

TOM SLADE FOREST RANGER



By PERCY KEESE FITZHUGH

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TOM SLADE: FOREST RANGER



“WELL—I’LL BE—BRENT GAYLONG!”

TOM SLADE: FOREST RANGER

BY

PERCY KEESE FITZHUGH

Author of

THE TOM SLADE BOOKS
THE ROY BLAKELEY BOOKS
THE PEE-WEE HARRIS BOOKS
THE WESTY MARTIN BOOKS

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TOM SLADE: FOREST RANGER

CHAPTER I

VOICES OF THE NIGHT

In a momentary lull of the storm the baying of a dog could be heard in the heavy darkness at the base of the lonely lookout station—a weird, long moan seeming like one of the many voices of the raging wind. It lasted for only a few seconds, then was drowned in the furious tempest. The structure trembled as the frenzied gale swept through the steel framework.

Up in the little surmounting enclosure Tom Slade stood aghast. Could it have been the voice of the spectral dog that he had heard? What nonsense! The very thought aroused all Tom's common sense and he laughed to think that the wild elements could play such a trick on him. If it had not been for the weird stories he had heard, the moaning would never have sounded like the voice of a dog at all. He laughed good-humoredly, as he had laughed when the people of the distant village had edified him with those ghostly yarns.

"It's blamed funny the different noises the wind can make," he reflected aloud. It was so lonesome in that high, storm-swept wilderness that almost unconsciously he spoke aloud to keep himself company.

Yet the sound of his own cheery voice, bespeaking his common sense, did not quite reassure him. And in spite of himself he listened again for that moaning voice amid the storm. He waited; he was almost ashamed of himself for his credulity, but yet he waited for another lull in the black hurricane.

Then in a brief subsidence of the gale he heard again the baying in the darkness below him. To be sure, it seemed unreal, intangible, a part of the furious storm. Yet he could distinguish it as something different. If it was not the robust voice of a dog heard clearly above the clamorous elements, that only bore out the stories told by the people down in Watson's Bend. For was it not the whining of a spectral dog of which they had spoken? Was it not this that had caused the place to be deserted and shunned? The whining of a spectral dog and the terrifying presence of a ghostly master.

Tom stood motionless, gazing at the candle which cast its faint glow over the large, round map that covered the table in the center of the little, lofty shelter. The electric wires had gone down in the storm and this candle was all that stood between Tom and utter darkness. And the little box of a shelter standing high upon its trestled pedestal was all that stood between him and the tempestuous night.

Now and again, as the shrieking, furious demon shook the tower, the tin candlestick joggled and the light flickered on the glass which covered the map. And the field-glass, which stood there too, ready for scanning those rugged mountain slopes and distant hills in the daytime, danced a little jig with its two stout legs with every fresh gust of the hurricane. There was something uncanny in the way those two connected cylinders would start and cease to joggle on the sounding glass to the uproarious accompaniment without. It was odd and disturbing how, whenever they ceased their ghoulish dancing, that ominous baying could be heard below.

“And then the ghost of his dead master comes out up there in the tower and tries to call the dog, only he can’t make out to speak, so the ghost of the dog never knows he’s up there.” That was what they had told Tom off in the village. “No, siree, you couldn’t get none of us ter go up and mind that tower—not us.” And Tom had tried to laugh them to shame.

But he did not laugh now, for just then *he saw the face*.

CHAPTER II

AS LUCK WOULD HAVE IT

If any one in Watson's Bend had been willing to take charge of the fire lookout station on Tempest Peak, that lonely job would never have fallen to Tom Slade.

Even Tom, with all his adventurous spirit, would have balked at the isolation of the tower far up in the mountain wilderness, had it not been that his companion in former adventures, Brent Gaylong, had agreed to spend the summer with him in his wild retreat. But Brent could not join his friend until the summer was well on and, meanwhile, the job must be filled.

"Look for me around the first of July," Brent had said. "Keep scanning the horizon with your trusty field-glass and you'll espy me in the distance approaching up the rugged slopes with my knitting. I'll spend the summer doing crossword puzzles while you're fire-lookouting. I only hope we have some good conflagrations. Keep the forest fires burning. If we don't I'm going in for floods on the Mississippi next summer. My soul craves adventure. How about the ghost?"

"Oh, he pokes his head out now and then, so I'm told," Tom had answered laughingly.

"That's great," Brent had answered with a kind of drawling relish, "but I'm afraid he'll be away on his vacation while I'm there. I kind of like the idea of a spectral dog, don't you? Don't know as I ever heard of one."

"You'll hear enough *about* one if you go to Watson's Bend," Tom had laughed.

"I hope he's not a spectral mut," Brent had answered. "Anyway, we won't have to feed him."

"I'm not worrying about the ghost and his ghostly dog," Tom had said, "but if you don't show up I'll kill you."

"Never fear, Tommy," Brent had laughed. "It's always been the dream of my young life to meet a ghost. I feel like Hamlet already."

That conversation had occurred a couple of months prior to the tempestuous night when Tom's adventures on Tempest Peak began. During April he had driven up to Temple Camp in his outlandish flivver. As assistant manager of the big Scout community in the Catskills, it was his custom to run up from Bridgeboro each spring to look about and help old Uncle Jeb Rushmore open up the cabins and pavilions and get ready for the rush to camp which would begin as soon as school closed.

During the winters Tom was in the Temple Camp office, which was maintained in Bridgeboro under the supervising eye of Mr. John Temple, Bridgeboro's most public-spirited citizen as well as founder of the famous Scout camp. The Temple Camp office was in the fine building which Mr. Temple owned and in which his bank was housed.

