gone plumb locoed?" bellowed the amazed captain, as he saw the little craft dancing lightly on the sunny waters.

"You are certainly not mistaken in supposing that is your boat. I'd know her among a thousand," Rob assured him. "Are you quite certain that she was not here last night, captain?"

"Just as sure as I am that yer and me is standin' here," rejoined the bewildered captain. "I've sailed the seven seas in my day, and man and boy seen many queer things; but if this don't beat cock fightin', I'm an inky Senegambian!"

The captain's voice had risen to a perfect roar as he uttered the last words, and a sort of jack-of-all-trades about the wharf, whose name was Hi Higgins, came shuffling up, asking what was the trouble.

"Trouble," roared the hermit of Topsail Island. "Trouble enough fer all hands and some left over fer the cat! Say, shipmate, yer hangs about this here L wharf a lot. Did yer see any piratical humans monkeyin' around my boat last night?"

"Why, what d'yer mean, cap'n," sniffled Hi Higgins. "I seen yer tie up here, and there yer boat is now. What d'yer mean by pira-pirawell, them parties yer mentioned? Yer mean some one took it?"

"Took it—yes, yer hornswoggled longshore lubber!" bellowed the captain. "I thought yer was hired as a sort uv watchman on this wharf. A find watchman yer are!"

"Well, yer see, cap'n," returned Hi Higgins, really alarmed at the captain's truculent tone, "I ain't here much after nine at night or before five in the morning."

"Well, was my boat here at five this mornin'?" demanded the captain.

"Sure it was," rejoined Hi Higgins, with a sniffle; "the fust boat I seen."

"Rob, my boy, I'm goin' crazy in my old age!" gasped the captain. "I'm as certain as I can be that the boat wasn't here when I came down to the wharf last midnight, but the pre-pon-der-ance of evidence is against me."

The captain shook his head gravely as he spoke. It was evident that he was sorely puzzled and half inclined to doubt the evidence of his own senses.

"Douse my toplights," he kept muttering, "if this don't beat a flying Dutchman on wheels and with whiskers!"

"I certainly don't believe that your eyes deceived you, captain," put in Rob, in the midst of the captain's rumbling outbursts. "It looks to me as if somebody really did borrow

your boat last night, and that the decoy note supposed to be from me had something to do with it.”

“By the great horn spoon, yer’ve got it, my boy!” roared the captain. “And now yer come ter speak uv it, my mind misgives me that all ain ’t right at the island. I didn’t tell yer, but I left a tidy sum uv money in that old iron safe off the Sarah Jane, the last ship I commanded, and all this what’s puzzled us so may be part uv some thievish scheme.

“I’m going ter hurry over ter the island and make certain sure,” he went on the next minute. “The more I think uv it, the more signs uv foul weather I see. Good-by, my lad, and good luck. Will yer be out ter see me soon? The bluefish are running fine.”

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"We may be out this afternoon, captain," responded Rob. "I am curious myself to see if any mischief has been done on your island. If there has been," he added earnestly, "you can count on the Eagle Patrol to help you out."

"Thanks, my boy!" exclaimed the old man, who was bending over his gasoline tank. "Hullo!" he shouted suddenly. "I wasn't crazy! This boat was took out last night. See here!"

He held up the gasoline measuring stick which he had grabbed up and plunged into the tank. The instrument was almost dry. The receptacle for fuel was nearly empty.

"And I filled her before I started out!" thundered the captain. "Whoever took my boat must have run her a long ways."

Fresh fuel was soon obtained, and the captain, after more shouted farewells, started for the island to try to obtain some clue to the mysterious happenings of the night.

Rob, after watching him for a few moments, as he sped down the blue waters of the sunlit inlet, turned away to return to his home, just recollecting that, in their eagerness to search for the boat, both he and the captain had entirely forgotten about breakfast. He was in the middle of the meal, and eagerly explaining to his interested parents the strange incidents of the missing boat and the decoy note, when Merritt Crawford burst into the room unannounced.

"Oh, I beg your pardon!" he apologized, abashed. "I didn't know you were at breakfast. But, Mr. Blake—Rob—something has happened that I just had to come and tell you about at once."

"Good gracious! More mysteries," Mr. Blake was beginning in a jocular way, when the serious look on the boy's face checked him. "What is it? What has happened, Merritt?" he asked soberly, while Rob regarded the spectacle of his usually placid corporal's excitement with round eyes.

"The uniforms are all gone!" burst out Merritt.

"What uniforms?"

"Ours—the Eagle Patrols'."

"What! Stolen?"

"That's right," hurried on Merritt. "I met old Mrs. Jones in a terrible state of mind. You know, Mr. Blake, she's the old woman who scrubs out the place in the morning. I asked what was the matter, and she told me that when she went to the armory early to-day, she found the lock forced and all the lockers broken open and the uniforms gone!"

“Have you seen the place?” asked Mr. Blake.

“Yes, I followed her up. The room was turned upside down. The locks had been ripped right off and the lockers rifled of everything. Who can have done it?”

“I’ll bet anything Jack Curtiss and his gang had something to do with it, just as I believe they put up some crooked job on the captain!” burst out Rob, greatly excited and his breakfast entirely forgotten.

“Be careful how you make such a grave accusation,” warned his father.

“I know it’s a tough thing to say,” admitted Rob; “but you don’t know that bunch like we do. They’d—”

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He was about to explain more of the characteristics of the bully and his cronies when a fresh interruption occurred. This time it was Hiram Nelson. He was almost as abashed as Merritt had been when he found that his excitement had carried him into what seemed a family conference.

"It's all right, Hiram. Come right in," said Mr. Blake cheerfully. "Come on out with your news, for I can see you can hardly keep it to yourself."

"It's going round the town like wildfire!" responded the panting boy. The others nodded. "I see you know it already," he went on. "Well, I think I've got a clue."

"You have! Come on, let's hear it quick," cried Rob.

"Well, I was up late with Paul Perkins last night, talking over the aeroplane model competition, and didn't start home till about midnight. As I was approaching the armory I thought I saw a light in one of the windows. I couldn't be certain, however, and I put it down to a trick that my eyes had played me."

"Well, that's all right as far as it goes," burst out Rob. "It probably was a light. I wish you'd investigated."

"Wait a minute, Rob," said his father, noting Hiram's anxious face. "There's more to come, isn't there, Hiram?"

"You bet! The most exciting part of it—the most important, I mean," went on young Hiram, with an important air.

"Oh, well, get down to it," urged the impatient Rob. "What was it?"

"Why, right after I'd seen the light," went on Hiram, "I thought I saw a dark figure slip around the corner into that dark street."

"A dark figure! Hum! Sounds like one of those old yellow—back novels," remarked Mr. Blake, with a smile.

"But this was a figure I recognized, sir," exclaimed Hiram. "It was Bill Bender!"

"Jack Curtiss' chum! They're as thick as two thieves," burst out Merritt.

"And I believe they are two thieves," solemnly put in Rob.

"Well," went on Hiram, "the next minute Bill Bender came walking round the corner as fast as if he were coming from somewhere in a great hurry, and was hastening home. He told me he had been to a birthday party at his aunt's."

“At his aunt’s,” echoed Mr. Blake. “Well, that’s an important point, for I happen to know that his aunt, Mrs. Graves, is out of town. She visited the bank yesterday morning and drew some money for her traveling expenses. She informed me that she expected to be gone a week or more.”

“I knew it, I knew it!” shouted Rob. “That fellow ought to be in jail. He’ll land there yet.”

“Softly, softly, my boy,” said Mr. Blake. “This is a grave affair, and we cannot jump at conclusions.”

“I’d jump him,” declared Rob, “if I only knew for certain that he was the thief!”

“I will inform the police myself and have an investigation made,” Mr. Blake promised. “We will leave no stone unturned to find out who has been guilty of such an outrage.”

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"And in the meantime the Eagle Patrol will carry on an investigation of its own," declared Rob sturdily. "What do you say, boys?"

"I'll bet every boy in the corps is with you on that," rejoined Merritt heartily.

"Same here," chimed in Hiram.

"The first step is to take a run to Topsail Island and see if all the queer things that happened last night have not some connecting link between them," suggested Mr. Blake. "I am inclined, after what you boys have told me, to think that they have."

"I am sure of it," echoed Rob.

CHAPTER IX

THE HYDROPLANE QUEERLY RECOVERED

Seldom had the Flying Fish been urged to greater speed than she was a short time after the discovery of the looting of the scouts' armory. She fairly flew across the smooth waters of the inlet and out on to the Atlantic swells, leaving a clean, sweeping bow-wave as she cut her way along. Her four young occupants, for Tubby had been called on and notified of the occurrences of the night, were, however, wrapped in slickers borrowed from the yacht club, so that the showers of spray which fell about them had little effect on them.

The run to Topsail Island was made in record time, and as they drew near the little hummock of tree and shrub-covered land the boys could perceive that something unusual had happened. A figure which even at a distance they recognized as that of Captain Job Hudgins was down on the little wharf, and had apparently been on the lookout there for some time. A closer view revealed the captain waving frantically.

"Something's up, all right," remarked Tubby, above the roar of the motor-boat's engine.

The others said nothing, but kept their gaze riveted on the captain's figure. With the skill of a veteran boatman, Rob brought the Flying Fish round in a graceful curve and ran her cleanly up to the wharf without the slightest jolt or jar.

"Ahoy, lads, I'm glad yer've come!" exclaimed the captain, as he caught the painter line thrown out to him by Merritt, and skillfully made the boat fast.

"Why, what has happened?" demanded Rob, as he sprang on to the wharf, followed by the others.



“Happened?” repeated the captain. “Well, in a manner of speakin’, about twenty things has happened at once. Lads, my spirits and emotions are in a fair Chinese tornado—every which way at once. In the first place, I’m seventy-five dollars poorer than I was last night; in the second, poor old Skipper’s been given some kind av poison that’s made him so sick I doubt he’ll get over it.”

“You’ve been robbed?” gasped Merritt.

“That’s it, my lad. That’s the word. My poor old safe’s been scuttled and her hold overhauled. But I don’t mind that so much—it’s poor old Skipper I’m worried about. But come on up ter the house, lads, and see fer yerselves.”

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Followed by the sympathetic four, the old man hobbled up from his little wharf to a small eminence on which stood his neatly whitewashed hut. He opened the door and invited them in. A first glance discovered nothing much the matter, but a second look showed the boys poor old Skipper lying on the floor in front of the open fireplace which was filled with fresh green boughs— and evidently a very sick dog indeed. He gave the boys a pathetic glance of recognition as they came in, and with a feeble wag or two of his tail tried to show them he was glad to see them; but this done, he seemed to be completely exhausted, and once more laid his head between his forepaws and seemed to doze.

“Poor old dog,” said the captain, shaking his head. “I doubt if he’ll ever get about again.”

The safe now engaged the boys’ attention. It is true that it was a rickety old contrivance which might well have been forced open with an, ordinary poker, but to the captain, up to this day, it had been a repository as safe and secure as a big Wall Street trust company’s vaults.

“Look at that, boys!” cried the captain, with tragic emphasis, pointing to the door, which had been forced clear off its rusty hinges. “Just busted open like yer’d taken the crust off’n a pie! Ah, if I could lay my hands on the fellers that done this, I’d run ’em tip ter the yardarm afore a foc’sle hand could say ‘Hard tack’!”

“Why, we think that—” began Tubby, when Rob checked him. The captain, who had been bending over his dog, didn’t hear the remark, and Rob hastily whispered to Tubby:

“Don’t breathe a word to anyone of our suspicions. Our only chance to get hold of the real culprits is to not give them any idea that we suspect them.”

After a little more time spent on the island, the boys took their leave, promising to come back soon again. First, however, Rob and his corporal made a brief expedition to see if they could make out the tracks of the marauders of the previous evening. Whoever they had been, however—and the boys, as we know, had a shrewd guess at their identity—they had been too cunning to take the path, but had apparently, judging from the absence of all footmarks, made their way to the house through the coarse grass that grew on each side of the way.

“Well, what are we going to do about it?” Tubby inquired, as they speeded back toward home.

“Just what I said,” rejoined Rob. “Keep quiet and not let Jack or his chums know that we suspect a thing. Give them enough rope, and we’ll get them in time. I’m certain of it.”

How true his words were to prove, Rob at that time little imagined, although he felt the wisdom of the course he had advised.

As they neared the inlet, Rob, who was at the wheel and scanning the channel pretty closely, for the tide was now running out, gave a sudden shout and pointed ahead. As the others raised their eyes and gazed in the direction their leader indicated they, too, uttered a cry of astonishment. From the mouth of the inlet there had stolen a long, low, black craft, gliding through the water at tremendous speed.

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In the strange craft the boy scouts had little difficulty in recognizing Sam Redding's hydroplane.

"So he's got her back," exclaimed Merritt, recovering from his first astonishment.

"Yes, and she seems little the worse for her experience," remarked Tubby. "It doesn't appear, though, that they are going to profit by their lesson of the other day, for there they go out to sea again."

"Probably consulted the glass this time," remarked Rob. "It read 'set fair' when we started out."

"Well, that's the only kind of weather for them," commented Merritt; "though as both Jack and Bill can swim, I wouldn't mind seeing them get a good ducking."

"I suppose the coincidence has struck you fellows, too?" remarked Rob suddenly, as he skillfully twisted and turned the dancing Flying Fish through the devious ways of the channel at low water.

"What on earth are you talking about?" demanded Merritt.

"Why, that it seems rather queer that Sam, who was round town desperately trying to raise money with which to get his boat out of pawn suddenly manages to redeem her, and that on the very day after the robbery of Captain Hudgins hut."

"By hookey, that's right!" shouted Tubby. "I'll bet your guess was correct, Rob—that gang of Jack's robbed the old captain."

"And stole our uniforms," put in Merritt.

"Yes; but how are we going to prove it?" was Rob's "cold water" comment which silenced further speculation for the time being. Each boy, however, determined then and there to do his share in running down the persons responsible for the vandalism.

By the time they got back to Hampton the news had spread among the entire Eagle Patrol, and an indignation meeting was called in the devastated armory. Mr. Blake entered in the midst of it, and offered, in conjunction with the rest of the local council, to furnish new uniforms. On the matter being put to a vote, however, the lads all agreed that it would be better not to accept such an offer till they had made a determined effort to run down the plunderers.

"Very well," said Mr. Blake; "your spirit does you great credit, and if you need any help, don't fail to call upon me at any time."

“Three cheers for Mr. Blake and the members of the council!” shouted Merritt, jumping on a chair.

They were given with such roof-raising effect, that people outside in the street, many of whom knew of the robbery, began to think that the uniforms must have been recovered.

As the lads surged out of the armory, all talking at once about the robbery and its likely results, whom should they encounter on the street but Jack Curtiss and his two chums, evidently, from the fact that they carried waterproof garments over their arms, just back from their trip in Sam’s newly-recovered hydroplane.

It might have been fancy, but as the eyes of the Boy Scouts met those of the three lads who would have so much liked to belong to the organization, Rob thought that a look of embarrassment spread over Jack Curtiss’ heavy features, and that even Bill Bender’s brazen face took on a shade of pallor. If this were so, however, it could have been only momentary, for the next minute Jack, with what seemed very much overdone cordiality, came forward with:

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"Why, hullo, boys. I just heard about your loss. Any news?"

"No, not a word," chirped little Joe Digby, one of the few lads in the Eagle Patrol who had never run afoul of the bully.

"Well," went on Jack, affecting not to notice the silence with which his advances had been greeted, "I hope you find the fellows who did it, whoever they were."

"Same here," chimed in Bill Bender, now quite at his ease, "although, at that, I guess it was only a joke, and you'll get 'em back again before long."

"Do you think so, Bill?" asked Merritt, looking the bully's crony steadily in the eye. "I hope so, I'm sure. By the way, Hiram Nelson here says that he saw you hurrying up Main Street at just about the time the robbery must have taken place. You didn't hear any unusual sounds or see anything out of the way, did you?"

"I—why, no—I—you see, I was on my way home from my aunt's home," stuttered Bill, seemingly taken off his guard.

"Yes; your aunt, who left home yesterday afternoon to be gone a week," shot out Merritt.

"Queer that she should have changed her mind and come home in such a hurry."

"Oh, come on, Bill," stuck in Sam, seeing that things were getting very unpleasant. "We've got to hurry up if we're to get out to Jack's in time."

Without another word, the three hurried off, seemingly not at all unrelieved to escape from what Merritt was pretty sure were embarrassing questions.

CHAPTER X

WINNING THE CONTEST

The day which was to witness the tests of the aeroplane models for the prizes offered by the professor of aeronautics dawned still and fair. It followed several days of storm, in which the boys had been unable to make any excursions in their motor boat, or into the country, or, indeed, even to devote any time to the engrossing subject of tracing the theft of the uniforms to its source.

Early in the morning a small field in the rear of Mr. Blake's house was well filled with boys of all ages and sizes, watching the contestants in the model contest trying out their craft. The models were of all sorts and sizes. Some were freak craft that had been constructed in a hurry from pictures, without any attention being paid to scale or proportions, while others were carefully made bits of mechanism.



Among the latter class were Paul Perkins' monoplane—Silver Arrow, he called it,—Hiram Nelson's two models, the monoplane of Tom Maloney, a lad of about sixteen, and Ed River's little duplicate of a Curtiss biplane. The contest was to take place on the Main Street of the town, in front of the bank, and in the middle of the course two poles had been erected, one on each side of the street, between which a brightly colored tape had then been strung, forming a sort of aerial hurdle. The tape was fifty feet above the ground, and to qualify at all it would be necessary for the contesting models to clear it.

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The lecture which took place in the village hall came first and was well attended, most of the young folks of Hampton being there. If the truth must be told, however, while the lecturer was expounding his subject, illustrating it on the blackboard with chalk drawings, the majority of his young hearers were wishing that it was over and the contest really begun.

Especially was this true of the boys of the Eagle Patrol, who were every one of them anxious to see what kind of aeroplanes Jack Curtiss and Bill Bender would have produced. The lecture, however, at last came to an end, and the gentlemen on the platform shook hands with the professor and the professor shook hands with them, and somebody called for three cheers for "Hampton's distinguished son."

Everybody then lost no time in filing out into the afternoon sunlight, where they found quite a crowd already on the streets, and a small wooden grand stand, which had been erected near what was expected to be the finishing line, seating several guests. The committee and the professor, led by the Hampton brass band, blaring away at patriotic airs, made their way to the front seats in the structure, and everybody was requested to line up on each side of the street, so as to make a clear lane for the models to fly in.

The starting line was about a hundred yards from the red tape, and the contestants were compelled to stand back of this. Mr. Wingate, the president of the yacht club and member of the Boy Scout Council, had already shuffled the numbers of the contestants in a hat, and they were to fly their models in the order in which they drew their figures.

Up to this time there had been no sign of Jack Curtiss or Bill Bender, but the boys now saw them hastening up to a member of the committee and whispering to him. A moment later a man, with a megaphone boomed out from the grand stand:

"William Bender announces that he has withdrawn from the contest."

"Aha! I'll bet Jack's got cold feet, too," whispered Hiram, nudging Paul, who was kneeling down and winding up the long rubber bands which drove the propellers of the Silver Arrow, an Antoinette model.

But a short interval showed him to be mistaken, for Jack, with his usual confident air, repaired to the buggy in which he had driven into town from his father's farm, and speedily produced a model that caused loud sighs of "Ohs!" and "Ahs!" to circulate through the juvenile portion of the crowd.

However he had managed to accomplish it, the bully had certainly produced a beautiful model. It was of the Bleriot type, and finished perfectly down to the minutest detail. Every wire and brace on it was silvered with aluminum paint, and it even bore a small figure at its steering wheel. Beside it the other models looked almost clumsy.

The faces of the Boy Scouts fell.