Tom was particularly anxious to make an early flying trip to camp this spring, for he was to have the summer off, and he wished to see Uncle Jeb and find out how that old hickory nut of a scout had enjoyed his own summer off in his old familiar Rockies. Old Uncle Jeb had returned to the closed-up camp in March, and Tom was to have his turn in the summer now approaching. Mr. Temple had insisted on Tom's taking a summer off, as his old superior had done. "Get out among grown-ups for a while and then you'll appreciate the kids when you get back," Mr. Temple had said.

We need not concern ourselves with Tom's visit with Uncle Jeb. He stayed there two days, then bade a regretful good-by to the beloved camp and to the old man who was its very spirit. As he drove home in his dilapidated nineteen-ten flivver, he had not the slightest idea how he was going to spend the summer. He was a little sorry that he had not insisted on staying at camp, his camp, where the thunderous voice of Pee-wee Harris could be heard to the bantering accompaniment of Roy Blakeley.

As he drove down the state road, one loose fender waving like some martial emblem in the breeze, he thought that perhaps he would go out and surprise his sister in Missouri. He had not seen her since he was a little boy in Barrel Alley. She had renounced the alley and had married and gone west. Then it occurred to him that he would take a flyer over the water and see the old battlefields where he had fought. He would hunt up Frenchy (you remember Frenchy?) and they would have an old-time hike in the Black Forest. Then he thought he would like to go up to Overlook Mountain, just for memory's sake, and see——

Whoa! That was a narrow escape. His daydreaming had almost brought him plunk into a big red sign which stood across the road. And upon that sign perched Tom's good little angel of adventure. ROAD CLOSED. TAKE DETOUR TO LEFT. FOLLOW ARROW, he read. Around went the rickety little Ford down into a sequestered country road, over bumps and into puddles, and into a country where it seemed to Tom that no automobile had ever gone before. Soon he was in a wilderness. And his own particular little angel of adventure perched upon the leaky radiator of his car. But of course Tom could not see her. Lickety-split, he went, down into the loneliest and wildest region he had ever seen, cursing the autocratic signs and bone-racking detours.

And that is how Tom Slade came to Watson's Bend.

CHAPTER III WATSON'S BEND

Whoever Watson was, about the only thing he seemed to have was his Bend. But it was a terrible bend. From whichever direction the motorist approached it, it was a place to cause a shudder. At night, thought Tom, it would be the worst kind of a death-trap. He paid his respects to it by jamming on his brakes and going around the horrible corner at a decorous speed. That was more respect than he had shown the remote little village itself which lay just westward of the bend. The turn formed almost a right angle. The narrow, grass-grown road ran west and east, then turning as if some giant had pulled it across his knee and broken it, it ran north and south.

After Tom had made the turn, he paused to look about him. He was so interested that he drove his long-suffering car into a thicket of brambles and sauntered out into the road. He saw that the road, such as it was, bordered the lower reaches of a mountain which towered in the southwest. It was because the road followed so closely the base of that frowning height that it made so abrupt and perilous a turn. Off to the north and east the land lay in low, undulating fields as far as the eye could see.

The road was not exactly cut into the mountainside like many scenic highways—it followed a natural course around the base of the heights. It cut a sharp corner because the base of the mountain did. In other words, this sequestered road enclosed a mountain or jumble of mountains. Off to the other side of the road was low country. If you plunged off the road at the bend you would go down twenty or thirty feet, and that would be enough.

“Some place, I’ll say!” mused Tom.

He shaded his eyes and looked away off up into that mountain wilderness. “What the—dickens——” he said, somewhat puzzled. Then he concentrated his gaze on something which he saw or thought he saw. The trees upon those distant slopes were still bare, though here and there a patch of green could be seen in the bleak landscape.

“That’s some blamed kind of a thing away up there,” said Tom. “I’ll be hanged if it——”

He changed his position and gazed again, long, intently. Then, as if resolved to settle some matter in his mind, he strode back along the road, around the bend, and to the little village. He paused to gaze again far off into that rising wilderness. But from this new point of view he could see nothing.

Beside its perilous corner, Watson's Bend possessed about twenty houses, a village store, a tiny schoolhouse and some chickens perched in a row on a wayside watering trough. Watson's Bend was absolutely harmless save for its sharp turn in the road.

On the platform of the village store sat three men who had not yet recovered from their astonishment at seeing the stranger go rattling by.

"That turn in the road is the sharpest thing I ever saw outside of a razor," said Tom. "But I don't suppose there's much traffic through here ordinarily."

"Don't drive like yer hadn't oughter do 'n' ye'll be all right, I reckon," said one of the men.

"T'wan't fer that there bend this town wouldn' hev no name at all," said another, evidently the local wit. "Yer in the army?" he asked, alluding to the khaki which Tom almost invariably wore.

"No, I'm mixed up with the Scouts," Tom said. And he could not deny himself the pleasure of adding, "Ever hear of them?"

"We got one on 'em."

"No, we hain't, they go in gangs, sort o' regiments like," said another of the trio.

"Sterrett's youngster, he's one on 'em."

"No, he hain't nuther."

"Yere, he is," said the first speaker, "he's one them all 'lone scouts."

"He hain't got no togs," said another of the three. "'N'f I wuz Sterretts I wouldn' git 'im none. He's a dirty little devil of a Heinie, that's what he is. All 'lone scout, huh? If I wuz ter give 'im anything, I'd give 'im a taste er harness strap."

"The war's over," said the one member of the trio who was hatless. Tom thought he was the presiding genius of the store.

"How'd yer find that out?" the village wit shot at him.

Tom laughed too and, looking casually about him, wondered how they *had* found it out.

"Nice day," the hatless man said.

"You bet," said Tom. "I was going to ask you if that's a fire lookout station away off up the mountain. I saw it from around the Bend, I don't seem to be able to see it from here. Kind of a box up on—I guess it's on a framework? I could only see the top part."

"'Tain't, but uster be," said one of the trio. "They ain't nobody up there now—'less yer call a spook somebody."

"There seem to be plenty of woods all around to get on fire," Tom said.

"Oh, there's woods enough," said the other loiterer. "I'd take my chances with a fire any time before I'd get inter a mess with a spook, *I* would. I seed fires sence I wuz a kid, 'n' I ain't seed nobody killed by one yet, I hain't."

“Lizey Henk’s man wuz killed by a wood fire,” the other visitor said. “Comin’ through from Skunk Holler.”

“That wuz thirty year ago,” said the other.

“Killed then or killed now, it’s no matter,” his companion retorted. “All Derry Conner’s woods wuz burned down. Nobody never knowed what started ’em.”

“’Twas the ole feud started it, that’s what ’twas. Derry’s wife’s folks wuz agin her hookin’ up with Irish. Skunk Holler ’n’ Irish Pond wuz alluz hittin’ back one way or another.”

The proprietor of the store leisurely pulled a corncob pipe out of his ticking overalls and, disregarding the conversation, proceeded to fill and light it. It seemed to Tom that this comfortable, white-haired man was not altogether of a mind with the others.

“Lizey Henk’s man wuz tipsy,” the old man finally drawled.

Tom was rather amused at these village reminiscences with all their quibblings and ignorant prejudices. But he thought that the store owner was rather more intelligent, or at least more mellowed than the others, and so to him he addressed his next question. There was something breezy and offhand and broad-minded about Tom which set him off in strange contrast with these citizens of Watson’s Bend.

“Well, anyway,” he said cheerily, “tell me about the ghost. I don’t know as I’m specially interested in ghosts, but I’m blamed interested in saving the forests, and you can bet there ought to be somebody up there for what’s the use of having it if they don’t use it? Why, you’ve got miles and miles of unbroken forests around here. That’s a nice state of things.”

“N’ I s’pose you’d like to go up here?” the old man asked.

“Well, I sure wouldn’t let a spook keep me out,” laughed Tom.

“If you went up there ye’d come back lickety-split, hop, skip and a jump, quick enough,” said the humorist of the party.

“No, he wouldn’t come back nuther,” said the other loitering historian. “Did Chevy Ward come back? Yere, I reckon! But not hop, skip and jump. He come back ’cause we carried him back, me an’ George Terris an’ Denny.”

“What happened to him?” Tom asked.

“Murdered.”

“Murdered? Did they get the one who did it?”

“A spook done it, him ’n’ his spook dog. Why, sonny, if yer wuz to offer one thousand dollars ter any one round these parts ter go ’n’ look after that hell spot, they’d on’y laugh in yer face. The State wardens they ain’t even tryin’ ter git anybody, not this season, as I heered. Let the ole woods blaze away, I don’t want ter go near no place that’s haunted.”

“Reckon the ole thing’s ’bout fallin’ ter pieces anyway,” said the store proprietor.

Tom gazed at him. That, at least, seemed a sensible observation.

CHAPTER IV THE SCHOOLMASTER

The thought which was uppermost in Tom's mind was not that of ghosts. It was that the safety of the forest was being jeopardized in deference to ignorant superstition.

"Can't they get some one from another village?" he asked.

"They'd hev ter git th' other village fust, I'm thinkin'," said the local wag. "Chevy, he come here from over the mountain yonder in Todd's Crossroads. He was the fust one ter live up on the peak."

"Vollmer, he stayed up there some nights," said the storekeeper.

"He was welcome," said the other, "a heap sight more welcome 'n he wuz down here."

"Dead rebels is worsen 'n live ones, I says," his companion observed.

"Oh, I don't know about that," Tom laughed. "You can't do much harm after you're dead."

"Looks if poor Chevy had some harm done him by somebody 't *was* dead," the storekeeper remarked.

"Well," said Tom conclusively, "if I can get that job I'm going to take it. So maybe you'll have me for a neighbor. My name is Slade and I live in Bridgeboro, New Jersey, and I'm not afraid of spooks, but I *am* afraid of fires. Who should I apply to, I wonder; the head warden, State warden, or whatever you call him?"

The three men simply gaped at him. What the climax of their amazement might have been it would be hard to say; for the tableau of incredulity was cut short by an anticlimax. The storekeeper turned lazily around and addressed a young man who had just come unobtrusively among them and was leaning back against one of the supports of the platform roof. How long he had been standing there listening Tom did not know. His age might have been thirty and he was attired in city fashion; that is, he wore a suit of clothes. His face was pale and intelligent, and it was evident from his appearance that he was not a tried and true native of Watson's Bend.

He seemed so far above the level of the conversation that Tom was a little perplexed at his not laughing as he himself was doing. He would have supposed that such an apparently enlightened young man would give him at least a sly wink to denote his amusement. Yet the young man gave no sign of being his ally in this absurd talk.

"Wotcher after, Horry?" the storekeeper asked.

“Cigarettes,” said the young man; “no hurry.”

The storekeeper lazily arose and went within, which had the effect of ending the talk. The young man, having received his purchase, strolled along toward the Bend with Tom.

“I didn’t know there were any houses down this way,” Tom said, by way of making talk. “I left my machine around the corner. You live here, I suppose.”

“Yes, I board here,” the young man answered. “Watson’s Bend isn’t quite so small as it looks. There are a few houses scattered around in the woods. You can’t see them all. My name is Dennison, I’m school teacher here.”

“Oh,” said Tom.