“If that machine can fly as well as she looks,” said Rob to Merritt, “she wins the first prize.”

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"Not a doubt of it," was Merritt's reply.

"Oh, well," put in Tubby, for the three inseparables were standing together, "if he can win the prize fairly, don't knock him. He certainly has built a beautiful machine. You've got to give him credit for that."

And now, as Jack, with a triumphant smile at the glances of admiration his model excited, strode to the starting point, elbowing small boys aside, and drew from the hat, the man with the megaphone once more arose. He held in his hand the result of the drawing and the order in which the models would fly.

"The f-i-r-s-t model to com-pete for the big p-r-ize," he bellowed, "will be that of Thomas Maloney—a Bler-i-ot!"

Poor Tom might have called his machine a Bleriot, but it is doubtful if the designer of the original machine of that name would have recognized the model as having any more than a distant relationship to the famous type of monoplane. It was provided with a large tin propeller, however, and seemed capable of at least accomplishing a flight. In fact, at the trials in the morning it had flown well, and by some of the lads was regarded as a sort of "dark horse." As Tom was on the village team, as opposed to the Boy Scout contingent, he was greeted with loud cheers and whistles by his friends as he stepped to the starting line, and, holding his already wound up machine in his hand, made ready to launch it.

"Crack!" went the pistol.

At the same instant Tom, with a thrusting motion, released his model; but, alas! instead of darting forward like the Sparrow Hawk it was named after, the craft ingloriously wobbled about eccentrically, and finally alighted on an old lady's bonnet, causing her to exclaim as the propeller whizzed round and entangled itself in her hair:

"No good'll ever come of teaching lads to meddle with these here contraptions."

The model having finally been extricated, amid much laughter, and poor Tom having offered mortified apologies, the announcer made known that Hiram Nelson's Doodlebug monoplane would essay a flight.

As the pistol sounded, Hiram launched his craft, and amid cheers from the crowd it soared up, and, just clearing the red tape, settled gracefully down a few feet the other side of the two hundred foot line.

"Good for you, Hiram!" exclaimed Ernest Thompson, the bike scout, who was acting as a patrol on the course. "Whose turn next?"

“You kids wait till I get my Bleriot started,” sneered Jack. Several small boys near him, who were mortally afraid of the big fellow and rather admired him as being “manly,” set up a cheer at this.

“Wait for Jack’s dandy model to fly!” they cried.

“Edward Rivers—model of a Curtiss biplane!” came the next announcement through, the megaphone.

Another cheer greeted this, as young Rivers was also on the “town team.”

The little Curtiss darted into the air at the pistol crack and flew straight as an arrow for the red tape. It cleared it easily and skimmed on down past the grand stand, and alighted, fluttering like a tired butterfly, beyond Hiram’s model.

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"Three hundred feet!" cried the announcer, amid a buzz of approval, after the measurers of the course had done their work.

"Paul Perkins—Bleriot!" was the next announcement.

A hum of excitement went through the crowds that lined the track. It began to look as if the record of Ed Rivers' machine would be hard to beat, but from the determined look on his face and his gritted teeth it was evident that Paul meant to try hard.

Before the report of the pistol had died out, the yellow-winged Dragonfly soared upward from Paul's hand and darted like a streak across the red tape, clearing it at the highest altitude yet achieved by any of the models.

"Hurrah!" yelled the crowd.

On and on sped the little Bleriot, while Paul watched it with pride-flushed cheeks. It was evident that it was going to out-distance the record made by Ed Rivers' machine. The Boy Scouts set up their Patrol cry:

"Kr-ee-ee-ee-ee!"

As the little machine settled to the ground, far beyond the grand stand, the officials ran out with their tapes, and presently the announcement came blaring down the packed ranks of the onlookers:

"Three hundred and fifty feet!"

What a cheer went up then.

"I guess you've got it won. Congratulations!" said Ed Rivers, pressing forward to Paul's side.

"Thanks, Ed," returned the other; "but 'there's many a slip,' you know, and there are several others to be flown yet."

Now came in rapid succession several of the smaller models and freak designs. Some of these wobbled through the air and landed in the crowd. Others sailed blithely up toward the red tape and just fell short of clearing it. Another landed right on the tape and hung there, the target of irreverent remarks from the crowd.

While this was going on, Bill Bender, Jack Curtiss and Sam were in close consultation.

"Remember, you promised that if you won the prize you'd give that money back," Sam whispered to Jack, "and for goodness' sake, don't forget it. I half believe that those boys suspect us already."

“Nonsense,” returned the bully. “And what if they do? We covered up our tracks too well for them to have anything on us. They can’t prove anything, can they?”

“I—I—I don’t know,” stammered Sam, and was about to say more, but the clarion voice of the announcer was heard informing the crowd that:

“John Curtiss’ Bleriot model will now make a flight for the great prize.”

With a confident smile on his face, Jack stepped forward and held his model ready. The murmur of admiration that had greeted its first appearance was repeated as he held it high in the sunlight and the afternoon rays glinted and shimmered on its fittings and wings.

“That’s the model for my money,” remarked a man in the crowd.

“It’s going to win, too,” said Jack confidently.

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Just at that moment the pistol cracked, and Jack released his much-admired air craft.

Its flight showed that it was as capable of making as beautiful a soaring excursion as its graceful outlines and careful finish seemed to indicate. In a long, sweeping glide, it arose and cleared the red tape by a greater margin than had Paul Perkins' model.

"Jack Curtiss wins!" yelled the crowd, as the machine soared right on and did not begin its downward swoop for some distance. After it had alighted and the measurers had laid their tapes on the course, the announcer megaphoned, amid a perfect tornado of roars and cheers:

"The last flight, ladies and gentlemen—and apparently the winning one—accomplished the remarkable distance of four hundred and fifty feet—four hundred and fifty feet."

"Three cheers for Jack Curtiss!" shouted Bill Bender, slapping Jack heartily on the back and giving most of the cheers himself.

"I guess those cubs won't be quite so stuck up now," commented Sam, shaking Jack's hand warmly.

"I was pretty sure I'd win," modestly remarked the bully, as he began shouldering his way through the press toward the judges' stand. He was closely followed by the boys, as it looked as if Paul Perkins might have won the second prize and Ed Rivers the third.

Urged by Bill Bender, the band began puffing away at "See, the Conquering Hero Comes," and Jack, nothing averse to appearing in such a role, bowed gracefully right and left to the admiring throngs.

The professor shook hands warmly with the victorious Jack, and remarked:

"You are to be congratulated, young man. I have rarely seen a better model, and your skill does you great credit. Are you thinking of taking up aeronautics seriously?"

The bully, his face very red, stammered that he had entertained some such thoughts.

The professor was about to reply, when there came a sudden sound of confusion among that portion of the crowd which had surrounded the delegates deputed to pick up the aeroplanes and bring them to the stand. This was in order that they might be exhibited as each prize was awarded. A small boy with a very excited face was seen struggling to get through the mass, and he finally gained the judges' stand. As he faced the congratulatory professor he stuttered out:

"Please, sir, there's something wrong about Jack Curtiss' machine."

“What do you mean, you impudent young shaver!” shouted the bully, turning white, nevertheless.

“Let the lad speak,” said Mr. Blake, who as one of the committee was standing beside the professor. “What is it, my boy? Let me see. You’re Joe Digby, of the Eagle Patrol, aren’t you.”

“Yes, sir; and I live out on a farm near Jack Curtiss. I was watching him fly his machine this morning, from behind a hedge, and I heard them saying something about ‘their store-made machine beating any country boy’s model.’”

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"He's a young liar! Pay no attention to him," stammered Jack, licking his dry lips.

"Silence, sir!" said Mr. Blake gravely. "Let us listen to what this boy has to say. If he is not speaking the truth, you can easily disprove it. Go on, my boy."

"Well, I guess that's about all I know about it: but I thought I ought to tell you, sir," confusedly concluded the small lad.

"You young runt, I'll half kill you if I catch you alone!" breathed Jack, under his breath, as the lad sped off to join his companions.

"Of course, you are not going to pay any attention to that kid's—I mean boy's—story," demanded Jack, addressing the professor. "It's made out of whole cloth, I assure you."

In the meantime the machines had been brought to the grand stand and were being examined. Naturally, after young Digby's statement, Jack's was one of the first to be scrutinized. The committee turned it over and over, and were about to pass on it, when Mr. Wingate, who had been bending attentively over the bully's model, gave a sudden exclamation.

"Look here, gentlemen," he cried, pointing to a small tag which Jack had evidently forgotten to remove, "I think this is conclusive evidence. Here is the label of the 'Manhattan Model Works' pasted right under this wing."

"Somebody must have put it there. It's a job those Boy Scouts put up on me," protested Tack. "I made that model every bit myself."

"I regret to say that we must regard the price tag as conclusive evidence that this machine comes from a store," said the professor sternly, handing Jack his unlucky model. "You are disqualified for entering a machine not of your own workmanship."

"Stand back, please," he went on, as Jack tried to protest. "I want to say," he went on in a loud tone, holding up his hand to command attention, "that there has been a grave mistake made. The machine which actually flew the longest distance is disqualified, as it was made at a New York model factory. The first prize of fifty dollars, therefore, goes to Paul Perkins, of the Boy Scouts, the second to Edward Rivers, of Hampton, and the third to Hiram Green, also of the Boy Scouts."

"Hold on one minute," he shouted, as the crowd began to cheer and hoot. "There is an additional announcement to be made. The committee has decided to offer a further reward of five dollars to Thomas Maloney, whose model shows evidence of praiseworthy and painstaking work."

As the cheers broke loose once more, Jack Curtiss and his cronies slunk off through the crowd, and having placed the rejected model in the buggy, drove off into the country in no very amiable or enviable frame of mind.

"Well, you made a fine mess of it," grumbled Bill Bender savagely. "I told you to look carefully and see that all the tags were off it."

"It's no more my fault than yours," grated out Jack, lashing the horse savagely, to work off some of his rage. "It's all the fault of those young cubs of Rob Blake's. Let them look out, though, for I'll get even with them before long, and in a way that will make them sit up and take notice."

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"Don't forget that young mischief maker, Joe Digby," suggested Bill Bender. "It was all his fault—the young spy!"

"Oh, I'll attend to him," Jack assured his chum, with a grating laugh that boded no good for the youngest member of the Eagle Patrol.

CHAPTER XI

A FORTUNATE DISCOVERY

"Want to go fishing?" Rob inquired over the telephone of Merritt Crawford a few days later.

"Sure," was the response.

"We can run into Topsail Island and get a site for the camp picked at the same time," suggested Rob.

"Bully! I'll meet you at the wharf. Going to bring Tubby?"

"You bet! We'll be there in ten minutes."

"All right. Good-by."

At the time set the three boys met on the wharf of the yacht club, and were speedily ready to start on their trip. Rob brought along bluefish squids and lines, and Tubby—never at a loss to scare up a hurried lunch—had a basket full of good things to eat.

The run to the island was made without incident, and the boys were glad to see that, contrary to the captain's fears, his dog Skipper was all right again, for the animal came bounding and barking down the wharf as they drew near, in token of his gladness to see them.

Attracted by his dog's barking, the old captain, who was at work in a small potato patch he cultivated, came hobbling to meet the boys as they tied up and disembarked.

"Well, well, boys; come ter stay?" he cheerily remarked, as the three lads shook hands.

"No, we're off after 'blues,'" said Rob; "but we thought we'd drop in and see how things are coming along with you, and if you have heard any news yet concerning the robbery."

"Not a thing, boys, not a thing," said the old man. "In fact, I haven't left the island since my old safe was busted open. Skipper, as yer see, got over his sickness. It's my belief that them fellers fed him poisoned meat or something."

"I shouldn't wonder," remarked Rob dryly. "It would be quite in their line."

"By the way," exclaimed the old man suddenly, "a queer thing happened the other day. Skipper had been a-skirmishin' round the other side uv the island after rabbits and critters, and he brought home this— Wait a minute and I'll show it to yer."

After some fumbling in his pocket, the old man produced a torn strip of yellow material with a brass button attached to it.

"I wonder where that come from," he remarked, as he handed the fragment to Rob for his inspection.

"Why, it's khaki," exclaimed Rob, as he felt it. "And, by hokey!" he ejaculated the next instant, "it's a piece of a Boy Scout uniform!"

Old Skipper was jumping about in great excitement, and endeavoring to sniff the bit of torn material as Rob examined it, and a sudden idea struck the boy.

"I wonder if Skipper could pilot us to where he found this bit of material."

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"Are you sure it's a bit of uniform?" asked Tubby doubtfully.

"Certain of it. No one else wears khaki in these parts. Hey, Skipper, hey, good dog! Sic 'em, sic 'em!" cried Rob, holding up the khaki for the intelligent creature to see.

The animal seemed to be greatly excited and gave short, quick barks as he danced about the boys.

"Well, we might try and see if he will lead us anywhere," remarked Merritt somewhat dubiously. "At any rate, there's no harm done, except wasting a little time; and if we can get on the track of our uniforms, it's not such a much of a waste, after all."

"He sure wants ter be off somewhere," observed the old captain, watching the antics of his dog, whom he regarded in the light of a human being. "He never acts nor talks that way unless he's got suthin' on his mind. Yer boys follow him, and I'll bet he'll lead yer ter suthin'. It may be nothin' more than a dead rabbit, and it may be what ye think. I'll stay here an' dig my pertaters, fer my rheumatiz is powerful bad today."

"Very well, captain. We shan't be long," rejoined Rob, calling to the dog. "Hey, Skipper, hey, old boy! After 'em, Skipper—after 'em!"

The dog bounded on ahead of the three boys, occasionally looking back to see if they were following and then plunging on again.

"As the Captain said, he 'sure has got suthin' on his mind'!" laughed Merritt.

After traversing about a mile of beach, the dog suddenly bounded into a thicket overhanging the shore and began barking furiously.

"He's treed something, all right," remarked Rob, pushing the branches aside.

The next minute he gave a loud shout of triumph.

"Look there, boys! Old Skipper sure did 'have suthin' on his mind'!"

Peering over Rob's shoulder, the other two were able to make out two hidden sacks, the mouth of one of which had been torn open, evidently by the investigating Skipper.

From the aperture appeared the torn sleeve of a Boy Scout's uniform, and a brief searching of the sacks after they had been lugged out on the beach revealed the entire stolen equipment.

"Bones for you, Skipper, for the rest of your life!" promised Tubby, as the dog, evidently well pleased with the petting he received and the admiration showered upon him, pranced about on the beach and indulged in a hundred antics.

The only one of the uniforms damaged was the one that Skipper had torn. The others were all intact, but badly crumpled, having been hastily thrust into the sacks, and, as it appeared, tamped down to make them fit more compactly.

“Well, what do you know about that?” was Merritt’s astonished exclamation, as one by one Rob drew forth the regimentals and laid them on the beach.

“You mean what does Jack Curtiss and Company know about that,” seriously returned Rob.

“However, we found them—that’s one thing to be enthusiastic over,” observed Tubby sagely.

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"I'd like just as well almost to find out exactly who hid them there," was Merritt's reply.

"The same folks that stole the old captain's seventy-five dollars, I guess," returned Rob, thrusting the garments back into the sacks preparatory to carrying them to the boat.

"Here, Tubby, you carry this one—it'll take some of that fat off you to do a hike along the beach with it. I'll shoulder this one."

"Well, boys, yer certainly made a haul, thanks ter old Skipper here," declared Captain Job, after the delighted boys had made known their discovery. "He's a smart one, I tell yer. No better dog ever lived."

"That's what we think," agreed Merritt warmly, patting old Skipper's black and white head.

The recovery of the uniforms had quite put all thoughts of blue or any other fishing out of the boys' heads, and after bidding farewell to the captain, who promised to point out to them a good site for a camp on their next visit, they made their best speed back to Hampton. On their way to the armory they spread the news of their discovery broadcast, so that in a short time the town was buzzing with the information that the Boy Scouts' lost uniforms had been found under most surprising circumstances; and the editor of the Hampton News, who was just going to press, held his paper up till he could get in an item about it.

It was this item that caught Jack Curtiss' eye, the next morning as he and Bill Bender and Sam were seated in Bill's "club room."

"Confound those brats, they seem always to be putting a spike in our schemes!" muttered Jack, as he handed the paper to Bill for that worthy's perusal. "Which reminds me," he went on, "that we haven't attended to the case of that young Digby yet."

"I wish you'd leave those kids alone for a while, Jack," objected Sam, in his usual whining tones. "You've had your fun with them. They've had to do without their uniforms for a long time. Now let up on them, won't you?"

"Oh, you're feeling friendly toward 'em, now, are you?" sneered Jack.

"Oh, no, it isn't that," Sam hastened to assure him; "nothing of the kind. What I mean is that we are liable to get into serious trouble if we keep on this way. I saw Hank Handcraft the other day, and I can tell you he's in no very amiable mood. He wants his money for the other night, he says, and he intimated that if he didn't get it he'd make things hot for us."

"He'd better not," glowered Bill Bender, looking up from his paper. "We know a few things about friend Hank."

“Yes, and he knows a good deal about us that wouldn’t look well in print,” retorted Sam gloomily. “I wish I’d never gone into that thing the other night.”

“Pshaw, it was just borrowing a little money from the old man, wasn’t it?” snorted Jack. “We’ll pay it back some time.”

“When we get it,” rejoined Sam more gloomily than ever; “and I don’t see much immediate chance of that.”

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"Oh, well, cheer up; we'll get it all right somehow," Jack assured him. "And in connection with that I've got a scheme. Why shouldn't we three fellows go camping after the motor-boat races?"

"Go camping—where?" asked Bill, looking up surprised.

"Well, I would have suggested Topsail Island, but those pestiferous kids are going there, I hear. However, there are plenty of other islands right inside the Upper Inlet. What's the matter with our taking possession of one of those?"

The Upper Inlet was a sort of narrow and shallow bay a short distance above Topsail Island, and was well known to both Bill and Jack, who had been there in the winter on frequent ducking expeditions.

"We might as well do something like that before school opens," said Sam. "I think that Jack's suggestion is a pretty good one."

"I don't know that it's so bad myself," patronizingly admitted Bill; "but what connection has that with your scheme for getting money, Jack?"

"A whole lot," replied the bully. "I'm going to get even with that young Digby if it takes me a year. He cost me the fifty-dollar prize, and, beside that, all the kids in the village now call me 'cheater,' and hardly anybody will have anything to do with me."

"Well, how do you propose to get even by going camping?" inquired Bill.

"I plan to take that Digby kid with me," rejoined Jack calmly.

"You're crazy!" exclaimed Bill. "Why, we'd have the whole country after us for kidnapping."

"Oh, I've got a better plan than that," laughed Jack coolly, "and we won't need to be mixed up in it at all. It'll all come back on Hank Handcraft, I owe him a grudge for bothering me about money, anyhow, the old beach-combing nuisance!"

"But where do we come in to get any benefit out of it?" demanded Sam.

"I'll explain that to you later," said Jack grandiloquently. "I haven't quite worked out all the details yet; but if you'll meet me here this evening I'll have them all hot and smoking for you."

CHAPTER XII

JACK FORMS A PLOT

The next morning Jack lost no time in making his way toward Hank Handcraft's tumble-down abode. He found its owner in, and likewise disposed to be quarrelsome.

"Oh, here you are at last!" exclaimed the hairy and unkempt outcast, as the bully approached heavily through the yielding sand. "I'd about given you up, and was seriously contemplating making a visit to your home—"

"If you ever did," breathed Jack threateningly.

"Well," grinned Hank impudently, with his most malicious chuckle, "if I did, what then?"

"I'd have you thrown out of the house," calmly replied Jack, seating himself on a big log of driftwood, once the rib of a schooner that went ashore on the dangerous shoals off Hampton and pounded herself to pieces.