“Yes, I came here just after the war when jobs were hard to get and I’ve been stalled here ever since.” He seemed to apologize for his rustic position. “It isn’t so bad though,” he added; “nice and quiet. You’re on your way down through to Jersey, I suppose? We’ve seen more traffic in the last six days than we’ve seen in the last six years, I guess.”

“Yes, the road’s closed from High Falls down,” Tom said. “What do *you* think about those ghost stories? Some spook fans, hey, these rubes?”

They had passed around the treacherous Bend and were standing by Tom’s car. Far up on the distant mountain could be seen a gray speck, the little surmounting shelter of the lookout tower. The supporting structure was concealed among the trees and the tiny house looked like a large nest in the new foliage. At such a distance not one among a hundred strangers would have distinguished it for what it was. Dennison commented upon this.

“Oh, I suppose I happened to notice it because I’m interested in forest conservation,” Tom said. “But I never saw one so far up before. *Boy*, it must be pretty lonely up there! Well, I’m going to see if I can get the job; I’ll try anything once. Did you ever hear such nonsense as those men talked? Spooks!”

“There are lots of things that we don’t know anything about,” Dennison said. “It’s easy to say you don’t believe a thing just because you don’t understand it. You never saw anything supernatural, so you say there isn’t any such thing. I don’t say there is, either, but just the same I wouldn’t go up there. And I wouldn’t advise you to either. It’s an uncanny place.”

Tom stared at his chance acquaintance in blank amazement. “Well—I’ll—be—jiggered!” he laughed. “You don’t mean to tell me that *you* believe those stories?”

“Where there’s a lot of smoke there’s apt to be a little fire,” Dennison commented. “I wouldn’t just exactly advise any one to go up there.” Tom laughed. “Well, there’ll be some smoke and some fire too if somebody

doesn't go up there," he said. "Why, this little berg is just surrounded by woods. There'll be some pretty little bonfire in this country first thing you know."

By way of showing his resolve and his impatience with the silly rumors, he jumped into his car as if this were a first decisive step toward carrying out his plan. "Well, I'll see you later," he said.

"I guess you'll never be back," laughed the school teacher. Then after a pause he added, "You don't really mean that, do you?"

It seemed to Tom that Dennison was just a trifle anxious, too anxious for one who had no interest in the matter.

"I'll say I do," said Tom, leaning on the steering wheel.

"Did they tell you what happened up there?" Dennison asked.

"No, what happened up there?" Tom laughed derisively.

CHAPTER V

THE NEW JOB

The young schoolmaster of Watson's Bend climbed into the car and sat beside Tom. "I don't meet many people from the great world," he said. He seemed to offer this as an excuse for causing Tom to linger. "It's like a circus come to town."

"Oh, I'm in no hurry," Tom said. "Half the time I can't get the blamed old thing started anyway," he added, in his happy-go-lucky way. "Go ahead, shoot. We often tell ghost stories around the camp-fire. I'm connected with the Scouts."

"Oh, I thought maybe you were in the service," Dennison said. It seemed to Tom that he was just a trifle reassured by this intelligence.

"Scouts, eh," Dennison said. "We boast of one of those youngsters here; sort of near scout, I guess he is. It was his father who used to be up at the lookout station; Vollmer, his name was. That was before my time. You know there are always feuds in a little place like this. Folks think all is peace and quiet in these simple, little rustic hamlets, but believe me it's just in little places like this that quarrels become feuds. I suppose that's because there isn't any social life to feed on. So they feed on quarrels. Why, the war isn't over here yet."

Tom glanced sideways at this friendly and intelligent young man who seemed to understand the ignorant village life so thoroughly and was yet so respectful of the absurd local superstition.

"They feed on ghosts, too," Tom said.

"The war has awakened many people to truths they never dreamed about," Dennison said, lighting a cigarette. "Who are you and I to say that there is nothing in spirit manifestation? You're not interested, that's all."

"I'm more interested in where you throw that lighted match," Tom said. He jumped out of the car and trampled down a tiny area of dry grass which had become ignited.

"My fault," said Dennison.

"As long as there's no one up at the station we might as well be careful," Tom laughed, as he climbed in again. "How about Vollberg or whatever his name was? Was he scared away?"

The young schoolmaster slid down on the seat and stuck his feet up on the frame of the broken windshield. He smoked and seemed friendly and at

home. Tom did not wonder that an educated young man, marooned in such a place, should encourage a passer-by to pause and chat.

“Don’t mind my making myself at home?”

“Go to it,” Tom said. “As long as we’re going to know each other better we might as well start in now.”

“Oh, you won’t be back here,” Dennison laughed. “I guess you’re sort of adventurous, hey? Well, I’ll tell you about Vollmer. Did you notice a big white house around the Bend—opposite the store? Only decent house in the place. Well, old man Peck used to live there; Wolfson Peck, his name was. Place is closed up now, but I heard he’s coming back to fix it up or sell it or something. Well, there’s an old story about how—don’t you smoke?”

“Not now,” Tom said.

“Most troubles in little villages start on account of land disputes, do you know that? Somebody or other puts a fence a sixteenth of an inch beyond where he ought to put it, or something like that. Well, when old Peck built his place he put his fence so as to just bring Vollmer’s well on the Peck side of the fence. That’s what started it. I don’t know who was wrong or who was right. Only all of a sudden Vollmer couldn’t get any more water. Maybe he was wrong and maybe he was right, but anyway he went thirsty. Peck had a lot of money and he beat him in court. Then Vollmer carried it higher and I guess it must have looked as if he was going to win out. And then this country got into the war and Vollmer made a break——”

“He had charge of the lookout station, you say?” Tom interrupted.

“Oh, yes, he was up there. He said that in Germany a rich man couldn’t beat a poor man like that. That was old Peck’s cue. He came out and said that Vollmer had a wireless on the mountain and all sorts of stuff—no truth in it at all as far as I can make out. But that little break about the poor man’s chances in Germany queered him. Peck got him interned for disloyal utterances and poor Vollmer died in jail. War’s rotten anyway you look at it, isn’t it?”

“It’s no pink tea,” Tom said.

“I’ll say it isn’t. Well, after poor Vollmer died you can imagine how his folks felt. This kid, Henny, he swore he’d kill Peck if he ever came back to the Bend. You know how kids talk. But this little devil kept it up. He didn’t forget. Why, even after I came here I kept that little rascal in school one day for insolence. I told him to make a sentence and write it a hundred times—punishment. What do you think the little rascal wrote? *I’ll kill Wolfson Peck.* He wrote it one hundred times.

“Of course all these front-porch patriots here were against the Vollmers and they’re sore at the kid yet; he’s sixteen now. They cherish their grudges here and pass ’em down from father to son.”

“Is that the kid that’s a sort of a near scout as you say?” Tom asked.

“Yes, he got hold of some sort of a manual book, but I guess it isn’t doing him much good; keeping him from his lessons, that’s about all,” Dennison laughed. “He says he’s got to be loyal to his dead father; he says there’s a law about that. Which means he’ll kill old Peck if he ever sees him, I guess. I suppose that’s what you’d call the German mind, hey?”

Tom smiled, but he was thoughtful. “How about the ghost?” he finally encouraged.

“Well,” said Dennison, “they went up to the station one night after Vollmer had died to see if they could find any signs of a wireless. Of course the Secret Service men had visited the place and found nothing. But these woodland patriots had to go up and snook around just the same. They got a good scare for their pains.

“Vollmer’s face (he had a round face and blond hair all matted) appeared up in that little house and stared at them. They couldn’t get out of the place quick enough and they were crowding down the spiral stairs when they heard a dog baying at the foot of the tower. They had to do one thing or the other, so they went on down and there wasn’t any dog there. But still the baying kept up right close to them. There was the baying, but there wasn’t any dog. They recognized it for the baying of Vollmer’s dog.

“Nobody ever went up there again till Chevy Ward got the job. He laughed just as you’ve been laughing and went up there to take charge. They found him dead one day at the foot of the tower and there wasn’t any trace of another human presence to be found there. Stuck in his pocket was a piece of paper with a few words of writing on it. The paper had been wet and they could hardly make the words out. But the matter ran something like this: *I jumped on account of his face—it’s horrible—the dog is yelping, but I can’t see him—he came close—*

“Well, it ended like that,” Dennison said. “I don’t remember if those were just the exact words, but that was about the way we made it out. I was one of the party that went up to see what was the matter with Ward; he hadn’t been down for several days. We found him lying there with both his legs broken. He must have lived and been conscious for a while at that, or else he couldn’t have written the note. You listen down here any windy night and you’ll hear Vollmer’s dog baying up there. Nobody’s ever been up to the place since we brought Chevy down and as for me, well, you can laugh, but I’ve had enough of it.”

Tom sat whistling in an undertone.

“You couldn’t get anybody around these parts to go up there,” Dennison said.

“Well, I’m going up there,” said Tom; “that is, I am if I can get the job.” And by way of demonstrating his resolution he started at once, as it were, by pushing the starter button on his little Ford.

But the Ford did not start. Tom’s act was a hint to young Mr. Dennison to vacate the seat where he had been lolling and he stood beside the car waiting for it to depart. But Lizzie would not back out into the road.

“I’ll give her a shove,” said Dennison, pushing against the radiator. “Out she goes,” he added.

“Do you know who’s warded around these parts?” Tom asked, pausing while the engine rattled uproariously.

“Barrett, I think his name is,” Dennison said, “Harley Barrett; he’s in Chesterville. But I guess you’ll think better of it,” he laughed.

“Chesterville?” Tom queried.

“Yes; here, I’ll write it down for you.”

“Got a slip of paper?” Tom asked. “Here’s a card.”

“No, here’s a piece,” Dennison said, tearing a page from a notebook.

When Tom drove away he carried in his pocket the slip of paper on which was written the name of Harley Barrett, Forest Warden, Chesterville.

And it was through the influence of this man (to whom he wrote) that he was given the anything but desirable and far from lucrative position of fire lookout at the lonely station with all its dismal traditions, which stood in the dense wilderness on Tempest Peak.

CHAPTER VI

THE WIND IN THE EAST

It was several weeks after his first chance visit to Watson's Bend that Tom drove there, bag and baggage, to begin his employment as fire lookout. The main road had been reopened, which fact had consigned Watson's Bend to an even more remote obscurity than when Tom had first paused there. It was now completely buried with all its gossipy and ignorant superstitions, and the village store with its reminiscent trio seemed to Tom like a fragment of a dream.

There was something amusing in the thought of how Skunk Hollow and Irish Pond, Todd's Crossroads and Derry Conner's woods and Lizzy Henk's man, who was tipsy, and Chevy Ward and all the rest, were brought forth and given an airing, then put away again never more to be heard of by the world. There was a detour and presto, Watson's Bend appeared, then suddenly withdrew again into its grave-like seclusion. As Tom thought of these things it seemed to him that his visit there had been like a sojourn to fairyland. He had a queer feeling that he would not find the place now, that the hamlet and its people were no more real than the white rabbit and the mock-turtle in *Alice in Wonderland*.