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"Oh, no; you wouldn't have me thrown out!" chuckled Hank, resuming his task of scaling a mackerel. "Cause if you did, I'd go to the chief of police and tell him something about the robbery of the armory and the cracking of old man Hudgins' safe."

"You wouldn't dare to do that!" sneered Jack. "You are implicated in that as badly as we are."

"That's a matter of opinion," rejoined Hank, industriously scraping away at his fish, and showing no trace of any emotion in his pale eyes. "Anyhow, what I want right now is some cash. You agreed to pay me well for what I did the other night, and I haven't seen the money yet."

"Be a little patient, can't you?" irritably retorted the other. "Money doesn't grow on trees. Now listen, Hank. How would you like to get a nice little sum of money—more than I could give you—for camping out on Kidd's Island, in the Upper Inlet, for a few days?"

Hank's fishy eyes showed some trace of feeling at this.

"What do you mean?" he asked. "Is this a new joke you're putting up on me?"

"No, I am perfectly serious. You can make a good sum by following our directions, and I'll see that you get into no trouble over it."

"Well, if you can do that, I'll keep my mouth shut," chuckled Hank in his mirthless way; "but if I don't get some money pretty quick, I'm going to make trouble fer somebody, I tell you!"

"Haven't you got some place where we can talk that is less exposed than this?" said Jack, looking about him apprehensively.

"Sure, there's my mansion," grinned Hank, pointing over his shoulder with a fishy thumb.

"That's the place," said Jack, "although I wish you'd clean it out occasionally. Now listen, Hank, here's the plan—"

Still talking, the ill-assorted pair entered the ruinous shack.

* * * * *

Motor-boat engines were popping everywhere. The club house was dressed in bright-colored bunting from veranda rail to ridge pole. Ladies strolled about beneath their parasols with correctly dressed yachtsmen, asking all sorts of absurd questions about

the various boats that lay ready to take part in the various events. It was the day of the Hampton Yacht Club's regatta.

Among the throng the Boy Scouts threaded their way, watching with interest the events as they were run off, one after the other. But their minds were centered on the race for the trophy which, although there were several other entries, had been practically conceded to Sam Redding's hydroplane.

"She's a wonder," said one of the onlookers, pointing from the porch to the float, where Jack Curtiss, Bill Bender and Sam were leaning over their speedy craft, stripping her of every bit of weight not absolutely necessary. On the opposite side of the float the crew of the Flying Fish, the Snark, the Bonita and the Albacore were equally busy over their craft.

"Douse the engine with oil," directed Rob, as Merritt gave the piece of machinery a final inspection; "and how about that extra set of batteries?"

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"They're aboard," rejoined Tubby, who was perspiringly removing cushions and other surplus gear from the fleet boat.

"That's right; if it comes to an emergency, we may need them," said Rob. "Nothing like being prepared."

"Do you think we have any show?" asked Tubby, who was to be a sort of general utility man in the crew. Rob was to steer.

"I don't see why not," rejoined the other, wiping his oily hands on a bit of waste. "The race is a handicap one, and we get an allowance on account of our engine not being as powerful as the hydroplane's."

The course to be run was a sort of elongated, or isosceles triangle. The turning point was at the head of the inlet, a buoy with a big red ball on it being placed just inside the rough waters of the bar. It made a course of about five miles. The race for the Hampton Motor Boat Club's cup, for which the boys and the others were entered, was twice round.

The waters about the club house were so dotted with motor craft which darted about in every direction that Commodore Wingate of the club and the other regatta officials had a hard time keeping the course clear for the contestants. On the threat, however, that the races would be called off if a clear course was not kept, order was finally obtained.

The boys were too busy to pay much attention to the results of the other races, but a member of the club who had won the Blake trophy for the cabin cruiser boats, warned the boys to beware of the turn above the far buoy.

"It's choppy as the dickens there," he said, as he made his way to the club house, "and you want to take the turn easily. Don't 'bank' it, or you'll lose more than you gain."

The boys thanked him for his advice, and laid it to heart to be used when the race was on.

Sam's boat having been tuned up to the last notch of readiness, Jack Curtiss strolled consequentially about on the float, making bets freely on the hydroplane's chance of winning.

"I'll bet you twenty-five to any odds you like that the hydroplane wins the race," he said, addressing Colin Maxwell, the son of a well-to-do merchant from a neighboring town. Young Maxwell had heard nothing of Jack's mean trick in the aeroplane contest, and therefore didn't mind talking to him.

"I like the look of the Flying Fish pretty well," was the response, "and I'll take you up. You'll have to give me odds, though."

“Oh, certainly,” responded the bully, with a confident grin; “twenty-five to thirty, say.”

“Make it thirty-five.”

“All right; done,” said Jack. “You know me, of course; no necessity of putting up the money.”

“Oh, not the least,” rejoined the other politely, though had he known the state of Jack’s finances he might have thought differently.

The bully went about making several bets at similar odds, until finally Bill Bender came up behind him and in a low voice warned him to be careful.

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"What are you going to do if we lose?" he breathed. "You haven't got a cent to pay with."

"Oh, it's like taking gum from a busted slot machine," rejoined the bully, with a laugh. "They can't win. We know what their boat can do, and the race is practically conceded to us. Besides—" he placed his hand close to Bill's ear and whispered a few minutes. "I guess that's a bad scheme, eh?" he resumed in a louder tone, though his voice was still pitched too low for those about to hear him. "If it's done right, we'll ram them and it'll never be noticed."

"Hum, I'm not so sure," grunted Bill. "However, if we really perceive we are losing, I don't see what else we are to do. Are you going to steer?"

"Sure. Sam lost his nerve at the last moment—like him, eh? It's a good thing, though, I'm to be at the wheel, because I don't think Sam would have had the courage to carry out my plan."

"Not he," said Bill, with a shrug. "He's got the backbone of a snail."

More of this interesting conversation was cut short by the "bang" of the pistol which warned the contestants of the racing boats to get ready.

"The race for the Hampton Yacht Club's trophy will take place in five minutes!" cried the announcer.

The five contestants cast off from the float and slowly chugged out to a position in the rear of the starting line and behind the committee boat. Then came the nervous work of awaiting the starting gun. The boys had all donned slickers, and the crew of the hydroplane wore rubber coats which covered them completely. A sort of spray hood had been erected over the hydroplane's engines.

"That means she's going to do her best," remarked Rob, pointing to this indication that great speed was expected. "That's what we want to do, too, isn't it?"

At last came the gun that started off the Snark, the Bonita and the Albacore, which were all of about the same speed.

"Our turn next," said Rob, who had previously received his instructions from the committee.

"Well, I'm all ready," said Merritt, nervously twisting a grease cup.

CHAPTER XIII

THE “FLYING FISH” ON HER METTLE

“Bang!”

With a nervous twitch, Rob threw in the first speed clutch, for the engine had been kept running on her neutral speed, and was able to take up way as soon as the propeller began to “bite.”

Rapidly the boy increased the speed up to the third “forward,” and the Flying Fish darted through the water like a pickerel after a fat frog.

“Bang!” came behind them once more, as the sound of the cheers which greeted them as they shot across the line grew faint.

“Crouch low!” shouted Rob back to his crew. “We’ll need every inch of advantage we can get.”

The white spray shot in a perfect fountain from the sharp bow of the Flying Fish, and her every frame and plank quivered under the vibration of her powerful engine.

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"She's doing better than she ever did!" shouted Merritt to Tubby, who crouched in the center of the boat, ready to take any part in an emergency.

The other nodded and kept his eyes ahead on the white wake of the other three craft.

Suddenly the Albacore began to fall back. As the Flying Fish roared by her, Rob heard a shout of something about "missing fire."

A steady downpour of spray was drenching the occupants of the racer, but they paid scant heed to it. Rob dived in his pockets and put on a pair of goggles. The spray was blinding him. He waved to Tubby to go further astern and keep the rear part of the boat well down when they made the sharp turn at the red buoy.

In an incredibly short time, it seemed, the turning buoy faced them. Rob set his wheel over and spun the Flying Fish through the rougher water at the mouth of the inlet at as sharp an angle as he dared. In a few seconds more they had passed the Snark and the Bonita, which were racing bow and bow. The crew of the Flying Fish, though, knew that both boats had a time allowance over them, so that the mere passing didn't mean much, unless they could increase the lead.

Faster and faster the boy's craft forged ahead. A thrill shot through Rob's frame. The Flying Fish was showing what she was made of.

But as he turned his head swiftly he saw that the hydroplane had rounded the stake and was coming down the straight stretch of water like an express train. A great wave of water shot out on either side of her bow. So low in the water had her powerful engines dragged her that she seemed to be barely on the surface, and yet, as the boys knew, she was actually "coasting" over the surface.

Try as he would, Rob could not get an ounce more speed out of the Flying Fish, and as the speedy hydroplane roared by them they heard a mocking shout from her crew.

Rob, more determined than ever to stick it out, sent the Flying Fish plunging at top speed through the wash of the speedy craft, hoping to keep up the distance between them at least equal. But as he saw the hydroplane gradually drawing away and heard the great roar that went up from the thrilled spectators as she shot by the club house, his heart sank.

It looked as if the Flying Fish was beaten. And now the club house loomed near once more.

"Go on, Flying Fish, go on!"

"You've got a time allowance on her!"

“Push along, Rob!”

“Kr-ee-ee-ee-ee!”

A tumult of other shouts roared in Rob’s ears as they tore past the crowded porch.

“Kr-ee-ee-ee-ee!” screamed back Merritt and Tubby, with waves of the hand to the brown uniformed figures they could see perched on every point of vantage.

Suddenly the Flying Fish began to creep up on the hydroplane, which had slowed down for some reason.

“Hurrah! We’ve got’em now!” shouted Merritt, as he saw, far ahead, Jack and the other two occupants of the seeming winner leaning over the craft’s engine, the hood having been raised.

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Rob said nothing, but with burning eyes clung to the wheel and shot the Flying Fish straight ahead on her course.

As they thundered past the hydroplane, the slender craft lay almost motionless on the water, with a great cloud of blue smoke tumbling out of her exhausts.

"Looks like they've flooded her cylinder," said Merritt, observing these signs.

"Kr-ee-ee-ee-ee!"

It was Tubby giving utterance triumphantly to the Eagle scream.

Jack Curtiss straightened up angrily as he heard, his face black and greasy from his researches into the engine. He shook a menacing fist at the others as they tore by. The next minute, however, a quick look back by Rob showed that the hydroplane was coming ahead again, and that the engine trouble, whatever it was, had been adjusted.

As they neared the turning point, Rob saw, to his dismay, that the hydroplane was creeping up faster and faster. It was the last lap, and if Sam Redding's boat passed them at the stake the race was as good as over.

"Come on, Flying Fish! Come on!" shouted Rob, as the hydroplane crept ever nearer and nearer to his boat's stern.

Rob noticed, as he swung a trifle wide of the stake raft, that it seemed to be the intention of Jack Curtiss, who was at the wheel, to swing the hydroplane round the sharp angle of the course inside of the Flying Fish. Guessing that this would mean disaster to her ill-advised occupants, he waved his hand at them to keep out.

"When we need your advice we'll send for it. This is the time we've got you!" yelled Jack Curtiss, bending low over his wheel, as he grazed by the Flying Fish's stern to take the inside course.

At the same instant, so quickly that the boys did not even get a mental picture of it, the hydroplane overturned.

Taking the curve at such a speed and at such a sharp angle had, as Jack had surmised, proved too much for her stability. Her occupants were pitched struggling into the water.

"Shall we pick them up?" yelled Merritt.

"No," shouted Rob; "they've all got life belts on. A launch from the club will get them."

Indeed, as he spoke a launch was seen putting off to the rescue. The accident had been witnessed from the club, and as the water was warm, the boys were satisfied that no harm would come to the three from their immersion.

But the delay almost proved fatal to the Flying Fish's chance of winning. Close behind her now came creeping up the speedy Albacore.

But a few hundred feet before the finish the Flying Fish darted ahead once more, and shook off her opponent amid a great roar of yells and whoops and cheers. An instant later she shot across the line—a winner.

“Bang!” went the gun, in token that the race was finished.

“I congratulate you,” said Commodore Wingate, as the boys brought their craft up to the float. “It was a well-fought race.”

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And now came the captains of the Albacore, Snark and Bonita.

"You won the race fairly and squarely," said the former, shaking Rob's hand. "I presume, commodore, the time was taken?"

"It has been," replied that official. "The Flying Fish wins by one minute and four and seven hundredths seconds."

More cheers greeted this announcement, mingled with laughter and some sympathy, as the club launch, towing the capsized hydroplane, puffed up to the float. From the launch emerged three crestfallen figures with dripping garments. But wet as he was, Jack Curtiss was not going to surrender the race without a protest.

"A foul! We claim a foul! The Flying Fish fouled us!" he shouted.

"My dear young man," calmly replied the commodore, "I was watching you every foot of the way through binoculars, and I should rather say that you fouled the Flying Fish. Anyhow, you should have better sense than to try to shave round that turn so closely."

More mortified, and angrier than ever, Jack strode off to put on dry clothes, followed by his equally chagrined companions, who, however, had sense enough now not to make any protests. They knew well enough that Jack, in his hurry to grab the prize, had attempted a foolish and dangerous thing which had cost them the race.

"A great race, a great race," said Mr. Blake, as the boys, followed by the crowd, entered the club house, where the awards were to be distributed. "You boys certainly covered yourselves with glory," he went on.

"Yes, and here is your reward. I hope it will stimulate you to put up a fine defense for it next year," said Commodore Wingate, handing to the elated boys a fine engraved silver cup, the trophy of the Hampton Yacht Club.

"Get up and make a speech!" shouted some one.

The boys felt inclined to run for it.

"Go ahead! Make some sort of a talk," urged Rob, helping Tubby on to the platform from which the prizes had been handed out.

"Ladies and gentlemen," puffed the stout youth, "we want to thank you for your congratulations and thank the club for the fine cup. Er—er—er—we thank you."

And having made what was perhaps quite as good a speech as some of his elders', Tubby stepped down amid loud and prolonged cheering.

Up in the dressing room Jack and his cronies, changing into other, garments, heard the sounds of applause.

“It’s high time something was done,” said Bill, as he gazed from a window at several of the yacht club attendants bailing out the unlucky hydroplane. “Those young beggars will be owning the town next.”

CHAPTER XIV

THE EAGLES IN CAMP

The next few days were full of excitement and preparation for the Boy Scouts. Their headquarters resounded all day to the tramp of feet, and the Manual of Instructions was consulted day and night. The official tents had arrived, and every boy in the Patrol was eager for the time to arrive to put them up. So much so that two or three confessed that they could hardly sleep at night in their impatience for the hour when the embarkation for Topsail Island was to take place.

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Besides the tents, there was much other equipment to be overhauled and set in order, for, before their departure, the boys were to be reviewed by their scout master and a field secretary from New York. There were haversack straps to be replaced, laces mended, axes sharpened, “Billys” polished and made to shine like new tin, and a hundred and one things to be done. At last, however—although it seemed that it would never come—the eventful Monday arrived, as eventful days of all kinds have a habit of doing; and the Eagle Patrol, spick and span and shining from tan boots to campaign hats, fell in line behind the band. Proudly they paraded up the street, with their green and black Eagle Patrol sign fluttering gallantly in the van.

The “reviewing stand” was the post-office steps, around which most of the citizens of Hampton and the proud parents and relatives of the young scouts were assembled.

Plenty of applause greeted them, as, in response to Rob’s orders, given in the sharp, military manner, they drew up in line and gave the Boy Scout’s salute. This done, the young scouts went through a smart drill with the staffs they carried. Then, after saluting once more, and being warmly complimented on their appearance by the field secretary, they marched off to the wharf where they were to embark for their camp.

The day before Merritt, Hiram Nelson, Paul Perkins and the three “tender feet”—Martin Green, Walter Lonsdale and Joe Digby—had been told off by Rob as on “pioneer service”; that is to say, that they had gone down to the island in the Flying Fish. Arrived there, they selected a good spot for the camp, aided by Commodore Wingate’s and Captain Hudgins’ suggestions, and set up the tents and made the other necessary preparations. The camp was therefore practically ready, for the “army” to move into.

At Tubby’s special request, a list of the rations for the week’s camp had been made out by Rob and affixed to the bulletin board in the headquarters of the Eagles. As perhaps some of my young readers may care to know what to take on a similar expedition, is the list, exclusive of meat, which was to be brought from the mainland, and fish, which they expected to catch themselves:

Oatmeal, 8 lbs.; rice, 4 lbs.; crackers, 35 lbs.; chocolate, 1 1-2 lbs.; tea, 3 lbs; coffee, 1 lb.; lard, 6 lbs.; sugar, 8 lbs.; condensed milk, 10 cans; butter, 4 lbs.; eggs, 12 dozen; bacon, 20 lbs.; preserves, 14 jars; prunes, 8 lbs.; maple syrup and molasses, 4 quarts; potatoes, 1 bushel; white beans, 6 quarts; canned corn, 6 tins; canned tomatoes, 6 tins; flour, 35 lbs.; baking powder, 2 lbs.; salt, 4 lbs.; pepper, 2 ounces.

“Well,” Tubby had remarked, as he gazed attentively at the list, “we won’t starve, anyhow.”

“I should say not,” laughed Rob; “and besides all that, I’ve got lots of lines and squids, and the blues and mackerel are running good.”

“Can’t I take along my twenty-two rifle—that island’s just swarming with rabbits, and I think I heard some quail when we were there the other day,” pleaded Merritt.

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"Not in season," answered Rob laconically. "Laws not up on them till November."

"Oh, bother the law!" blurted out Merritt. "However, I suppose if there wasn't one there wouldn't be any rabbits left."

"I guess you're right," agreed Tubby. "Still, it does seem hard to have to look at them skip about and not be able to take a shot at them."

"Maybe we can set a springle and snare some," hopefully suggested Tubby, as a way out of the difficulty; "that wouldn't be as bad as shooting them, you know, and I can build a springle that will strangle them instantaneously."

"No fair, Tubby," laughed Rob. "You know, a boy scout promises to obey the law, and the game law is as much a law as any other."

Arrived at the L wharf, the boys found the Flying Fish and Captain Hudgins' Barracuda waiting for them. With much laughter they piled in—their light-heartedness and constant joking reminding such onlookers, as had ever seen the spectacle, of a band of real soldiers going to the front or embarking for foreign stations.

With three ear-splitting cheers and a final yell of, "Kr-ee-ee-ee-ee!" the little flotilla got under way.

They arrived at the camping ground at the northeast end of the island before noon, and found that the "pioneers" appointed by Rob had done their work well. Each tent was placed securely on a level patch of sandy ground, cleared from brush and stamped flat. The pegs were driven extra deep in anticipation of a gale, and an open cook tent, with flaps that could be fastened down in bad weather, stood to one side.

A small spring had been excavated by the pioneers, and an old barrel sunk in place, which had filled in the night and now presented sparkling depths of cool, clear water.

"I suppose that water is all right, captain?" inquired Leader Rob, with a true officer's regard for his troops.

"Sweet as a butternut, son," rejoined the old man. "Makes the sick strong and the strong stronger, as the medicine advertisements say."

For the present, the cooking was to be done on a regular camp fire which was built between two green logs laid lengthwise and converging toward the end. The tops of these had, under Commodore Wingate's directions, been slightly flattened with an axe. At each end a forked branch had been set upright in the ground, with a green limb laid between them. From this limb hung "cooking hooks," consisting of green branches with hooked ends at one extremity to hang over the long timber, and a nail driven in the other from which to hang the pots.

“That’s the best form of camp fire, boys,” said Commodore—or perhaps we would better call him scout master now—Wingate, who had accompanied the boys to see them settled. “Now, then, the next thing to do is to run up the Stars and Stripes and plant the Eagle flag. Then you’ll be all O.K.”

Little Andy Bowles made the woods behind them echo with the stirring call of “assembly,” and halliards were reeved on a previously cut pole, about fifteen feet in height. The Stars and Stripes were attached, and while the whole company stood at attention and gave the scout salute, Scout Master Wingate raised the colors. Three loud, shrill cheers greeted Old Glory as it blew bravely out against the cloudless blue.

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"That's a pretty sight now, shiver my timbers if it ain't," observed old Captain Hudgins, who had stood, hat in hand, during the ceremony. "I've seen Old Glory in many a foreign port, and felt like takin' off my hat and givin' three cheers fer the old flag; but I never seen her look better or finer than she does a-streakin' out from that there bit of timber."

"Now, Patrol cooks," was Scout Master Wingate's next command, "it's only an hour to dinner time, and we want the first mess to be right. Come on, and we'll get the pot boiling."

Cook duty fell that day to Hiram Nelson and Walter Lonsdale, and under the scout master's directions they soon had potatoes peeled, beans in water, and a big piece of stew meat chopped up with vegetables in a capacious pot.

After every errand to the store tent, Walter was anxious to know if it was not yet time to light the fire.

"Never be in a hurry to light your fire when you are in the woods," rejoined the scout master; "otherwise you will be so busy tending the fire you won't be able to prepare your food for cooking. Now we're all ready for the fire, though, and you can bring me some dry bark and small sticks from that pile of wood the pioneers laid in yesterday."

This was promptly done, and the lads watched the next step with interest. They saw the scout master take a tiny pile of the sticks and then light a roll of bark and thrust it into them.

"I thought you piled them up all criss-cross," remarked Hiram.

"No woodsman does that, my boy," was the rejoinder. "Now get me some larger timber from that pile, and I'll show you how to go about it like regular trappers."

The fire builder shoved the ends of the sticks into the blaze and then the bean pot was hung in place.

"We won't put the potatoes on now, as they take less time," he remarked; "those beans will take the longest."

Soon the heat was leaping up about the pots, and the cheerful crackle and incense of the camp fire filled the air. As the sticks burned down the scout master shoved the ends farther into the blaze, instead of throwing them on top of it.

"Now, then, boys, you've had your first lesson in camp fire making and cooking," he announced. "Now go ahead, and let's see what kind of a dinner you can produce. I'm going for a tour of exploration of the island."

Among the other things the pioneers had accomplished was the building of a table large enough to seat the entire Patrol, with planks set on logs as seats. Hiram put Walter to setting this, while he burned his fingers and smudged his face over his cookery. Long before the beans seemed any nearer to what experience taught the young cook they ought to be, Walter announced that the table was all set, with its tin cups and dishes and steel knives and forks.

Suddenly, while Hiram was considering putting the potatoes on their hook, there came from the rear of the store tent the most appalling succession of squeals and screams the boy had ever heard. Springing to his feet, he dashed to the scene of the conflict—for such it seemed to be though not without a heart that beat rather faster than usual. He had no idea what the creatures could be that were producing all the uproar, and for all he knew they might have been bears.

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Behind him came Walter, rather pale, but determined to do his best as a Boy Scout to fight off any wild beasts that might be attacking the camp. As he dashed behind the tent, however, Hiram was impelled to give a loud laugh. The contestants—for he had rightly judged they were in high dispute—were two small black pigs which had looted a bag of oatmeal from under the flap of the store tent and were busily engaged in fighting over their spoils.

“Get out, you brutes! Scat!” shouted the boy, bringing down a long-handled spoon he carried over the backs of the disputants.

The spoon, being almost red-hot, the clamor of the porkers redoubled, and with indignant squeals and grumbings they dashed off into the dense growth of scrub oak and pine that covered the island in its interior. At the same moment the captain, who had been taking a snooze under some small bushes, awoke with a start.

“Eh—eh—eh! What’s all that?” he exclaimed, hearing the yells. “Why, it’s that plagued Betsy and Jane, my two young sows,” he cried the next moment. “Consarn and keelhaul the critters, they’re breakin’ out all the time. I reckon they’re headed fer home now,” he added, when Hiram related how he had scared them.

“I’m glad that they were nothing but pigs, captain,” said Hiram, going back with flushed cheeks to his cookery. “I was afraid for a minute they were I hardly know what. We’ll have to fix that store tent more snugly in future.”

“And I’ll have ter take a double reef in my pig Pen,” chuckled the captain.

CHAPTER XV

THE CHUMS IN PERIL

Even the epicurean Tubby Hopkins voted dinner that day a great success, and Hiram, with becoming modesty, took his congratulations blushing. In mid-afternoon, after seeing that the camp was in good working order, the scout masters started for the home shore in Captain Hudgins’s boat, which was also to bring back some additional supplies for the next day.

After dinner Rob had assigned Merritt and Tubby to form a “fishing squad,” to range seaward in the Flying Fish and “halt and detain” all the bluefish they could apprehend. The others were given the afternoon to range the island and practice up their woodcraft and landmark work, while Rob busied himself in his tent, which was equipped with a small folding camp table, in filling out his pink blank reports which were to be forwarded to Commodore Wingate and dispatched by him to the headquarters of the Boy Scouts in New York.

Merritt and Tubby were both ardent fishermen, and in response to Hiram's pleadings, they allowed him to accompany them on their expedition. The fish were running well, and the boys cast and pulled in some time without particularly noticing how far out to sea they had gone.

Suddenly the stout youth, who was fishing with an unusually heavy line and hook, felt a hard tug on his apparatus, so powerful a tweak, in fact, that it almost pulled him overboard. He tried to haul in, but the resistance on the other end of his line was so great that he was compelled to twist it about a cleat in order to avoid either letting go or being dragged into the sea.

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"What in the name of Sam Hill have you hooked?" gasped Merritt, as the Flying Fish began to move through the water faster than even her engine could propel her.

"I've not the least idea," remarked Tubby placidly, "but I rather think it must be a whale."

"Whale nothing!" exclaimed Merritt scornfully and with superior wisdom. "Whales sound, don't they?"

"Well, there's not been a sound out of this one so far," truthfully observed Hiram.

"What kind of a sound do they make, corporal?"

"Oh, you chump," responded Merritt good-naturedly, "you've lived by the sea all your life, and you don't know how a whale sounds. Sound means when a whale blows, spouts, sends up a big fountain of water."

"Oh, I see," responded Hiram, much enlightened. "But see here, Merritt, whatever we are fast to is beginning to pick up speed pretty rapidly. Don't you think we'd better cut the line or try to haul in?"

"Haul in! Not much!" exclaimed Tubby indignantly. "We'll just hang on till we tire him out, that's what we'll do, and then haul in."

"But we're getting a good way out from shore," objected Hiram, who, however much at home he was at the key of a wireless apparatus, had no great relish for blue water in a small motor boat.

"Don't you worry, sonny," put in Merritt patronizingly. "We'll be all right. My, that was a plunge!"

As he spoke the bow of the Flying Fish dipped till she shipped a few gallons of green water.

"I'll pay out some more line," said the unperturbed Tubby. "I guess whatever we're onto begins to believe that he has swallowed something pretty indigestible."

Faster and faster the Flying Fish began to cut through the sea. The water sprayed out from both sides of her cutwater in a steady stream.

"She's doing as well as she did the day of the race," said Merritt, with a laugh, gazing at Hiram's rather pale face. The wireless youth was casting longing glances at the shore.

"Well, I wish Mr. Whale, or whatever he is, would come up and let us have a look at him!" exclaimed Tubby suddenly. "This is getting pretty monotonous."

As he spoke the boy paid out a little more line. He had only just time to belay it round the cleat to avoid its being jerked out of his hand, so fast was the creature they had hooked now traveling.

“Say, Tubby,” spoke Merritt at length, “I’m beginning to think myself that it might not be a bad idea to put back. Those clouds over there on the horizon look as if they meant trouble.”

“Oh, let’s keep it on a little while longer pleaded Tubby; cutting through the water like this, without any expenditure of gasoline or power, is the real luxurious way of ocean traveling. It beats the Mauretania. just think if liners could hitch a whole team of things like whatever has got hold of us to their bows! Why, the Atlantic would be crossed in four days.”

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For some time longer the boat shot along over the waves, towed by its invisible force. The boys, with the exception of Tubby, began to get anxious. The shores of the mainland were dim in the distance behind them, and Topsail Island itself only showed as a dark blue dot.

Suddenly the motion ceased.

"He's free of the line!" shouted Hiram, inwardly much relieved to think they had got rid of what to him was an alarming situation.

"No, he's not," replied Tubby, bending over the line. "He's still fast to us. The line's as tight as a fiddle string."

He was standing up as he spoke, and as the Flying Fish gave a sudden, crazy jerk forward, he was almost thrown overboard. In fact, he would have toppled into the sea if Merritt had not bounded forward and grabbed the fleshy lad just as he was losing his balance.

"We're off again!" exclaimed Hiram, as the Flying Fish once more began to move through the water.

But now the creature that had seized Tubby's big hook started to move in circles. Round and round the Flying Fish was towed in dizzy swings that made the heads of her young occupants swim.

"Start the engine on the reverse, and see if that will do any good," said Tubby, bending anxiously over his line.

Merritt brought the reverse gear to "neutral," and then started it up, gradually bringing back the lever governing the reversing wheel till the Flying Fish was going second speed astern, and finally at her full gait backward.

The tug thus exercised seemed to have no effect on the monster that had caught Tubby's bait, however. With the exception that the speed was diminished a trifle, the Flying Fish was still powerless to shake off her opponent.

Suddenly, and without the slightest warning, a huge, shiny, wet body shot out of the water almost directly in front of the amazed and startled boys, and settled back with a mighty splash that sent the spray flying in a salt-water shower bath over their heads.

"Whatever was it?" gasped Hiram in awed tones.

"A shark," replied Merritt, "and a whopper, too. What are we going to do, Tubby—keep on or cut loose?"

“Just a little longer,” pleaded the other. “He must be tiring by this time. If we can only wear him out, we can tow him ashore and make a little money out of him. You know shark skin is valuable.”

“I’d rather have a whole skin of my own,” quavered Hiram, who had been considerably alarmed by the momentary glimpse he had had of Tubby’s quarry.

“He’s off again!” shouted Merritt, as the sea tiger started straight ahead once more.

Suddenly the line slackened again.

“Look out!” Tubby had just time to shriek the warning before a mighty shock threw them all off their feet in a heap on the bottom of the boat.

“Zan-g-g-g!”

The line twanged and snapped under the sudden strain, and a great rush seaward showed the boys, as soon as they recovered their senses, that they had lost their shark.

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"And a good line," moaned Tubby.

"What are you kicking about?" demanded Merritt. "It's a lucky thing the beast didn't start some plank of the boat when it charged; but as far as I can see, the Flying Fish stood the shock all right."

"It felt like an earthquake," murmured Hiram, whose face was white and eyes frightened.

"Well, I suppose we'd better head for home," said Tubby at length. "Those bluefish will go fine for supper."

"Spoken like a Tubby," laughed Merritt. "All right, I'll start up. Hullo—" he looked up with a puzzled face from the reverse lever. "I can't get her on the forward speed."

"What's the matter?" gasped Hiram.

"I don't know. Something's stuck. Shut off that engine, will you, Tubby, while I see?"

Tubby promptly shut down the motor, and Merritt struggled with the refractory lever. It was all in vain, however; he could not get it on the forward speed.

"I've got to investigate," puffed the perspiring corporal; "something must be wrong with the reversible propeller."

"Well, whatever you are going to do, hurry up about it," spoke Tubby, with unwonted sharpness in his tones.

"Why, what's the—" began Merritt.

Tubby checked him with a finger on his lips.

"Don't scare the kid," he whispered, leaning forward, "but we're in for a storm."

He pointed seaward.

Rolling toward them was a spreading wall of heavy clouds traveling at seemingly great speed, while below the wrack the water darkened ominously and became flecked with "white horses."

CHAPTER XVI

LOST IN THE STORM

"The trouble's in the reversible propeller. I always told Rob he was foolish not to have a regular reverse gear on the shaft itself and a solid wheel," said Merritt.

“Well, never mind that now,” urged Tubby anxiously. “I’ll shift all the cushions and stuff up in the bow, and Hiram and I will get as far forward as we can. That will raise the stern and you can hang over and reach the wheel.”

When the stout lad had done as he suggested there was quite a perceptible tilt forward to the Flying Fish, and Merritt, hanging over the stern, could feel about the propeller better.

“Just as I thought,” he shouted presently. “That shark when he came astern fouled that heavy line on the propeller.”

He got out his knife, and in a few minutes succeeded in cutting the entangling line free.

It was not any too soon. From far off there came a low sound, something like the moaning of a large animal in pain. It grew louder and closer, and with it came an advancing wall of water crested with white foam. The sky, too, grew black, and air filled with a sort of sulphurous smell.

“It’s a thunder squall,” shouted Tubby, as Merritt shoved over the lever and started the engine.

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As he spoke there came a low growl of thunder and the sky was illumined with a livid glare.

"Here she comes!" yelled Merritt; "better get out those slickers or we'll be soaked."

Tubby opened a locker and produced the yellow waterproof coats. The boys had hardly thrust their arms into them before the big sea struck them. Thanks to Tubby's steering, however, the Flying Fish met it without shipping more than a few cupfuls of water.

The next minute the full fury of the storm enveloped the Boy Scouts and the Flying Fish was laboring in a heaving wilderness of lashed and tumbling water.

"Keep her head up!" roared Merritt, above the screaming of the wind and the now almost continuous roar and rattle of the thunder. It grew almost dark, so overcast was the sky, and under the somber, driving cloud wrack the white wave crests gleamed like savage teeth.

Hiram crouched on the bottom of the boat, too terrified to speak, while Tubby and Merritt strove desperately to keep the little craft from "broaching to," in which case she would have shipped more water than would have been at all convenient, not to say safe.

As if it were some vindictive live thing, seized with a sudden spite against the boat and its occupants, the storm roared about the dazed boys.

The Flying Fish, however, rode the sweeping seas gallantly, breasting even the biggest combers bravely and buoyantly.

"It's getting worse," shouted Tubby, gazing back at Merritt, who was bending over the laboring motor.

"Yes, you bet it is!" roared back the engineer; "and I'm afraid of a short circuit if this rain keeps up."

"Cover up the engine with that spare slicker," suggested Tubby.

"That's a good idea," responded the other, rummaging in a stern locker and producing the garment in question. In another moment he had it over the engine, protecting the spark plugs and the high-tension wires from the rain and spray. But the wind was too high to permit of the covering remaining unfastened, and with a ball of marlin the young engineer lashed the improvised motor cover firmly in place.

Hiram, with a white face, now crawled up from the bottom of the boat. In addition to being scared, he was seasick from the eccentric motions of the storm-tossed craft.

"Do you think we'll ever get ashore again?" he asked, crawling to Merritt's side.

“Sure,” responded the corporal confidently. “Come on, buck up, Hiram! You know, a Boy Scout never says die. We’ll be back in camp in three hours’ time, when this squall blows itself out.”

“I—I don’t want you to think me a coward, Merritt,” quavered Hiram, “but—but you know this is enough to scare any fellow.”

Indeed, he seemed right. The Flying Fish appeared no more than a tiny chip on the immense rollers the storm had blown up. Time and again it looked as if she would never be able to climb the huge walls of green water that towered above her; but every time she did, and, as the storm raged on, the confidence of the boys began to grow.

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"She'll ride it out, Tubby!" yelled Merritt, dousing the engine with more oil.

"Sure she will!" yelled back Tubby, with a confidence that was, however, largely assumed. The stout youth had just been assailed by an alarming thought that flashed across his mind.

"Would the gasoline hold out?"

There was no opportunity on the plunging, bucking craft to examine the tank, and all the boy could do was to make a rapid mental calculation, based on what he knew of the consumption of the engine. The tank, he knew, had been half full when they came out, and that, under ordinary conditions, would have sufficed to drive the Flying Fish for five or six hours.

But they were not ordinary conditions under which she was now laboring. Tubby knew that Merritt was piling in every ounce of gasoline the carburetor could take care of.

Suddenly, while the stout youth's mind was busied with these thoughts, and without the slightest warning, there came a sort of wheezing gasp from the motor.

Merritt leaned over it in alarm. He seized the timing lever and shoved it over and opened the gasoline cock full tilt.

But there was no response from the motor.

It gasped out a cough a couple of times and turned over in a dying fashion for a few revolutions and then stopped dead.

The boys were adrift in the teeth of the storm in a crippled boat.

"What's the matter?" roared back Tubby from the wheel. "She's lost steerage way!"

"Motor's gone dead," howled back Merritt laconically.

"Great Scott, we are in for it now! What's the matter?"

"No gasolene," yelled Merritt.

"Sosh-osh-soh!"

A huge green wave climbed on to the Flying Fish's bow, shaking her from stem to stern like a terrier shakes a rat.

"We've got to do something quick, or we'll be swamped!" roared Merritt.

“The cockpit cover, quick!” shouted Tubby, steadying himself in the bucking craft by a tight grasp on the bulwarks.

“That’s it. Now the oars. Hurry up. Here, you Hiram, grab that can and bail for all you’re worth!”

The fat youth seemed transformed by the sudden emergency into the most active of beings.

“What are you going to do?” yelled Merritt, framing his mouth with his hands.

“Make a spray hood. Come forward here and give me a hand.”

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With the oars the two boys made a sort of arched framework, secured with ropes, and over it spread the canvas cockpit cover, lashing it down to the forward and side cleats. This work was not unattended with danger and difficulty. Time and again as they worked the boys had to lie flat on their stomachs and hang on while the Flying Fish leaped a wave like a horse taking a barrier. At last, however, their task was completed, and the improvised spray hood served to some extent to break the waves that now threatened momentarily to engulf the laboring craft.

"Now to get out a sea anchor!" shouted the indefatigable Tubby.

He seized up an old bait tub, a boat hook and a "swabbing-out" broom, and lashed them all together in a sort of bridle. Then he attached the Flying Fish's mooring cable to the contrivance and paid it out for a hundred feet or more, while the storm-battered craft drifted steadily backward. Instead, however, of lying beam on to the big sea, she now headed up into them, the "drag," as it is sometimes called, serving to keep her bow swung up to the threatening combers.

"There, she'll ride for a while, anyhow," breathed Tubby, when this was done.

"What's to be done now?" shouted Merritt in his car.

"Nothing," was the response; "we've got to lie here till this thing blows over."

"It's breaking a little to the south now," exclaimed Merritt, pointing to where a rift began to appear in the solid cloud curtain.

This was cheering news, and even the seasick but plucky Hiram, who had been bailing for all he was worth, despite his misery, began to cheer up.

"Hurrah! I guess the worst of our troubles are over," cried Tubby. "It certainly looks as if the sea was beginning to go down, and the wind has dropped, I'm sure."

That this was the case became apparent shortly. There was a noticeable decrease in the size and height of the waves and the wind abated in proportion. In half an hour after the rift had been first noticed by Merritt, the black squall had passed, and the late afternoon sun began to shine in a pallid way through the driving cloud masses.

The lads, however, were still in a serious fix. They had been driven so far out to sea that the land was blotted out altogether. All about them was only the still heaving Atlantic. The sun, too, was westering fast, and it would not be long before darkness fell.

Without gasoline and with no sail, they had no means of making land. Worse still, they were in the track of the in and out-bound steamers to and from New York—according to Tubby's reckoning—and they had no lights.

“Well, we seem to have got out of the frying pan into the fire,” said Merritt in a troubled voice. “It’s the last time I’ll ever come out without lights and a mast and sail.”

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"That's what they all say," observed Tubby grimly. "The thing to do now is to get back to shore somehow. Maybe we can rig up a sail with the cockpit cover and the oars. We've got to try it, anyhow."