These apprehensions were perhaps somewhat encouraged by the dismal, wind-swept storm through which he drove. It was, as he observed to himself, an altogether fitting day on which to commit a murder. On this second descent upon the hamlet he left the main road, as he had been told to do, at Ferncliff Valley and so, of course, approached the scene of his adventures from the south. There was no reason to suspect that this road was ever serviceable to man except in role of detour. Detours, like excavations at the sites of ancient cities, are likely to unearth interesting relics. Do not scorn (much less swear at) the little arrow; it may point out the pathway to romance.

At somebody or other's "Crossing" Tom's fickle Lizzie lay down and it was nearly two hours (and then only after the most abusive treatment) before he could persuade her to start again. Hence it was evening before he drove along the foot of the spreading mountain which rose away to the left of him. It looked gloomy enough off there on the dense summit as he saw it through the rain and mist.

He could not see the top of the old lookout station at all as he drove along, and he almost steered off the road into the low land to the right as a

consequence of trying to pick it out. The mountain looked different than before by reason of the thickening foliage. "I suppose there's a trail up there," Tom mused. "It will be a fine night for mountain climbing."

In the springtime Nature is a lightning-change artist, donning her mantle of foliage suddenly. The whole scene had changed since Tom had been in the neighborhood before. If he had gone around the Bend and found that the village was not there, he would not have been greatly astonished. Even the sharp turn looked different; not quite so dangerous as when he had first seen it.

Watson's Bend was not out to welcome the stranger. A more dismal scene than the hamlet presented could hardly be imagined. There was no sign of life now even at the village store. A waterfall poured off the platform roof and the steady sound, even of this, seemed companionable in the general gloom.

The big, white house standing well back on its extensive lawn across the road caught Tom's notice now, as it had not before, for he knew it for the mansion of the absent Wolfson Peck. It seemed out of keeping with the rest of the village, pretentious and aloof. A white picket fence enclosed the grounds. Smoke was pouring out of a chimney of the house, but the wind and rain beat it down and it broke up like clabbered milk and dropped away below the roof level. Yet it seemed cheerful on such a day.

Back on the grounds, and just within the side fence was an ornamental well-house painted white, and beyond, some distance off, a wretched little unpainted house. As he drove past, Tom had a momentary fancy of that humble well suddenly brought within the exclusive area of pomp and circumstance and white paint and imbued with a haughty contempt for the lowly home which had unsuccessfully claimed it.

Was it in that poor little house beyond that Henny Vollmer lived? Tom laughed at the thought of the boy killing a man in order to obey the rules of scouting! Well, at all events, old Peck must have returned, and it would be cheerful with a fire going on such a day, with night coming on....

On the ornate well-house was a gilt weathervane showing that the wind was in the east. The bucket suspended blew in the impetuous gusts and banged against the sides of the trim enclosure. It was not a cheery sound and it bespoke a dismal night.

CHAPTER VII THE MONSTER

Tom had intended to look up Dennison and take shelter with him for the night. It was rather characteristic of him that at the last minute he decided not to seek hospitality at Watson's Bend, even from the young schoolmaster. Since Watson's Bend would view his coming as an act of bravado, he would make the bravado complete. The first they would know of his coming would be that he was on the job.

The State Warden who had sent Tom his appointment had told him that the trail up the mountain began alongside the schoolhouse; he had said that it was not hard to follow since the electric wire above would guide him in places where the disused trail might be overgrown. Watson's Bend enjoyed no light from this wire; the power was relayed from Connington.

The schoolhouse was a little box of a building somewhat apart from the group of houses. Tom thought it could not possibly have housed more than a dozen of the Bend's younger set. An unruly shutter was blowing back and forth, but the unruly children had long since gone home, if indeed there had been any school on that wretched day.

Tom drove his Ford across the open space adjacent to the schoolhouse and poked its nose into the very edge of the woods. Before alighting he donned his suit of oilskins and oilskin hat which had done duty on rough water during many a motor-boat trip. Then he selected a few provisions from the store which he had brought, put them in his duffel bag and wrapped this in a piece of balloon-silk tenting. With this slung over his back he looked equal to the weather and was ready for his journey. But he lingered long enough to throw a dilapidated old tent (souvenir of Temple Camp) over his Ford. His Lizzie was not unaccustomed to being parked for weeks at a time under the clinging shelter of this old tent. He then set out upon the trail into the woods behind the schoolhouse.

But this trail soon became overgrown and indistinguishable and it was fortunate for Tom that he found his way to the power line before dark. A mile or so up into the woods he saw that the storm had beaten down the wire and in one place it lay broken at his feet. But he was still able to follow it.

Soon, however, he realized that his adventurous spirit had brought him into a predicament. The darkness became so dense that he could not see the wire and even had to grope for the supporting poles which stood far apart.

This sent him on many futile detours and he paused now and again in the rain and darkness, utterly baffled.

Once, in a prolonged flare of lightning, he saw where the poles were down for some distance and both poles and wire sunk in underbrush. He thought this wreckage must have dated from a former day. In any case the glare was too transitory to permit him to see beyond the point of wreckage and now he had lost his one fitful means of guidance altogether. He plunged into a yawning gully of soaking brush, descended on its drenched and yielding network, down, down, then scrambled up and out, he knew not how.

He stood in utter blackness with no better means of guidance than there is upon the ocean. It is all very well to talk about what to do if lost in the wilds, as if it were a choice of going one way or another. But Nature in her savage wastes is full of pitfalls and death-traps and with the frightful ally of darkness, fills every step of the wayfarer with peril.

She had Tom in her clutches, this demon Nature; she had buried his trail in rank luxuriance, she had cast his guiding wire to the ground, and she laughed at him with her raging wind and rolling thunder as he stood there, baffled, helpless; all but panic-stricken.