After hauling in the sea anchor, the lads set to work to rig up and lash the oars into an A shape. The canvas was lashed to each of the arms of the A, and the contrivance then set up and secured to the fore and aft cleats by the mooring line they had utilized for the sea anchor.

"Well," remarked Tubby, as he surveyed his handiwork with some satisfaction and pride, "we can go before the wind now, anyhow—even if we do look like a lost, strayed or stolen Chinese junk."

"Say, I'm so hungry I could eat one of those fish raw!" exclaimed Hiram, now quite recovered, as the Flying Fish, under her clumsy sail, began to stagger along in the direction in which Tubby believed the land lay, the wind fortunately being dead aft.

"Great Scott, the kid's right!" exclaimed Merritt. "We forgot all about eating in the gloom but now I believe I could almost follow Hiram's lead and eat some of those fellows as they are."

"Well, that's about all you'll get to eat for a long time," remarked Tubby, grimly casting an anxious eye aloft at the filling "sail."

CHAPTER XVII

ALMOST RUN DOWN

It grew dark rapidly and the night fell on three lonely, wet, hungry boys, rolling along in a disabled boat under what was surely one of the queerest rigs ever devised. It answered its purpose, though, and under her "jury mast" the Flying Fish actually made some headway through the water.

None of the boys said much, and Tubby, under the cover of the darkness, tightened his capacious belt. It spoke volumes for his Boy Scout training that, though he probably felt the pangs of hunger as much or even more keenly than the others, he made no complaint. Hiram, the second-class scout, complained a bit at first, but soon quieted down under Merritt's stern looks; as for the latter, as corporal of the Eagle Patrol, it was his duty to try to keep as cheerful as possible; which, under the circumstances, was about as hard a task as could well be imagined.

The eyes of all three were kept strained ahead for some sign of a light, for they had been so tossed about in the squall that all sense of direction had been lost, and they had no compass aboard, which in itself was a piece of carelessness.

Suddenly, after about an hour of “going it blind” in this fashion, young Hiram gave a shout.

“A light, a light!”

“Where?” demanded Tubby and Merritt sharply.

“Off there,” cried the lad, pointing to the left, over the port side of the boat.

Both the elder lads gazed sharply.

“That’s not the direction in which land would lie,” mused Tubby.

“The light’s pretty high up, too, isn’t it?” suggested Merritt. “It might be a lighthouse. We may have been blown farther than we thought.”

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Tubby offered no opinion for a few seconds, but his ordinarily round and smiling face grew grave. A sudden apprehension had flashed into his mind.

"Tell me, Merritt," he said, "can you see any other lights?"

"No," replied Merritt, after peering with half closed eyes at the white light.

"I can," suddenly shouted young Hiram.

"You can?"

"Yes; some distance below the white light I can see a green one to the right and a red one on the left."

"Shades of Father Neptune!" groaned Tubby. "It's just as I thought, Merritt—that light yonder is a steamer's mast lantern, and the fact that Hiram can see both her port and starboard lamps beneath shows that she's coming right for us."

This was alarming enough. Without lanterns, without the means of making any noise sufficiently loud to attract the attention of those on the approaching vessel, the occupants of the Flying Fish were in about as serious a predicament as one could imagine. To make matters worse, the wind began to drop and come in puffs which only urged the Flying Fish ahead slowly. Tubby made a rapid mental calculation, and decided that hardly anything short of a miracle could save them from being run down, unless the steamer saw them and changed her course.

"Can't we shout and make them hear us?" asked Hiram in an alarmed voice. He saw from the troubled faces of both the elder lads that something serious indeed was the matter.

"We might try it," responded Tubby, with a bitter shrug. "But it's about as much use as a mouth organ in a symphony orchestra would be. Better get on the life belts."

With hands that trembled with the sense of impending disaster, the three boys strapped on the cork jackets.

"Now all shout together," said Merritt, when this was done.

Standing erect, the three young castaways placed their hands funnel-wise to their mouths and roared out together:

"Ship ahoy! St-eam-er a-hoy!"

They were alarmed and not ashamed to admit it.

“No good,” said Tubby, after they had roared themselves hoarse. “When she strikes us, jump over the starboard bow and dive as deep as you can. If you don’t, the propellers are liable to catch us.”

It was a grim prospect, and no wonder the boys grew white and their faces strained as the impending peril bore down on them.

They could now see that she was a large vessel—a liner, to judge from the rows of lighted portholes on her steep black sides. Her bow lights gleamed like the eye of some monster intent on devouring the Flying Fish and her occupants. On and on she came. The air trembled with the vibration of her mighty engines, and a great white “bone” foamed up at her sharp prow.

Not one of the boys spoke as the vessel came nearer and nearer, although it speedily grew evident that unless a wind sprang up or the lookout saw them, it was inevitable that they would be cut in two amidships.

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"Remember what I said," warned Tubby, in a strange, strained voice. "Dive deep and stay tunder as long as you can."

And now the great vessel seemed scarcely more than two or three boat lengths from the tiny cockleshell on which she was bearing down. As a matter of fact, though, her towering bulk made her appear much nearer than she actually was.

"Can't we do anything, Merritt?" gasped Hiram, with chattering teeth. "We might try shouting once more," suggested Tubby in a voice that quivered in spite of his efforts to keep it steady.

"All together now—come on!"

"Ship ahoy! You'll run us down! St-eam-er a-hoy!"

Suddenly there were signs of confusion on the bow of the big vessel. Men could be seen running about and waving their arms.

"By hookey, they've seen us!" breathed Merritt, hardly daring to believe it, however.

The others were speechless with suspense.

Suddenly from the bow of the oncoming steamer a great fan-shaped ray of dazzling light shot out and enveloped the boys and their boat in its bewildering radiance.

"Hard over, hard over!" the boys could hear the lookout roaring, and the command rang hoarsely back along the decks to the wheelhouse.

Slowly, very slowly, as if reluctant to give up her prey, the bow of the mighty liner swung off, and the boys were safe.

"Look out for the wash," warned Merritt, as the great black bulk, pierced with hundreds of glowing portholes, ploughed regally by them, her deck crowded with curious passengers. A voice shouted down from the bridge:

"What in blazing sea serpents are you doing out here in that marine oil stove?"

The boys made no attempt to reply. They had all they could do to hang on, as the Flying Fish danced about like a drifting cork in the wash of the great vessel. They could see, however, that several of her passengers were clustered at her stern rail, gazing wonderingly down at them in great perplexity, no doubt, as to what manner of craft it was that they had so narrowly escaped sending to the bottom. For had the vessel even grazed the Flying Fish, the small boat would have been annihilated without those on board the liner even feeling a tremor. It would have been just such a tragedy as happens frequently to the fishing dories on the foggy Newfoundland banks.

"Wh-ew!" gasped Merritt, sinking down on a locker. "That was a narrow escape if you like it!"

"I don't like it," remarked Tubby sententiously, mopping his forehead, on which beads of cold perspiration had stood out while their destruction had seemed inevitable. So thoroughly unnerved were the lads, in fact, by their experience that it was some time before they could do anything more than sit limply on the lockers while the Flying Fish rolled aimlessly with an uncontrolled helm.

"Come on," said Tubby at length; "we've got to rouse ourselves. In the first place, I've got an idea," he went on briskly. "I've been thinking over that gasoline stoppage, and the more I think of it the more I am inclined to believe that there's something queer about it. It's worth looking into, anyhow."

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"You mean you think there may be some fuel in the tank, after all?" asked Merritt, looking up.

"It's possible. Have you tried the little valve forward of the carburetor?"

"Why, no," rejoined Merritt; "but I hardly think—"

"It wouldn't be the first time a carburetor had fouled, particularly after what we went through in that squall," remarked Tubby. "It's worth trying, anyhow."

He bent over the valve he had referred to, which was in the gasoline feed pipe, just forward of the carburetor, and placed there primarily for draining the tank when it was necessary.

"Look here!" he yelled, with a sudden shout of excitement. "No," he cried the next moment, "I don't want to waste it—but when I opened the valve a stream of gasoline came out. There's plenty of it. That stoppage is in the carburetor. Oh, what a bunch of idiots we've been!"

"Better sound the tank," suggested Merritt; "what came out of the valve might just be an accumulation in the pipe."

"Not much," rejoined the other, "it came out with too much force for that, I tell you. It was flowing from the tank, all right."

"We'll soon find out," proclaimed Merritt. "Give me the sounding stick out of that locker, Hiram."

Armed with the stick, Merritt rapidly unscrewed the cap of the fuel tank and plunged the sounder into it.

"There's quite a lot of gasoline in there yet," he exclaimed, with sparkling eyes, as he withdrew and felt the wet end of the instrument.

The carburetor was rapidly adjusted. The rough tossing about the Flying Fish had received had jammed the needle valve, but that was all. Presently all was in readiness to get under way once more with the little boat's proper motive power. The "jury rig" was speedily dismantled Merritt swung the flywheel over two or three times, and a welcome "chug, chug!" responded.

"Hurray! she's working," cried Hiram.

"As well as ever," responded Merritt. "Now for the shore. By the way," he broke off in a dismayed tone, "where is the shore?"

"I know now," rejoined Tubby in a confident tone. "Off there to the right. You see, that steamer was hugging the coast preparatory to heading seaward—at least, I'm pretty sure she was, and that would put the shore on her port side, or on our starboard."

They chugged off in the direction Tubby indicated, and before long a joyful cry from Hiram announced the sudden appearance of lights.

"What are they?" asked Merritt.

"Don't know—they look like bonfires," rejoined the other lad. "I wonder if we have been lucky enough to pick up Topsail Island?"

As they drew nearer the lads soon saw that it was the island that they were approaching, and that the lights they had seen were campfires ignited by order of the anxious young Patrol leader to guide them back.

In a short time they had anchored the Flying Fish opposite the camp, and jumped into the dinghy left at her moorings when they embarked.

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"A fine scare you've given us," cried Rob, as they landed and flung down their afternoon's catch. "We were afraid for a time that you were lost in that black squall—it blew two of our, tents down, and we were mighty anxious about you, I can tell you."

"You did not alarm our folks?" asked Hiram anxiously.

"No, I thought that it would be best to wait. Somehow, I thought you'd turn up safe. Where on earth have you been and what has happened? You look as pale as three ghosts."

"Towed to sea by a shark—caught in a squall—almost run down by a liner—and so hungry we can't talk now," sputtered out Tubby comprehensively.

"All right; come on up to the fire and get dried out and pitch into the grub."

After such a meal as it may be imagined the young scouts indulged in, they told their whole yarn of their adventures to the listening Patrol. A short time after they concluded—so long had it taken to relate everything and answer all questions—the mournful call of "Taps" sounded and it was time to turn in. Little Digby alone, who was to do sentry service, remained on duty.

Merritt's dreams were a strange jumble. It seemed to him that he was being towed to sea on the back of a huge shark, by a big liner with a row of blazing portholes that winked at him like facetious eyes. Suddenly, just as it seem he was about to slip off the marine monster's slippery back, he thought he heard a loud cry of "Help, scouts!"

So vivid was the dream and so real the cry that he awoke trembling, and listened intently while peering out through the tent flap.

There was no sound, however, but the ripple of the waves on the beach and the "hoot hoot" of an owl somewhere back in the woods on the island.

"Funny," mused the boy, as he turned over and dozed off again, "that certainly sounded loud enough to have been a real, sure enough call for help."

CHAPTER XVIII

JOE DIGBY MISSING

"Merritt! Merritt, wake up!"

The boy sleepily opened his eyes and saw bending over him the pale features of Rob, whose voice quivered with suppressed excitement as he shook the other's shoulder.

"I didn't hear reveille blow yet. What's up? Have I overslept?" murmured the young corporal.

"No, it's not six-thirty yet—barely after half past four, in fact. But young Digby—he had the night watch, you know—and was to have been relieved at three o'clock. Well, Ernest Thompson, his relief, roused out at that hour, but not a trace of Digby was to be found!"

"What!" The sleepy boy was drowsy no longer. "Digby gone?"

"Hush! We don't know yet. Don't wake any of the others. Thompson and I have skirmished around ever since it began to get light, and we have not been able to find a trace of him."

Merritt was out of his cot while his leader was still speaking, and ten minutes later, during which time the boys exchanged excited questions and answers, he was in his uniform and outside the tent.

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The sun was just poking his rim above the western horizon and the chilly damp of early dawn lay over the island. The sea, as calm almost as a lake, lay sullen and gray, scarcely heaving. Behind the sleeping camp a few shreds of mist—the ghosts of the vapors of the night were arising like smoke among the dim trees. At the further end of the assemblage of tents, and beyond the smoldering fire, stood a silent figure, that of Ernest Thompson.

“Have you explored the island thoroughly?” asked Merritt under his breath. Somehow the dim hour and the situation seemed to preclude the idea of loud talking.

“Of course not. Not yet,” breathed the other in the same tones. “We will break the news to the rest of the Patrol after breakfast. It’s no use alarming them yet.”

“It isn’t possible that he went off on an early fishing expedition?”

For answer, Rob waved his hand toward the water, where the Flying Fish lay rocking gently at her anchor. Ashore the dingy lay as Merritt and his companions had left it the night before.

“But what can have happened to him?” burst out Merritt, as they made their way over to Ernest Thompson’s side.

“I cannot think. It is absolutely mystifying. I am going to start for the captain’s place now. He may be able to throw some light on the affair.”

Merritt shook his head.

“Hardly likely. If there is no trace of Joe Digby on this side of the island, it is improbable that Captain Hudgins knows anything about him.”

“Well,” rejoined Rob in a troubled voice, “we’ve got to try everything. I am responsible for his safe keeping while he is in camp. I blame myself for allowing the kid to go on sentry duty at all.”

“No use doing that,” comforted Merritt; “there’s one thing sure, he can’t have melted away. He must be somewhere on the island. There are no wild beasts or anything like that here to carry him off, so if we keep up the search we must come upon him sooner or later.”

“That’s what makes the whole affair the more mystifying,” rejoined Rob. “What can have become of him?”

“Well, if he’s on the island, we’ll find him,” he continued; “and if he isn’t—”

“We’ll find him anyway,” declared Merritt in a determined voice.

“That’s the stuff!” warmly exclaimed the other. “And now I’m going to take a cruise round to the other side of the island, and see if I can find out anything there.”

A few seconds later he was in the dinghy and sculling out over the water to the speedy Flying Fish. In a short time he was off.

As the “chug chug” of the motor grew fainter, Merritt turned to young Thompson.

“Don’t breathe a word of this to the others till we know for certain that Digby has vanished,” he said.

The other boy nodded.

“I understand,” he said, and the look with which he accompanied the words rendered Merritt perfectly confident that he would be obeyed.

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“And now let’s rouse out Andy Bowles and get him busy with that tin horn of his,” cheerfully went on Merritt, walking toward Andy’s tent.

That youth was much surprised to find that it was morning, but tumbled out of his cot in double-quick time, and soon the cheerful notes of reveille were ringing out over the camp, on which the sun’s rays were now streaming down in that luminary’s cheerful morning way.

The soldier who immortalized himself by sing the words: “We can’t get ’em up, We can’t get ’em up, We can’t get ’em up in the morning—, We can’t get ’em up, We can’t get ’em up, We can’t get ’em up at a-a-l-l-l!” to the stirring notes of the army’s morning call had never been in a camp of Boy Scouts. If he had he wouldn’t have written them, for before the last notes had died away the camp was alive and astir, with hurrying lads filling tin washbasins and cleaning up.

The cook and “cookee” for the day—Jim Jeffords and Martin Green—soon had their cooking fire going, and presently the appetizing aroma of coffee and fried ham and eggs filled the camp.

“Give the breakfast call, Andy,” ordered Merritt, as the proud if flush-faced cooks announced their labors complete, and with a clatter and bang of tin dishes and cups the Boy Scouts sat down to breakfast.

“Where’s Rob and Digby?” demanded Andy Bowles, as he dug his spoon into an island of oatmeal completely surrounded by an ocean of condensed milk thinned down with warm water.

The moment that Merritt had dreaded had arrived.

“Why, he and Rob went off early to see the captain,” he said. “I guess they’ll be back soon.”

“Pretty early for paying social calls,” commented Andy, too busy with his breakfast, however, to give the matter more attention, for which Merritt was duly thankful.

After breakfast Merritt ordered a general airing of bedding, and the side walls of the tents were raised to let the fresh air blow through them. Still there was no sign of Rob. Merritt grew so anxious that he could hardly keep from pacing up and down to conceal his nervous state of mind. However, he stuck to his duties and oversaw the first routine of the morning without betraying his anxiety to any of the lads under his charge. At last there came the awaited chug chug of the returning boat, for which he had been so eagerly listening, and Rob appeared rounding the little point below the camp. In the craft was another figure, that of the captain himself.

Merritt's first hope when he saw the two persons in the boat—namely, that one of them might be the missing boy—was promptly dashed, and he instinctively guessed by Rob's silence as he dropped the anchor and he and the captain tumbled into the dinghy that there had been no news.

"No," said Rob, shaking his head dejectedly as they reached the shore, "there isn't anything to tell. The captain is as much in the dark as we."

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"Well, you'd better have some breakfast," said Merritt, after he and the captain had exchanged greetings, "then we can go ahead and notify the others and institute a thorough search."

"That's the stuff, my boy," agreed the veteran. "Overhaul ship from bilge ter royals, and if not found, then take a cruise in search uv."

Rob ate his meal with small appetite, but the captain, urging on his young companion the necessity of "filling his hold," devoured prodigious quantities of food, and then, arising, suggested that the time had come to "pipe all hands aft and read orders."

The boys had been so busy about their morning tasks that fortunately none of them, except Tubby, whom Merritt had told of the disappearance, had found time to notice Rob's return or ask questions; so that when he announced to them that Joe Digby was missing it came as a stunning shock.

"Now, boys," said Rob, after he had communicated the full details, so far as he knew them, of the circumstances of the disappearance, "there is only one thing to do, and that is turn this island inside out. It won't take long, but I want it done thoroughly. Don't leave a stone unturned. If after a painstaking search we find nothing on the island, we'll know we have to look elsewhere. You are all fairly good woodsmen by this time, and can trail by signs as effectively as first-class scouts. Use your eyes, and good luck."

Merritt at once assigned searching parties, he and Rob and Tubby taking the center of the island and the others being detailed to search along the shores in two separate squads for any trace of their missing comrade.

"Call me a lubber if this ain't the most mystifyin' thing I've run my bow into since the Two Janes, uv Boston, brig, lost her bearings in a fog and fetched up off Iceland," declared the captain, who had elected to accompany the three leaders of the Patrol. "But drown or swim, sail or sink, we'll find that kid if he's on deck."

The searching parties construed this speech as a sort of valedictory to them as, indeed, the captain intended it—and greeted it with a cheer.

"The first scout that finds a trace of Joe is to light the four 'smokes', meaning come to council," was Rob's last order. "Light them on as prominent a place as you can find and we will all meet in camp to hear the news."

The searching parties at once separated, one striking off to the right, the other to the left and the three young leaders and their grizzled friend making a dead set for the center of the island.

If Joe Digby was to be found, the look of determination on the face of each scout showed that it would not be the fault of his young comrades if he were not.

CHAPTER XIX

SAM REBELS

In the meantime on a small island in the Upper Inlet a strange conference was taking place. Three youths whom our readers will recognize as Jack Curtiss, Bill Bender and Sam Redding; were in earnest consultation with the unkempt and unsavory individual whom we know as Hank Handcraft, the beach-comber.

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"Well, the job's put through, all right," Hank was saying, as the three sat outside a small tent in front of which was a smoldering fire, about which the remnants of a meal were scattered.

"Yes, but now we've got to tackle the hardest part of it," said Jack, knitting his brows. "I've got the letter written and here it is." As he spoke he drew from his pocket a sheet of paper. "The question is who to send for the money when the time comes."

"Oh, Hank is the man," said Ben, without an instant's hesitation. "We must not appear in this at all."

"Oh, I am the man, am?" put in Hank, with no very gratified inflexion in his voice; "and what if I am caught? I'm to go to prison, I suppose, while you fellows get off scot-free."

"As for me," said Sam Redding, who was pale and looked scared, and whose eyes, too, were red-rimmed and heavy as if from lack of sleep, "you can count me out. I want nothing to do with it. You've gone too far, Jack, in your schemes against the boys. I'm through with the whole thing."

"Well, if you're that chicken-hearted, we don't want you in it at all," sneered Jack, although he looked somewhat troubled at his follower's defection. "All we want you to promise is not to split on us."

"Oh, I won't peach," promised Sam readily.

"It will be better for you not to," warned Bill Bender; "and now let's figure this thing out, and quickly, too. We haven't got any too much time. They'll have discovered the kid has gone by this time and the alarm will be spread broadcast."

"I thought, when he yelled like that last night, we were goners sure," remarked Jack, scowling at the recollection. "It's a good thing those kids sleep as hard as they do, or we'd have been in a tight fix."

"Oh, well, no good going back to that now," dissented Bill. "How was the young cub when you left him, Hank?" he asked abruptly.

"Oh, he'd got through crying, and was lying nice and quiet on his bunk," remarked Hank, with an amiable chuckle, as though he had just performed some praiseworthy act, instead of having left little Joe Digby locked in a deserted bungalow on an island some little distance from the one on which the conversation related above was taking place.

"Well, that's good," said Bill; "although crying, or yelling, either, won't do him much good on that island. He could yell for a week and no one would hear him."

“No; the water’s too shallow for any motor boats to get up there,” agreed Hank. “I had a hard job getting through the channel in the rowboat, even at high water.”

“Is the house good and tight?” was Jack’s next question.

“Tight—tight as the Tombs,” was Hank’s answer, the simile being an apt one for him to use. “The door has that big bolt on the outside that I put on, besides the lock, of which I carried away the key, and the shutters are all nailed up. No danger of his getting away till we want him to!”

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"Couldn't be better," grinned Jack approvingly. "Now, here's the letter. Tell me what you think of it?"

Opening the sheet of paper, the bully read aloud as follows:

"Mr. And Mrs. Digby:

"Your son is safe and in good hands. I alone know where the men who stole him have taken him. But I am a poor man, and think that the information should be worth something to you. Suppose you place two hundred dollars under the signpost at the Montauk crossroads to-night. I will call and get it if you will mark the spot at which you place it with a rock. Look under the same rock in the morning and you will find directions how to get your boy back.

Captain Nemo."

"What do you think of that?" inquired Jack complacently, as he concluded the reading of his epistle.

"A bee-yoo-tiful piece of composition," said Hank approvingly, with one of his throaty chuckles; "the only thing is—who is Captain Nemo?"

"Why, so far as delivering the letter and getting the, money is concerned, you are," said Jack decisively. "Eh, Bill?"

"Oh, by all means," assented Bill.

Sam was not included in the conversation, and gazed sullenly straight in front of him as he lay where he had thrown himself on the fine white sand.

"Oh, by no means," echoed Hank derisively. "Say, what do you fellows take me for, the late lamented Mr. Easy Mark? If you do you have another think coming."

"Now look here, Hank," argued Jack, "what's the objection? All you've got to do is to take this note ashore, give it to some boy to deliver, and then go to the crossroads at whatever time to-night you see fit and get the money."

"Of course," Bill hastened to put in, "you've got to bring it to us for proper division."

"Oh, I have, have I?" chuckled Hank. "Well, what do you think of that? I'm to do all the work and you fellows are to get the bacon! That's a fine idea—not! Four into two hundred doesn't go very many times, you know."

"Not four," corrected Jack, "three. Sam is out of this. He's too much of a coward to have anything to do with it," he added, mimicking Sam's tone.

The boat-builder's son reddened, but said nothing in reply to the bully's taunt.

"Well, three, then," went on Hank; "that's not percentage enough for me. If I'm to have anything to do with this here job, I want half the money. You fellows can split the rest between you!"

Jack and Bill exchanged blank looks.

"Now, look here, Hank, be reasonable," began Jack in a tone meant to be conciliatory.

"Now, look here, Jack, be sensible," echoed Hank mockingly. "You seem to forget that you owe me something for the job we did on those uniforms the other night, and that other little errand you performed on the island. You've got a very convenient memory, you have. Why, I daresay those kids would have given me a nice little wad of tobacco money to have told just who took their Sunday-go-to-meetin' suits, but did I peach? No, you know I didn't; but," he added, with rising emphasis, "if I don't get what's coming to me pretty soon, I will."

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"Well, you idiot," began Jack truculently; "haven't you got your chance now?"

"If I choose to take it—yes," was the rejoinder; "but I don't know as I will. It seems to me I hold all the trumps and you are at my mercy."

"Why, you insolent dog!" bellowed Jack, rising to his feet from the position in which he had been squatting. "For two cents I'd knock your bewhiskered head off!"

He advanced threateningly, but Bill, seeing the turn matters were taking, and realizing that more was to be gained by peaceful methods, intervened.

"Now, Jack, shut up. Stow that nonsense," he ordered sharply. "Look here, Hank, we'll accept your terms. Half to you if you carry it out successfully."

"And if I don't?"

"Then we'll all have to shift for ourselves. This part of the country will be too hot to hold us. I mean to go out West. I've got a cousin who has a ranch, and I think I could get along all right there if the worst comes to the worst."

"See here, I don't agree with your way of dividing the money," began Jack, an angry light in his eyes. "Look—"

"Look here, Jack," cut in Bill sharply, "if you don't like it, it doesn't do you any good. If you object to it, keep out. Hank and I form a majority. You chump" he added, quickly, under his breath, as Hank turned away and began to "skip" flat stones over the water, "don't you see he takes all the responsibility? It's a cinch for us to get away if anything goes wrong."

"Yes, it's a cinch we get cheated out of our share of the money," argued Jack, with an angry glare in the direction of the unconscious Hank.

"Beggars can't be choosers," argued Bill. "You know, as well as I do, that if we are implicated in this affair it means serious trouble. Our parents wouldn't stand for it, and we should be disgraced. By doing it this way we get some of the proceeds—I admit not our fair share but what's to be done?"

"Well, I guess you are right, Bill," assented Jack, with a shrug. "It's go ahead now; we've gone too far to draw back."

"That's the line of talk," grinned Bill, "and when we've each got fifty dollars in our pockets, silenced Hank with a golden gag and had our revenge on those kids, we'll be able to talk over future plans. I'm sick of school. I hate the idea of going back there. I've half a mind to strike out for the West anyway."

“Do you think I could get a job on your cousin’s ranch?” asked Jack.

“I don’t doubt it a bit,” rejoined Bill. “You’re a good, husky chap, and brawn and muscle is what they need in the West.”

“Yes, I’m husky, all right,” conceded Jack modestly. “Sometimes I think that I don’t get full opportunities to expand here in this wretched country hole.”

“No, the West is the place,” agreed Bill, with an inward smile, “as the newspapers say—one can expand with the country out there.”

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Their conversation was broken in upon by Sam, who demanded in no very gentle tones:

"Well, who's going ashore? I'm off."

"No hurry, Sam," said Jack in a more amiable tone than he had yet used that morning. "Let's sit around here a while and enjoy the sun—we might take a swim after a while."

"If you don't come now you'll have to swim ashore," grunted Sam, arising and brushing the sand from himself. "I'm going back to Hampton. I'm tired of camping out here."

He walked toward the beach and prepared to shove off the dinghy, preparatory to sculling out to the hydroplane, which lay a few rods off shore in the channel.

"Hold on, Sam," cried Bill; "we're coming. Don't go away sore."

"I'm not sore," rejoined Sam, in a tone which belied his words, "but I don't think you fellows are doing the right thing when you maroon a kid like Joe Digby on a lone island, in a deserted bungalow in which you'd be scared to stop yourselves."

"Why, what's got into you, Sam?" protested Jack. "It's more a lark than anything else."

"Fine lark," grunted Sam, "scaring a kid half to death and then writing notes for money. It's dangerously near to kidnapping— that's what I call it, and I'm glad I'm not in it."

Both the others looked rather uncomfortable at this presentation of the matter, but Jack affected to laugh it off.

"Pshaw!" he exclaimed, "it's a little bit rough, I know, but such things do a kid good. Teach him to be self-reliant and—and all that."

"Sure," agreed Bill, "you don't look at these things in the right light, Sam—does he, Hank?"

Hank, who had shuffled toward the dinghy at the conclusion of these edifying remarks, agreed with a chuckle that Sam had no sense of humor, after which they all got into the dinghy and we sculled off to the unlucky hydroplane.

It didn't take long to get under way, and the little craft was soon scudding through the water at a good pace, towing the dinghy behind her.

"Better put us ashore before we get into Hampton," suggested Bill. "We don't want to be seen about there more than can be helped."

“That’s where you are wrong,” objected Jack. “We’ll put Hank ashore up the coast, but the more we are seen about the place the better. It won’t look as if we had anything to do with the Digby kid—in case things do go wrong.”

So it was agreed that Hank was to be landed in a small cove a few miles farther down the coast, from which it was a short cut across country to the neighborhood of the Digby farm.

Then he was to waylay the first likely-looking messenger and entrust the note which Jack had read to him for delivery. After that he was to spend the time as best he could in suitable seclusion, and after dark conceal himself near the sign-post. He was not to make any attempt to secure the money if any one hovered about the place, but if the coast was clear he was to go boldly in and take it.

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Hank was landed at the spot agreed upon, a short time later, and the other three then resumed their journey for the hydroplane's home port. As they turned seaward Jack pointed mockingly to Topsail Island, which lay a short distance on their port bow.

"I'll bet there's plenty going on there right now," he grinned.

"Right you are," assented Bill.

"Hullo," he added hastily the next moment; "what's that?"

He pointed toward the island, and the occupants of the homing hydroplane saw, slowly rising from it in the still air, four straight columns of blue smoke.

"Looks like a signal of some kind," suggested Jack after a scrutiny.

"It's coming from about the place where we grabbed the kid," added Bill, a note of apprehension in his voice.

"I wonder what it signifies?" demanded Jack, whose face began to bear a somewhat troubled look.

"I can tell you," said Sam shortly, turning round from the wheel.

"You can?"

"Yes."

"Well, hurry up, then—what does it mean?" Jack spoke sharply at Sam's deliberation.

"It means," said Sam slowly, as if he wanted every word to sink in, "that the Boy Scouts have picked up your trail."

CHAPTER XX

THE HUNT FOR TENDERFOOT JOE

Rob, Merritt, Tubby Hopkins and Captain Hudgins rested, perspiring under the noon-day heat, on a group of flat rocks at the highest point of the island. Their search had been fruitless, and their downcast faces showed it.

"How ever are we going to break the news to his parents?"

Merritt it was who voiced the question that had been troubling all of them.

Before any one had time to frame a reply the captain, whose keen eyes had been gazing about him, gave a sudden shout:

"There's that smoke yonder yer boys were lookin' fer," he exclaimed, pointing.

"Four columns of it," shouted Rob, "hurray, boys, that means news! It's 'Come to counsel.' Come on, don't let's lose any time in getting back."

Rapidly the boys stumbled and ran forward over the rocks and pushed on among the dense growth that covered the hillside they had climbed. They hardly noticed the obstacles, however, so keenly were they bent on getting back to camp and learning the news which they knew must be awaiting them. They covered the distance in half the time it had taken them to ascend the hillside and were met in the camp by the body of searchers—Andy Bowles, Sim Jeffords and Ernest Thompson—who had swung off to the left or mainland side of the island.

"Well, boys, what news?" breathlessly exclaimed Rob, "we saw the counsel smoke and hurried down at top speed."

"Well, there's not very much, I'm afraid, Rob," began Andy, "but we found something that may give us a clue. About half a mile down the beach there's the distinct mark of a boat keel where it was drawn up on the hard sand and the marks of three separate pairs of feet."

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"Good," exclaimed Rob, "that's something and half confirms my suspicion. Go on, Andy, what else?"

"Well, we examined the marks carefully and found that two pairs of feet wore good shoes and the third a very broken, disreputable pair."

"Yes," exclaimed Rob, while the others listened breathlessly.

"Of course that indicated to us that three persons must have carried Joe off—for I don't think there's much doubt now that he was carried off, do you?"

"I don't," said Rob sadly, "but for what possible motive?"

"I have it," suddenly exclaimed Tubby Hopkins, snapping his fingers, "you remember the day of the aeroplane model contest?"

"Yes, but what—" began Rob.

"Has that to do with it," finished Tubby for him. "Everything. It was Joe who first told the committee that Jack's model was a bought one and so lost him the fifty-dollar prize."

"By cracky, that's right!" assented Rob, "and you think that Jack and his gang have carried him off in revenge for it?"

"Looks that way to me," nodded the stout youth.

"Why, they wouldn't dare," began Andy Bowles.

"Oh, yes, they would," amended Rob bitterly, "they'd dare anything to get even on us for their fancied wrongs. But whose could have been the broken ragged shoes?" he asked, suddenly taking up another train of thought.

"Hank Handcrafts, the beach-comber's," suggested Tubby.

"Gee Whillikens! I'll bet a cracker that's the solution," cried Andy, "and now I come to think of it I heard, before we left, that Jack and his gang had gone camping."

"Where?"

"Up around the Upper Inlet somewhere. You know that's full of islands and as there's no drinking water there few people ever think of frequenting the place. If they wanted to do anything like carrying off Joe that is where they would have been likely to go."

"You may be right, Andy. It's worth looking into, anyway," declared Rob. "I'll leave a note here for the others and we'll take a run over there in the Flying Fish. If Joe is there we'll get him out."

"And in jig time, too," chimed in Ernest Thompson.

"Come on, boys, get some gasoline, hop in the dinghy and let's get aboard. We've got to move fast if we're to accomplish anything. You get the boat, Andy, while I write a line to tell the others what we've gone after."

The young leader hastily ran into his tent and sitting down at the table dashed off these lines:

"Boys, we think we have a clue to Joe's whereabouts. Have gone after him. Keep camp in regular way while we are gone. Hiram Nelson is leader, and Paul Perkins corporal, in our absence.

"*Rob Blake*, Leader,

"Eagle Patrol, B. S. of A."

With a piece of chalk the boy marked a rough square and an arrow on a tree—the arrow pointing to a spot in the sand in which he buried the letter.

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"Now, then, come on," he shouted, dashing toward the boat, "shove off, boys, and if Joe's in the Upper Inlet we'll find him."

"Hurray," cheered the others, much heartened by the prospect of any trace of the missing boy, however slight.

"Give way, boys," bellowed the captain, who had insisted on coming along armed with a huge horse pistol of ancient pattern which he had strapped on himself in the morning when the news of Joe Digby's disappearance reached him. "This reminds me uv the time when I was A. B. on the Bonnie Bess and we smoked out a fine mess of pirates in the Caribees."

"Regular pirates?" inquired Andy as Rob and Merritt bent to the oars.

"Reg'lar piratical pirates, my boy," responded the old salt, "we decorated the trees with 'em and they looked a lot handsomer there than they did a-sailin' the blue main."

Further reminiscences of the captain's were cut short by their arrival at the Flying Fish's side. They had hastily thrown two cases of gasoline into the dinghy before they shoved off so that all that remained to be done was to fill the fast craft's tank and she was ready to be off.

"Hold on," warned Rob, as Tubby Hopkins was about to secure the dinghy to the mooring buoy, "we'll tow her along. We may need her. There's lots of shoal water in that Upper Inlet."

"Right yer are, my boy; there's nothin' like bein' forehanded," remarked the captain as Merritt bent over the flywheel and Rob threw in the spark and turned on the gasoline. After a few revolutions an explosion resulted and the Flying Fish was off on the mission which might mean so much or so little to the anxious hearts on board her.

"Do you know the channel," asked Merritt as Rob with his eyes glued on the coast sent the Flying Fish through the waves, or rather wavelets, for the sea was almost like a sheet of glass.

"I've been up here once or twice after duck," rejoined Rob, "but it's a tricky sort of a place to get through. However, I guess we'll make it."

As they drew nearer the shores the boys made out an opening which Rob said was the Upper Inlet channel.

"Say, Tubby, get out the lead line and let's see how much water we have," directed Rob as the color of the ocean began to change from dark blue to a sort of greenish tinge, lightening in spots, where the shoals were near to the surface, to a sandy yellow.

The stout lad took a position in the bow and swinging the lead about his head cast it suddenly ahead of the Flying Fish's bow.

"Slow down," ordered Rob, and Merritt cut down the motor to not more than two hundred revolutions a minute.

The lead line, tagged with different colored bits of flannel at each fathom length, sang through the stout lad's fingers.

"By-a-quarter-three," he called out the next instant.

This meant that three fathoms and a quarter or eighteen feet three inches of water was under the keel of the little craft.

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"Nough fer a man-uv-war," grinned old Captain Hodgins.

Slowly the Flying Fish forged ahead till right under her bow lay a patch of the yellow water.

"By-a-half-two," came a sharp hail from the fat youth, who had once more heaved the lead.

"Cut her down some more," sharply ordered Rob, without turning his head, "we draw only three feet so I guess we'll do nicely for a while."

"Great hop-toads, there's regular shark's teeth ahead," commented Captain Hudgins, pointing to the still shallower water indicated by the lightening tint of the channel.

"By-one-by-a-quarter-one!" came sharply from Tubby, as the Flying Fish seemed hardly to crawl along the water.

"By-a-half!" came an instant later, meaning that only three feet of water lay right ahead.

"Stop her," roared out Rob.

But he was too late. Instantly, almost as Merritt's hand had flown to the lever, the nose of the Flying Fish poked into the sandbank and her motor with a gentle sigh came to a stop.

"Hard a-ground!" roared the captain, "too bad and with a fallin' tide, too."

"Full speed astern," came the next order.

The propeller churned up the water aft into a white turmoil. The Flying Fish trembled in her every timber, and began to slide slowly backward from the treacherous shoal.

"Safe, by the great horn spoon!" roared the captain, fetching Andy Bowles a slap on the back that almost toppled the small bugler into the water.

"For a time," said Rob quietly, "come ahead a bit, Merritt."

Slowly the little vessel slid ahead once more. Rob seemed fairly to feel his way through the narrow channel he had picked out and finally the Flying Fish, after as much coaxing as is usually bestowed on a balky horse, floated in the deep water beyond the sandy bar.

Eagerly the boys looked about them as they "opened up," as sailors call it, the narrow stretch of water known as the Upper Inlet. It did not take them long to spy the island

with the tent on it in which the conversation between Jack and his cronies, and the mutineer to his plans, had taken place.

“There’s their camp!” shouted Rob, eagerly sending the Flying Fish ahead at full speed, “now we’ll find out something.”

“And, maybe, use this.” The captain, as he spoke, grimly produced his formidable weapon and flourished it about.

“No, none of that,” sternly rejoined Rob, “the Boy Scouts can take care of those fellows—without using firearms.”

“You bet,” rejoined Merritt, grimly “musling up,” “we’ll show ’em if it comes to a fight.”

But bitter disappointment awaited the boys. As we know, the camp was deserted and no trace or clue of the whereabouts of its occupants was to be found. In the tent, however, lay a piece of blotting paper with ink-marks on it. It was the material with which Jack had dried his letter.

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"Anybody got a mirror?" asked Rob. "This blotter may help some if we can read what's on it."

"I've got a pocket one," said Andy Bowles, who was somewhat particular about his person and always carried a small toilet case.