Such a small thing is scouting. Such a tremendous thing is Nature.

CHAPTER VIII TEMPEST PEAK

Tom never knew exactly how he did grope his way to the top of the mountain. He was a good scout, if ever there was one, and he used tactics in dealing with the monster. One fitful guide he had, the lightning. Whenever it flashed he quickly laid out his course for a few yards.

At last, after hours, a long flash showed him the lookout tower outlined against the black sky. There was something startling, uncanny, in the sudden and vivid appearance of this alien thing, the handiwork of man, there on the lonely mountaintop. He saw it first bathed in the luminous glare. It appeared before him, a sort of glowing specter, strange with a peculiar strangeness, thus lifted out of its black environment. Then it withdrew into the stormy darkness.

He ascended the zigzag stair wearily, holding fast to the rail, for the steps were slippery with running water and the wind blowing a gale through the open structure. At each little landing where the stairs turned he paused, fatigued to the point of dropping, and rested for a brief moment while the wind and rain lashed him. At the top landing he fumbled in his pockets for the key the warden had sent him and entered the musty little room.

The tiny place was suffocating: oppressive with the atmosphere of long disuse. Its shelter was welcome, but there was something strangely jarring in the beating of the rain against the windows which were on every side.

In his hours of almost hopeless groping through that mountain wilderness, he had thought fondly of the cozy little shelter which would shut out the wild night. But now that he was there, he felt a certain uneasiness in its small, dark confines. There had been nothing spooky about the boisterous storm while he was in it. But listening to it from within this tiny, aerial bunk was another matter. The place was full of creaks and uncanny noises and Tom felt that another minute without a light would well-nigh unnerve him.

He struck a match and had his first glimpse of the place. There was the round table covered with the map under glass. The dirty, misshapen candle in its tallow-covered, rusty holder. The field-glass. With difficulty he got the candle lighted. It illumined hardly more than the table, leaving the surrounding area in shadow. There was an old kitchen chair, a rough chest, and a little cupboard. On opposite sides of the room were two sleeping bunks, one entirely without coverings, the other containing a pillow and a

smelly, mildewed quilt. An old magazine lay on this one; the picture on its cover showed a returning transport crowded with soldiers.

Outside the wind swept and moaned, and sometimes raised its voice in a sort of sudden, petulant complaint. The candlestick trembled audibly. The field-glass danced on the smooth glass. Tom laid it sideways and placed the magazine under the candlestick. Silence. He took down the telephone receiver and held it to his ear. He waited, ten seconds, half a minute, but no voice answered. He was shut off from the world. The storm raged and lashed the steel framework below him.

He threw off his oilskin coat and sank wearily down upon the locker. He was either almost asleep or almost fainting. He managed to raise the nearest window and in a second the gale cleansed the foul place. Then he sank down again, exhausted, his senses ebbing. The candle went out and the roaring wind blew the magazine open and drove it off the table. Its fluttering pages carried it against the field-glass and drove that also to the floor.

This aroused Tom and half-consciously he relit the candle and stood the field-glass upright on the table where it danced to the accompaniment of the driving wind. And then he heard, in an interval of the clamor, the baying of a dog far below him. The jolly little field-glass danced on its two stiff, stout legs. The tower shook. Then a lull. And the baying of dogs far below him in the tempestuous night.

And then he saw the face....

CHAPTER IX

THE FACE

He saw it peering in through the open window as if it were hovering in space outside. A face with staring eyes and matted hair. The shrieking wind subsided momentarily, and in the interval the baying below could be clearly distinguished. The lull permitted the rain to pour straight down and Tom saw the face through the downpour as something unreal, intangible.

What was this horrible thing? Tom was no coward, but he shuddered. He did not speak for he thought that the apparition would not answer, that it had no power of human speech. If he spoke and it did not answer the effect would be unnerving. He stared at it, horrified, panic-stricken. And meanwhile the baying below could be faintly heard like a voice spent, as if coming from another world....

"They ain't nobody up there now 'less you call a spook somebody." Tom remembered those words, spoken on the porch of the village store. *"A spook and his spook dog."* And the young schoolmaster's words came back to him all in a flash. *"Vollmer's face—his hair was all matted—appeared up in that little house and stared at them. And they were crowding down the stairs when they heard a dog baying at the foot of the tower—but when they went down there wasn't any dog there. But still the baying kept up...."*

What was this ghastly business? Tom stood aghast, every nerve on edge. Fear thrives on uncertainty. Tom's panic gave him an impulse which acted as a safety valve. Scarcely knowing what he did, he reached out suddenly as if to pass his hand through the spectral face. Then two arms clasped his and held fast.

"Let go!" Tom screamed.

"The dogs—they're—they're coming up," said a voice.

"I know you," Tom panted, trying to wrench his arm free while with the other he tried frantically to pull down the window. "Vol—you *let go*—you're Vollmer—let me get out of this place—you—are you—Vollmer?"

"Yes, help me in," the voice answered, "the hounds are coming up."

The two hands clutched Tom's trembling arm—they were very real. And a drenched form clambered over the window ledge. A round face with blond hair and staring eyes was before him in that little lofty shelter. "They're—they're down—they're down there," the voice panted. "You—got to—I didn't do anything—save me."



THEN TWO HANDS CLASPED HIS ARM.

Tom was ashamed that for the first time in his life he had fallen victim to fear and credulity. Here was an amazing apparition indeed, but it was no specter. It was a boy of perhaps fifteen years, drenched to the skin and in a

state of panic fright. By way of proving his restored composure, Tom nonchalantly threw the field-glass on the covered sleeping shelf and closed the window. He seemed quite cynical in his attitude toward ghostly sights and noises. One might have thought that he would have tossed a ghost aside in the same way.