"That will do; let's have it."

Rob seized the bit of looking glass and held the blotter to it.

"Just as I thought," he exclaimed a minute later, with a cry of triumph. "It's Jack Curtiss' writing, though he has tried to disguise it, and they've got Joe hidden somewhere. Look here, they want \$200 for his return."

"Yes, but what good does it do us to know that," objected Merritt, when the sensation this announcement caused had subsided. "They evidently had him here overnight and then deserted the camp for fear we'd pick up their trail. They've taken Joe with them."

"By the great sea-serpent, that's right," grunted the captain, "it's a blind trail, boys!"

CHAPTER XXI

Saved by "Smoke Morse"

Each member of the party regarded the other blankly.

The captain was right. The deserted camp was only a blind trail and they had all their work to do over again.

"The first people to communicate with are Joe's parents," mused Rob. "That note will be delivered very shortly, as the longer they delay the more dangerous it will be for them."

"That's right," agreed Merritt, "Jack and his gang will not let the grass grow under their feet now that they know the chase must be on. What can they have done with Joe?"

Rob had been looking about him with the instinct of the Boy Scout. He was anxious to ascertain if there were not something tangible, some clue on which they could base a search for the missing member of the Patrol. Suddenly something remarkable struck him about the tracks that lay about the tent.

They were all four those, of persons of larger growth than Joe Digby and mingling with them unmistakably was the broken-shoed track of Hank, the beach-comber.

“Boys,” announced Rob suddenly, “Joe has not been here at all.”

“Not been here at all,” echoed Merritt, amazedly.

“I mean what I say. Look at these tracks. There is not a footmark here that could by any chance be his.”

The others scrutinized the maze of foot-prints with the same care as had Rob and were forced to come to the same conclusion. There was no question about it—they would have to seek elsewhere for a trace of the lad.

But where?

They gazed about them at the stretch of lone bay or inlet, the sparse scrub grass and vegetation fringing it on the shore side and wheeling sea-gulls swooping and soaring above the shoal waters.

Then Rob's gaze rested carelessly on a closed and seemingly deserted bungalow, occupying the island above them. As his eyes fell on it they suddenly became riveted and then grew wide with surprise.

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A stream of smoke was issuing from the fieldstone chimney roughly constructed at one end of the apparently deserted dwelling.

"There's some one living in that bungalow," he exclaimed, as he made the discovery, "maybe whoever it is can give us some clue to where Joe Digby is."

They all gazed intently at the weather-beaten old house from which the paint was scaling, adding to the note of desertion sounded by its closed shutters and forlorn-looking yard.

As they looked, astonished at the idea that the barren structure should actually house a human being, a sudden thought struck Merritt.

"Suppose Jack Curtiss and his gang are there?" he said.

"Hardly likely," rejoined Rob, "however, we'll get over there and find out just who is making that smoke."

Suddenly the old captain, who had been watching the smoke closely, gave an astonished snort.

"What's the matter, captain?" asked Rob, who was about to walk to the water's edge and get ready to shove off the dinghy.

"Why, there's somethin' queer about that thar smoke," responded the old salt.

"Queer—how do you mean?"

"Well, watch it a minute—there—see! now stops—now it starts ag'in—then it stops—wha, do yer suppose is happenin' to it?"

Rob knitted his brows and watched the phenomenon to which the captain had called attention with narrowed eyes.

There was no question about it the smoke was certainly behaving "queerly" as the captain put it.

The blue vapor emerged from the chimney now in a copious puff and then, for a space, would cease, only to roll forth once more in larger volume. The boys watched it in some astonishment.

"What can they be doing, do you suppose?" Merritt asked.

"I have no idea. It's past me to say," responded Rob, "it comes out in puffs like—like—by hookey! I've got it!" he broke off with a shout, "like the Morse code!"

“Somebody signaling?” stammered Merritt.

“That’s it—watch!”

The smoke, which had not been visible for some seconds, now emerged from the stone chimney once more and the boys, fascinated, watched it closely with burning eyes. There was no doubt whatever about it now. It was signaling.

Four short puffs.

“Four dots—that’s H,” exclaimed Rob, trembling with excitement.

The smoke ceased.

“Here comes some more,” shouted Merritt.

One short puff from the chimney.

“E, one dot, that’s E sure enough,” translated Rob.

The others stood like figures carved in stone as their leader read off the strange signals.

Puff! A longer period of smoking by the chimney—then two sharp puffs.

“That’s L,” interpreted the leader of the Eagles. Before they could say a word the chimney took up its message once more.

Puff—a long puff—another long one, and then a short one.

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"Dot—dash—dash—dot," exclaimed Rob.

"That's the letter P," put in Merritt.

"That's right, old man," shouted Rob, slapping him on the back, "and we've found Joe Digby. That smoke signal spelled Help in the Morse code."

"You're right," shouted Merritt, "come on, Cap, come on, boys, we've got to get a move on and get it on quick!"

They dashed toward the dinghy and a few seconds later had once more embarked and were speeding toward the desolate and forsaken bungalow. Somehow they managed to get ashore in the dinghy without anyone being spilled over the side in their desperate hurry and a minute later were pounding at the door.

"Joe—Joe Digby," shouted Rob in a strange, strained voice.

"Here," came back the answer in a feeble tone, "oh, boys, I'm glad you've come."

Furiously Rob shook the door.

"It's locked," came the voice from inside, "I tried to break it down. Too weak, I guess. Try the shutters."

At each window in turn the Boy Scouts sought to effect an entrance, but in vain. The owner of the place had screwed up the window coverings too tightly for them to be opened without tools.

The rescue party came to a momentary halt.

"I've got it," shouted the captain suddenly, "we'll have him out uv there in two shakes uv a drake's tail."

He produced his formidable old pistol and waved it grimly.

"Come on, boys," he yelled, darting round to the front of the house—the side on which the door was.

"What are you going to do?" demanded Rob, as much mystified as the rest at the old eccentric actions.

"Watch me," grinned the captain as he gained the door.

"Stand clear!" he bawled at the top of his lungs, "stand clear uv the door inside there, Joe!"

“All right,” came back the reply, “I’m in a corner.”

“Now, stand by ter receive boarders!” roared the veteran as he placed the muzzle weapon at the lock and pulled the trigger.

“Bang!”

There was a roaring explosion from the wide mouthed weapon and a cloud of smoke filled the air. But simultaneously there came a sound of ripping, tearing and splintering and the lock of the door, shot clean out by the heavy charge, clattered down to the floor on the inside of the room.

An instant later Joe Digby, pale and trembling from privation, surprise and happiness all mingled in one, was in the midst of his friends and fellow scouts.

“I don’t know what made me think of it,” he explained in answer to eager questions about the smoke telegraph message. “It was what the books call an inspiration, I guess. There were plenty of loose boards—fragments of old packing cases lying about, and luckily they had not taken my matches. I built a blaze and then, while it was still smoldering, I covered it with an old strip of sacking that I wetted with some water out of the bottle they left me.”

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"It made about as good a signal, as one could want," responded Rob warmly, "but now tell us about your capture, Joe, how did it happen?"

"Why, you see," exclaimed the lad, his voice growing stronger as he proceeded, "I was just thinking it was about time to wake my relief when I heard a rustling noise in the bushes back of the camp. I walked up there to investigate, for I thought it might be some animals—maybe the captain's pigs."

"Keel haul them lubberly swine," from the captain.

"But, as you shall hear, I was mistaken. Hardly had I reached the edge of the dark shadows than I was seized and a hand put over my mouth. I had only time to let out one yell for help."

"The one that woke me," put in Merritt, in parenthesis.

"That was it; I guess," went on the small lad, "well, I was picked up and carried some little distance to where they had a boat, and thrown into it. Then the three men who were in the boat rowed to an island with a tent on it and there two of them got out. The other, a fellow with a big beard and very dirty, then rowed over to this place with me and, after putting some bread and a bottle of water inside the door, closed and locked it.

"I carried on like a baby, I guess. I cried for a long time and shouted, but no one came. Then I grew quieter and tried to find some way of escape but the shutters were all fastened and the door was too strong for me. I tried to clamber up the chimney once but I had to give it up. Then suddenly the thought of making a smoke came to me and then I improved on that idea and used the Morse code that Rob has been drumming into me. I never thought that I might be able to use it to save my life maybe—or at least a lot of hunger and misery."

"Could you recognize the men who took you if you saw them again?" asked Rob earnestly.

"I'm not sure," responded the small lad, "one of them I would know—the one with the beard. The other two wore masks. But I think their voices sounded like Bill's and Jack's. I'm sure of the man with the beard though."

"Hank Handcraft," exclaimed Merritt.

"Oh, that's who it was," cried the small lad, "I thought somehow the voice and something about the man seemed familiar. He's that old beach comber who lives outside Hampton."

"That's the son uv a sea-swab," roared the captain, "oh, if I could only get my hands on him, I'd—"

The fate the captain had reserved for Hank was doomed not to be known, for as he was speaking Paul Perkins gave a sudden shout:

“Look—look there!” he cried, pointing.

Sneaking up to the tented island was the familiar outline of Sam Redding’s hydroplane.

CHAPTER XXII

THE ESCAPE OF THE BULLY

The group standing about the newly rescued lad on the veranda of the deserted bungalow galvanized into instant action.

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"Jack Curtiss and Bill Bender are in her!" shouted Rob, "come on, scouts, we'll get after them while we can."

With a shout the Boy Scouts ran for the boat and speedily pulled out to the Flying Fish. Hastily as they executed this move, however, the two in the other boat had had time to head her about and start at top speed for the mouth of the inlet.

"Clap on more sail, my hearties," roared the captain, almost beside himself with excitement, "I want ter get my hands on them two piratical craft."

Rob, with a look of grim determination on his usually pleasant face, held the Flying Fish true on her course, but, heavily laden as she was, she could not make her usual speed and the hydroplane soon distanced her. Jack Curtiss stood in her stern and waved a mocking hand at the Boy Scouts as the light-draft craft shot over the shoals and shallows with ease while the Flying Fish had to lose much time and way by threading in and out seeking the deeper water.

"Douse my toplights, I can't stand that," bellowed the irate Captain Hudgins. "I'll put a shot in that jackanapes' locker."

With these words, and before any of the boys could stop him, he rose to his feet and sent a bullet from his ponderous revolver flying in the direction of the fleeing motor boat. It missed and hit the water near by, sending up a little fountain of spray.

Even at the distance they were the occupants of the Flying Fish could see the fear which this warlike move inspired in the bully and his companion. They threw themselves flat in their boat till only the hands of Bill, who was steering, were visible.

They need not have feared, however. The captain's hasty move brought down on his head Rob's wrath, though the young leader could not find it in his heart to be really angry with the old man who had been irritated past endurance by the bully's mocking defiance.

"Shiver my garboard strake," he exclaimed contritely, when Rob pointed out to him that he might have killed one of the occupants of the hydroplane, "shiver my garboard strake, lad, I saw red fer a minute just like I did that time the Chinese pirates boarded the Sarah Jane Butts in the Yellow River."

Although there was not much hope of catching the two, Rob stuck to the chase even when he realized the scouts were outdistanced, and in fact kept his attention so closely riveted on the other craft that when there came a sudden jar and jolt and the Flying Fish stopped with a grunt and a wheeze, he realized with a start that he had not been watching the treacherous channel and was once more fast on a sand bar.

With a last shout and a yell of defiance the bully and his companion, who had by now got over their fright, shot out on to the ocean and rapidly vanished.

“There goes our hope of catching those two crooks,” cried Tubby angrily, while the engine of the Flying Fish was set at reverse. “It’s all off now. They know that we have rescued Joe and they’ll fly the coop for some other part of the country.”

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"I suppose they came down here to get their tent, not realizing we'd be here so soon," observed Andy, which indeed was the fact.

Fortunately the Flying Fish was not very hard aground and a little manipulation got her off into deep water once more.

"I guess those two chaps are almost in Hampton by this time and getting ready to leave town," observed Rob as the motor boat forged ahead, once more.

"This will be the safest thing for them to do," exclaimed Merritt, "they are in a serious position this time. Kidnapping is a dire offense."

"I wonder what they came back for?" said Tubby suddenly.

"No doubt to get their tent and the few things they had left on the island," vouchsafed Rob, skillfully dodging a shoal as he spoke, "maybe, too, they intended to see how Joe was making out."

"I wasn't making out at all," said the small lad, with a shudder at the recollection of his imprisonment.

"Never mind, Joe, that's all over now," put in Merritt.

"I'm glad it is," answered the small lad, "and just think, if I hadn't been a Boy Scout and understood that code I might have been there yet."

"That's true enough," said Rob, "for we had about made up our minds that the bungalow was deserted, and were not going to bother investigating it, till we saw the smoke."

About an hour later the boys landed once more in camp, where their reception by the others may be well imagined by my young readers.

"And now comes the final chapter in the career of Messrs. Jack Curtiss and Bill Bender," said Rob decisively, "I'm going to take a run up to Hampton. Joe, you'll come along, and you, Merritt, and Tubby. If that letter was delivered, as I imagine it was, Joe's parents must be in a terrible state of anxiety by now and we must hurry up and see them at once."

"Right," agreed Merritt, and a few moments later, having left the captain and the others ashore, the Boy Scouts and their young leader were speeding toward Hampton. With the craft lightened as she was, they made good time and arrived at the yacht club pier speedily.

News of the events which had transpired at the island had evidently reached the town, for Mr. Wingate himself, with Mr. Blake and Merritt's father were at the landing as the Flying Fish glided up to it.

The three elders were almost as enthusiastic as the boys had been over the safe recovery of Joe, the details attendant on which Rob rapidly sketched to them. He had hardly concluded and had not had time to ask how they knew of the kidnapping when a wild-eyed man in faded old farm clothes, accompanied by an equally distracted woman, came rushing down to the wharf.

"Where's them Boy Scouts? I allers knew no good would come of my son joining 'em," the man shouted. "I'll give a hundred dollars fer a boat that'll take me ter Topsail Island in ten minutes."

"No need of that, Mr. Digby," said Rob quietly stepping forward with his hand on Joe's shoulder, "here is Joe safe and sound."

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"Great hopping watermelons!" yelled the farmer, rushing at his son followed by his wife. Together the worthy souls almost squashed the small lad like a butterfly under a harrow. But at last the first greetings were over and the farmer turned to the somewhat amused group of boys and men who were looking on.

"My, what a fright we had," exclaimed Mrs. Digby, a motherly-looking woman, dabbing at her eyes with capacious pocket handkerchief, "we gets a letter tellin' us that our boy be kidnapped."

"Yes we know all about that, Mrs. Digby," put in Mr. Blake, "you recollect your husband telephoned to the chief of police here about it, and expecting news from the island, we came down here."

"So he did, so he did," cried Mrs. Digby, "oh, dear me, Mr. Blake, I'm in such a takin! I hardly know what I'm sayin'."

"Consarn them Boy Scouts," sputtered the farmer, returning to his original grievance, "if Joe hadn't a joined them none of this would have happened."

"Oh, yes it would and worse in fact," said Mr. Blake quietly, "from what I have learned of the affair it was your lad's knowledge of the Morse code, which every Boy Scout must know, that saved him when he was confined on the island."

"That's right, pop," piped up the lad himself.

"Wall, I don't know nothin' about Horses, codes," grunted Mr. Digby, somewhat mollified, "but if it saved Joe here it must be all right."

"Then your animosity toward the Boy Scouts is somewhat modified," smiled Mr. Blake, "let me tell you just what happened. As a matter of fact the whole trouble dates back to the day your son exposed the contemptible trick by which Jack Curtiss hoped to win the aeroplane model prize contest."

The banker drew the farmer aside and related to him the story that had been previously narrated by Rob.

"I want ter shake yer hand, boy," exclaimed the fanner, darting at Rob at the conclusion, "I want ter shake all yer hands," he yelled in his enthusiasm.

"Bless my soul," exclaimed Commodore Wingate suddenly, "we are clean forgetting about those two young rascals who tried to extort the money from Mr. Digby. We must get after them at once and their accomplice who, I suppose, is, the man delegated to take the money from under the rock."

"What do you suggest?" asked Mr. Blake.

“That we hasten to the office of the chief of police and then get into my car and ferret them out if possible,” said the commodore briskly, “they must be made to suffer for this.”

“I don’t believe that Sam Redding had any hand in it,” put in Rob as Merritt mentioned the name of the boat-builder’s son. “You know that all our investigation only pointed to two persons, Jack and Bill, and their assistant, Hank Handcraft.”

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A short time later Merritt, Tubby and the Digbys being left behind on the landing, a high powered car, containing Rob, his father, Commodore Wingate and the chief of police of Hampton shot out on to the road leading to the farm owned by Jack Curtiss' father. Inquiry at the Bender home had already developed the fact that Jack and Bill had left there hurriedly a short time before, saying they were going out to the Curtiss place. The party was doomed to disappointment, however, so far as the hope of catching Jack or his accomplices at the farm was concerned. Old Mr. Curtiss informed them that his son had taken the family buggy and driven furiously off down the road with Bill Bender a short time before.

"He got a hundred dollars from me," explained the old man simply, "he told me he was goin' ter invest it in some rich mining stock his friend Bender had promoted but—what's the matter, gentlemen," he broke off, noticing the half-pitying look on the faces of the men in the automobile. Mr. Blake hurriedly explained the attempted extortion of which Jack had been guilty.

"What, Jack—my son!" exclaimed the old man in half daze at the stunning intelligence, "my boy Jack do a thing like that? Why, it can't be true. I don't believe it."

"I'm afraid, nevertheless, it is," rejoined Mr. Blake, but the old man only shook his head.

"I'll not believe it," he kept repeating.

"I wish that so good a father had a worthy son," remarked Mr. Blake as the car shot out of the farm and out upon the highroad in the hope of overtaking the buggy.

At the Digby farm the machine was turned off to take the cross roads and at this spot they encountered a buggy coming toward them driven by a farmer friend of Mr. Blake's.

"Seen a rig with Jack Curtiss and Bill Bender in it?" shouted the banker as the car was slowed up by Commodore Wingate.

"Down the road a piece driving like the Mischief," responded the rustic pointing back with his whip, "but you're wrong 'bout ther' bein' only two of them; that no-good beach-comber, Hank Handcraft, was in there with them."

With a shouted word of thanks the car dashed forward once more. It was evident that, realizing that their game was up, Jack and Bill had picked up Hank, and, with a sense of loyalty for which Rob certainly would not have given them credit, were trying to save him too.

"Where can they be headed for?" wondered Mr. Blake as the car dashed forward.

"I can hazard a guess," exclaimed Commodore Wingate, "for the Sunnyside railroad station. If they make a train they may escape us yet."

“Je-rus-a-lem,” exclaimed the chief of police, a man named Applegate, pulling out a huge old-fashioned silver watch, “there’s a train due in a few minutes now; if we don’t make it, they’ll slip through our fingers!”

Faster and faster the car roared forward and suddenly as it shot round a curve the little station of Sunnyside came in sight. Tied outside it was the buggy and horse of farmer Curtiss and on the platform stood three figures that the party in the auto made out at once as Jack Curtiss, Bill Bender and their unsavory ally.

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The road took a long curve at this point and while they could see the station the pursuers had the mortification of knowing that it would be some minutes before they could reach it. As the car bounded forward, swaying like a rocking ship over the rough roads, there came a sudden sound that made Rob's heart bound.

The long whistle of an approaching train.

Faster the machine shot onward roaring like a battery of machine guns going into action. Its occupants leaned forward with eyes glued on the group on the platform.

The trio of whom the autoists were in pursuit had by this time realized that they were the objects of the chase and were nervously staring up the track down which was fast approaching the train by which they hoped to escape.

The auto was still a good two hundred yards from the station when the train rolled in and, hardly stopping, started to move out again.

"Stop! stop!" yelled Chief Applegate, at the top of his lungs, and the others waved their hands frantically. The engineer looked back at them with a grin.

"Some more idiots missed their train, Jim," he remarked to the fireman, "I might have waited for them but we're five minutes behind schedule time now."

The fireman nodded understandingly and as the auto, in a cloud of dust, dashed up to the little depot the train, with a screech that sounded like the last defiance of the bully, shot round a curve and vanished with a cloud of black smoke.

"Beaten!" gasped the chief.

"We can telegraph ahead and have them arrested in New York," suggested Rob.

"No, perhaps it is all for the best," counseled Mr. Blake, "the parents of both those boys are respected citizens, and it would be a cruel grievance to them were their boys to be publicly disgraced. Let them work out their own salvation."

And so Jack Curtiss, Bill Bender and Hank Handcraft vanish for a time from the ken of the Boy Scouts, leaving behind them no regrets, except it be those of their parents who were for many months bowed down with the grief and humiliation of their boys' misdoings.

CHAPTER XXIII

SCOUTS IN NEED ARE FRIENDS INDEED

“Ta-ra-ta-ra-ta! Ta-ra-ta-ra-ta! Ta-ra-ta-rata! Ta-ra-ta-a-a!”

Andy’s bugle briskly announced the last morning of the Boy Scouts’ camp on Topsail Island. Already the first breath of autumn had begun to tint the leaves of the earlier fading trees, and the chill of the early dawn was noticeable.

During their stay in camp the lads had profited in every way. The scout program as sent out for camps by headquarters had been gone, through with some modifications, and Sim Jeffords had qualified as a first-class scout while Martin Green, Walter Lonsdale and Joe Digby, once more as merry as ever, were all fitted for their second-class scout diplomas. The prospect of another patrol in Hampton had been discussed and the outlook for one seemed favorable.

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As the last notes of Andy's call—to turn to the subject of the opening of this chapter—rang out the tousle-headed, sleepy-eyed scouts appeared from their tents and found themselves enveloped in a fleecy mist—such a light fog as is common on that part of the Atlantic coast at this season of the year.

"Pretty thick!" was Rob's comment as he doused his face in his tin basin.

"Hull-o-o-o!" suddenly hailed a voice from the water, "got any breakfast fer an old shipmate?"

Through the fog the boys could make out the dim outline of the captain's motor boat even if it's apoplectic cough had not already told them it was there.

"Sure, come ashore," hailed Merritt.

A few moments later the hearty old seaman was sitting down with the lads and performing miracles of eating.

"It's a good thing we haven't all got your capacity," remarked Rob, laughing, "or that provision tent wouldn't have held out very long."

"Wall, boys," observed the captain, drawing out a black pipe and ramming some equally black tobacco into it with a horny thumb, "a full hold makes fair sailin', that's my motto and 'Be Prepared' is yers. A man can be no better prepared than with a good meal under his belt. Give me a well-fed crew and I'll navigate a raft to Hindustan, but a pack uv slab-sided lime juicers couldn't work a full-rigged ship uv the finest from here to Bangor."

Having delivered himself of this bit of philosophy, the captain passed on to another subject.

"Hear'n anything uv them varmints what slipped their moorings on the train?" he asked.

"We heard that they had gone West," rejoined Merritt, "but to just what part I don't know."

"That thar Sam Reddin' boy clar'd himself uv all suspicion, did he?" went on the old man.

"Yes, after he had admitted that Jack Curtiss and Bill Bender and himself stole our uniforms and robbed you—"

"Consarn him," interrupted the captain.

"You needn't grumble, his father paid you back all that was taken," observed Merritt.

"That don't lessen the crime," grunted the captain, "heave ahead with yer yarn, my boy; yer was sayin' that that Reddin' boy admitted everythin'."

"Well," continued Rob, "in consideration of his confession, it was agreed not to prosecute him and he seems to be a reformed character. He absolutely denied, though, having had anything to do with the kidnapping of Joe Digby here, and I believe he is telling the truth."

"The truth ain't in any uv them fellers, that's my belief," snorted the captain, "and if ever I get my hands on that thar Jack Curtiss or Bill Bender I'll lay onto 'em with a rope's end."

"Oh, we'll never see them again," laughed Rob.

It may be said here, however, that in this he was very much mistaken. Rob and his friends did meet the bully again and under strange circumstances, in scenes far removed from the peaceful surroundings of Hampton.

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"Fog's thickenin'," observed the captain squinting seaward.

As he remarked, the mist was indeed increasing in density, shrouding the surroundings of the camp completely and covering the trees and bushes with condensed moisture, which dripped in a slow, melancholy sort of way from their limbs.

"Bad weather for ships," observed Merritt.

"Yer may well say that, my lad, and this is a powerful bad part uv the coast ter be navigatin' on in a fog. I've heard it said that there's a lot uv iron in the Long Island shoals and that this deflects the compasses uv ships that stay too near in shore in a fog. I don't know how that maybe, I don't place a lot uv stock in it myself, but I do know that steamers and vessels uv al kinds go ashore here more than seems ter be natural."

As he finished speaking there came, the fog a sound that fitted in so well with subject of his conversation that it almost an accompaniment to it.

"Who-oo-oo-oo!"

"A steamer's siren," exclaimed Rob.

"That's what it is, lad," assented the old sailor, as the sound came again, booming through the fog with a melancholy cadence.

"Who-o-o-o-o-o!" roared the siren once more.

"I'll bet the feller who's on the bridge uv that ship is havin' his own troubles just about now," remarked the captain, "hark at that!"

The whistle was now roaring like a wounded bull, sending distinct vibrations of sound through the increasing fog billows.

"Thick as pea soup," commented the captain, refilling his pipe, "reckon I'll have ter stay here till she lifts a bit. Wind's hauled to the sou'west too. Bad quarter means more fog and smother."

"Who-o-o-o-o!" boomed the siren of the hidden vessel once more, and this time it was answered by another whistle somewhere further off in the fog.

"Two uv 'em now. Stand by fer a collision," shouted the captain, while the scouts, intensely interested in the development of this hidden drama of the fog, clustered about him.

"Who-o-o-o-o! Who-o-o-o-o! Who-o-o-o-o!" came the nearest siren.

“She’s standin’ in shore,” shouted the captain, “boys, she’s in grave danger.”

“What’s she coming in for?” asked Merritt.

“I suppose her skipper thinks he’s got plenty uv water under his keel and wants ter give a wide berth ter the other vessel,” explained the captain. “Boys, if only we had a big bell or a steam whistle we could warn them poor fellows uv their peril.”

“It does seem hard to hear them blundering in and not be able to warn them,” agreed Rob, “there should have been a lighthouse put on these shoals long ago.”

“Right yer are, boy, but the government is a slow movin’ vessel and hard ter get under way.”

The boys had to laugh at this odd way of expressing the difficulty of getting new lights erected, but they knew as well almost as their companion the dangers of the ocean off this part of Long Island.

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The whistle boomed out its wailing note again.

“Closer and closer,” lamented the captain, “what’s the matter with those lubbers? Yer’d think they’d have a leadsman out.”

All at once the catastrophe for which they had been more or less prepared happened. So quickly did it come that they had not time to speak.

The echoes of the last note of the siren had hardly died out when there came a loud explosion.

“Bang!”

“A signal gun,” roared the captain.

“They are calling for help?” asked Rob.

“That’s it, my boy. They’ve struck, just as I thought they would.”

The distress gun sounded again.

“They’re in a bad mess by the sound uv that,” said the captain.

“It doesn’t sound as if they were more than half a mile or so out,” remarked Rob.

“I guess they’re not. Hark at that! They must be scared ter death.”

The gun was fired three times in rapid succession.

“They’ll never hear that at Lone Hill life savin’ station,” grimly commented the captain, “and this fog’s too thick fer them ter see her.”

“Do you imagine she is badly damaged, captain?” asked Rob anxiously. The idea of the stranded ship lost in the dense fog affected him strangely.

“Can’t tell,” the captain replied to his question, “may have stove a hole in herself and be sinking now.”

“Can’t we do something to help them?” asked Merritt eagerly.

“Only one thing we can do, boy, and that’s full uv danger.”

“What is it?” demanded Rob, ignoring the last part of the captain’s speech.

“Get in ther boat and go out thar to ’em. If they’re sinkin’ we can help ’em a whole lot, and—”



The captain stopped short in amazement.

Rob, Merritt and Tubby had already started for the beach and Hiram, “the wireless scout”, was close on their heels.

“Well, douse my toplights,” exclaimed the captain, rising to his feet and lumbering after them, “Yer can’t beat the Boy Scouts.”

CHAPTER XXIV

A MEETING IN THE FOG-CONCLUSION

“Can you make her out?”

Five pairs of eyes peered through the mist that hung like a white pall on every side of the Flying Fish.

“Stop that motor a minute, while I listen!”

In compliance with Rob’s order Merritt shut down the panting engine.

“What’s that noise off there?” asked Hiram suddenly.

“That sort of throbbing sound?” rejoined Tubby Hopkins.

“That’s it, sounds like a big heart beating,” put in Rob.

“I guess that’s their engine. They’re tryin’ ter back her off,” suggested the captain.

“Give them a blast on that fog-horn and see if they answer,” said Rob suddenly.

Hiram took up the big brass fish-horn, used as a fog signal on the Flying Fish, and blew a loud, long call.

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After an interval of waiting, from out of the mist came the wail of the stranded ship's siren once more.

"There she is, right in there," declared the captain, pointing seaward into the mist. "Steer right on that tack, Rob, and we'll pick her up pretty soon."

The motor was started up once more and the Flying Fish forged ahead through the smother. Suddenly Rob, with a sharp cry of:

"Stop her!" swung his wheel over sharp and the Flying Fish headed about.

The gleaming black rampart of a large vessel's side had suddenly loomed up dead ahead of him.

"Ahoy! aboard the steamer," roared the captain, framing his mouth with his hands, "what ship is that?"

"The El Paso from London to New York," came back a hail from somewhere above them in a somewhat surprised tone, "who are you?"

"The Flying Fish of Hampton, Long Island," responded Rob, with a laugh.

"Never heard of her," responded the voice, "we're hard aground on one of your Long Island shoals it seems."

"That's what yer are," exclaimed the captain, "how come yer ter be huggin' the shore so hard?"

"Trying to avoid a collision with another vessel."

"Are yer all right?" bellowed the captain.

"Seem to be. So far as we can find out there's not a plate started, but if you're from the land we've got a couple of passengers we'd be thankful if you'd take ashore. Will you come on board?"

"Sure, if yer'll drop a Jacob's ladder," bellowed the captain at the invisible speaker.

"In a minute."

The conversation had been carried on without either of the parties to it being able to see one another, but the captain of the vessel—for he had been the boy's interlocutor—now came off the bridge and with some of the crew watched two sailors lower a Jacob's ladder and make it fast to the rail.

"Now we go aboard," said Captain Hudgins, clambering up the swaying contrivance as nimbly as an athlete, "make our painter fast ter the ladder, Rob."

This being done, the boys followed the veteran on board. The steamer, when they gained her deck, puzzled them a good deal and it was not till her captain, a genial blond-bearded Britisher, explained to them that she was a cattle ship that they understood the utility of the wooden structures with which her decks were obstructed.

The captain explained that these were pens for the cattle she expected to take back to England, from which country she was returning after having taken over a large consignment of steers.

"Which," went on the captain, "brings us to my passengers. They are Mr. Frank Harkness and his son, of Lariat, a small cattle town in the West, where Mr. Harkness has a large ranch. They were his cattle that we took over and as he had difficulty in engaging a berth on a liner at this time of year, when the passenger ships are crowded, he decided to return with us. Here is Mr. Harkness now," he added, as a tall, bronzed man, with a long coat draped over a pair of broad shoulders, and a wide-brimmed sombrero above keen eyes, approached.

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"Visitors from the shore, captain?" he inquired, a pleasant smile illuminating his clean-shaven, sun-browned face.

"That's what they are," rejoined the captain, "just dropped in on us, don't you know."

"You mean we dropped in on them," amended the other with a laugh, "come here, Harry," he called, raising his voice, "we've got some company out of the fog."

In response to his call a lad about the age of Rob appeared from the after-end of the ship, where the cabins were, and greeted the boys with a smile and a nod. He, like his father, wore a sombrero and was quite as sunburned. For the rest he was well-knit and athletic looking and had evidently lived an out-door life.

"Well, we are getting plenty of experiences away from the ranch, eh, Harry?" observed his father, after the boys and the captain had introduced themselves and there had been a great and ceremonious hand-shaking all round.

"We just naturally are," responded the rancher's son. "Say, captain," he went on, "when do you expect to get off?"

"If we are not too badly hung up we ought to get off at high-water," rejoined the Britisher.

"That won't be till late to-night," observed Rob.

"If I could only get a tug we might do better," observed the captain, "in fact, since I've had the engines going I don't think we can back off under our own power."

"Have you got a wireless?" asked Hiram, his pet subject uppermost.

"Yes, but our operator went ashore in London and I guess he had too good a time; anyhow he never showed up so we had to cross without one."

"Is she working?" asked Hiram interestedly.

"Sure, there's plenty of 'juice' as the operators, call it. I tried to work it coming over," laughed Harry, "but outside of getting a proper shock, I didn't do much."

"I'll send out a signal for a tug," said Hiram quietly, "there's a station at Island. They'll pick up the message and transmit it."

"What—you can work a wireless?"

"A little bit," said the lad modestly.

"Come on, I'll show you the way," said the delighted captain, starting off with Hiram, and followed by the others.

"Say, don't think it personal of me, will you?" remarked Harry Harkness to Rob as they followed, "but would you mind telling me what you all are wearing those uniforms for?"

"Why, we're Boy Scouts," rejoined Rob proudly, and went on to explain just what the organization is.

"Say, that's great," exclaimed Harry enthusiastically, "I'd like to form a patrol out at Lariat. Do you reckon I could?"

"I don't doubt it," rejoined Rob, smiling the Western enthusiasm.

"By cracky, I'll do it," went on Harry Harkness, "I'll make it a mounted patrol and if we don't get old 'Silver Tip' then, besides all the other sport we'll have, call me a coyote."

"Who or what is old Silver Tip?" asked Rob, somewhat interested in his breezy new acquaintance.

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"Silver Tip is a grizzly," explained Harry, "a grizzly bear you know. Dad says he's the biggest he's ever seen and he seems to bear—excuse the pun, please—he seems to bear a charmed life. All the boys on the ranch are crazy to get a shot at him, but they've never been able to."

"Say, that sounds bully," agreed Rob, "I wish I could get out West for a while."

"It's a great country," said Harry sagely, as they entered the wireless room, where Hiram was already bending over the instrument sending out a message for aid, while the blue spark leaped and crackled across its gap. The others gazed on admiringly as Hiram, having completed his message, adjusted the detector on his head and awaited an answer.

It soon came. Tugs would be dispatched as soon as the fog lifted, the operator at Fire Island announced.

"That's a weight off my mind," breathed the captain, while Harry hastily confided to his father that the lads who had boarded the vessel out of the mist were Boy Scouts.

"The fog is lifting," announced Rob, as they streamed out of the wireless room.

"Yes, the wind has shifted," remarked Captain Hudgins. "I guess it was that sou'west breeze that brought the mist. She's hauled ter the nor'west now, and in an hour's time it will be clear."

"I wonder if you boys can put us ashore," said Mr. Harkness, as the group walked aft to the captain's cabin; "I would be very grateful if you could. It seems that it will be some time before the steamer is cleared, and I am anxious to make a train for the West."

The boys agreed to land the ranchman and his son as soon as the fog cleared off, which, as the captain had prophesied, it did in about an hour's time. The boys had spent the interim in exploring the ship and listening to Harry Harkness' tales of the ranch and the marvelous exploits of Silver Tip, the huge grizzly, who derived his name, it appeared, from a spot of white fur on his breast. In fact, so fast did they get on, that by the time Harry and his father were called by Captain Hudgins to embark in the Flying Fish, the boys had become fast friends.

The run to the shore was made quickly and by landing the two travelers at a point above Hampton they were enabled to make a train that would land them in the city in time for dinner. Mr. Harkness whiled away the trip by plying the boys with all sorts of questions about the Boy Scouts and seemed greatly interested in their answers. Altogether the boys felt quite sorry when it came time to part at the wharf at Farmingdale, the place where the rancher and his son were put ashore.

“Well, good-bye, boys,” said Mr. Harkness, holding out a big hand to Rob, who took it and was amazed to find a twenty dollar gold piece slipped into his palm by the ranchman.

“Oh, I couldn’t think of taking that,” he said, insisting on handing it back despite the ranchman’s protests, “I appreciate your motive, but I couldn’t think of taking any money for an ordinary courtesy.”

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"By Sam Hooker, you're right, boy," cried the ranchman heartily, "and it's a privilege to meet such a bunch of fine lads. I thought all you Easterners were a bunch of stuck-up tenderfeet, but I find I'm wrong—anyhow so far as the Boy Scouts are concerned."

A few minutes later the rancher and his son were hastening to the railroad station, followed by the boys' eyes. As they entered the depot, just in time to catch the New York train—they waved a hearty farewell and the boys waved and shouted in return.

"We've only known them a few hours, but I feel as if I'd just said good-bye to two friends," said Rob as they turned away and prepared to go back to the island in their boat and break camp.

"So do I!" said Tubby; "I wonder if we'll ever see them again."

"No, I guess they're kind of ships that pass in the night," laughed Merritt, "however, I'm glad we did them a good turn."

The boys, however, were destined to meet the ranchers again and to have many strange and exciting adventures, among which the ultimate downfall of Silver Tip was to be one. Could they have looked into the future, too, they would have seen that in the Far West they were to face dangers and difficulties of which they had as yet never dreamed and were to be the victims of the malicious contrivings of Bill Bender and our old, acquaintance, Jack Curtiss.

A few weeks after the events related above there was great excitement in Hampton over the announcement that Merritt's courageous act of life-saving and the achievements of the other young scouts of the Eagle Patrol were to receive official recognition. A field secretary of the organization arrived at the village one evening and was met at the depot by the Patrol in full uniform, and with the village band drawn up at their head. Proudly, under the Eagle standard, they marched to the Town Hall, which had been illuminated in a style the villagers would never have believed possible and were greeted by the local committee headed by Commodore Wingate and Mr. Blake.

"Three cheers for the Boy Scouts!" came from a voice in the back of the crowded hall after the honors had been distributed and the advances in rank announced.

The shout that went up cracked the plaster on the ceiling of the venerable building.

"Speech, speech," shouted one of those individuals who always do raise that cry on the slightest excuse.

Rob Blake, very red and protesting, was hustled to the front of the stage on which the Scouts had been drawn up.

"I can't make a speech," he began.

“Hear! Hear!” shouted the crowd, most of whom couldn’t.

“But on behalf of the Boy Scouts I want to thank you all and— and—”

The rest was drowned by the band which, having been quiescent for ten whole minutes, could maintain silence no longer and blared out into that favorite of all village bands, “Hail to the Chief.”

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"Come on, let's get out of here," whispered Rob to Merritt, whose breast was decorated with the coveted bronze cross and red ribbon, which is the highest honor a scout can attain.

As they slipped out upon the darkened street a boy came up to them with an outstretched hand.

"I want to tell you I'm sorry for the part I played in the mean tricks Jack Curtiss and Bill Bender put up on you fellows," he said contritely, "will you shake hands?"

"Sure we will, Sam Redding," responded Merritt, extending his palm, while Rob did likewise.

"At that," added Merritt, "I guess we win."

And here, with their former enemy become a remorseful friend, we will, for the present, leave the Boy Scouts to renew our acquaintance with them in the next volume of this series which will be called: "The Boy Scouts on the Range."

THE END