“Well, I’ll be hanged!” he said. “Who the dickens are you and what are you doing here?”

“I—I climbed up,” cried the boy, brushing aside his streaming hair. “They set dogs—I didn’t do it—I didn’t mean to——”

“How did you cut your hand?” Tom asked.

“Climbing up and hanging on,” the boy cried. His terror was shocking. “I—I wouldn’t—I didn’t—I don’t care what they say—I didn’t, *I didn’t, I didn’t!*”

“Shh, take it easy,” said Tom. “How am I going to help you if I don’t know what’s the matter?”

“They’ll tear me all to pieces, they will,” the boy wailed. “They got to prove—haven’t they? I didn’t, *I didn’t, I cross my heart I didn’t!*”

Amid the gusts of the storm the baying could be heard far below in the darkness.

“I’m—I’m a scout—do you think they kill people?” the boy cried. “They’ll tear me all to pieces—and they’ll let them know where I am, they will.”

“Vollmer, is that your name?” Tom asked.

“Yes, and they’ll kill me,” the boy cried, clutching Tom’s arm. “I’m a real one—a real scout—don’t you believe me——”

Tom Slade, who knew what a scout was if any one did, slowly drew a pistol out of his pocket. “They won’t kill you, Henny,” he said.

“Why—they—why won’t they?”

“Why, just because they won’t,” said Tom. “I’m a scout too, so you can believe me just as I believe you. Give us your hand, Henny—shake. Sit down now and let’s see what’s what.”

But Tom did not sit down. He picked up the pistol and, opening the little door, descended down the steps into the black night. The gale careered among the girders of the tower, whistling and shrieking, then swept off to moan and wail in the lonely forest.

At the foot of the structure two sparkling eyes looked at Tom, and a dark form sprang at his throat. A pistol shot sounded, almost drowned in the tempestuous gale, and the great bloodhound that had leaped up at him lay dead at his feet.

“Now, now they’ll kill *you*,” the boy said as Tom reëntered the little room.

“I don’t think they will,” said Tom grimly. “Nobody will ever try twice to kill me whether it’s a dog or a man. So it’s a *real* boy and a *real* dog—or it was! Sit down over there and tell me what it’s all about, Henny. I don’t think anybody will bother us up here, not for a while anyway. Let’s blow out the candle, hey? Now they won’t have any light or any sound to help them, whoever they are.”

And so these two were alone in the darkness in that little shelter in the mountain wilderness while the raging storm beat furiously outside.

CHAPTER X

THE FUGITIVE

He was the image of his poor father, that boy. Round face, blond hair and a certain glare in his eyes. In the old man this stern look had suggested a relentless, uncompromising habit; it had something of the war lord in it. In the boy this aspect of severity, which he had inherited, gave him a funny rather than a forbidding look. It had something to do with making him unpopular in the little school. And his blundering habit of autocratic declaration had not helped him in the village. Nor had the sorry fate of his honest father helped him in that hotbed of gossip and bigotry. It was not strange that Tom, fed up with the old superstitious yarn, had mistaken the boy for the shade of his dead father.

“So you’re the fellow that was kept in after school to write a sentence a hundred times, hey?” Tom said.

Now, indeed, Henny Vollmer stared.

“Yes, and you wrote you were going to kill Wolfson Peck too, you little rascal, didn’t you? You could have thought of a shorter sentence if you’d only had sense enough, and got out earlier,” Tom laughingly ran his hand through the boy’s wet, tousled hair. “Well, what are you doing up here on such a night? Why didn’t you come up the stairs? You gave me a scare, you little rascal! What was that dog doing, howling down there?”

The boy stared at Tom as if the new lookout were the specter. His unconsciously heroic glare consorted ill with his drenched appearance and evident predicament. If that glare had always been so humorously construed down at Watson’s Bend as it was by Tom, much of poor Henny’s trial and trouble would have been averted.

“You don’t intend to kill *me*, I hope,” Tom said.

“They set him on my trail,” the boy answered, “because I—because on account of Mr. Peck getting killed——”

“What?” Tom asked incredulously.

“I climbed up the framework so as to baffle him away.”

“Baffle him away?” Tom repeated. He would have been inclined to laugh at the quaint phrase but for the appalling information in the boy’s previous sentence. Such oddities of speech were peculiar to Henny. They were the one remnant of his Teutonic lineage.

“So you thought to baffle him away!” Tom repeated again, scrutinizing the boy. “Well, I see you’re a kind of a scout——”

“I’m a pioneer scout,” the boy asserted proudly. You would have thought he was declaring himself to be emperor of the universe. “I do a good turn and I don’t forget neither—every day I do. I don’t care how many lies they tell, I wouldn’t kill Mr. Peck. He killed himself because he didn’t look.”

“Yes?” Tom pulled off his soaking shoes, then settled down to listen, the while watching the boy closely. “Mr. Peck is dead? Isn’t that big white house his? I saw smoke coming out of it this evening when I started up the mountain.”

“He got killed,” the boy said in that tone which made all his declarations sound assertive, as if there could be no contradiction to anything he said. “But I wouldn’t kill him because I am a pioneer scout. So then I changed my mind and I wouldn’t kill him.”

“That was very kind of you,” Tom said. “How did he get killed?”

“Everybody knows what I wrote, but that don’t say I killed him, does it?”

“No.”

“Dumb-bell Denny, he has to tell all that happens in school so he can get his board and the people will like him in their homes——”

“You mean Mr. Dennison?” Tom asked, watching the boy shrewdly and smiling a little.

“He’s teacher,” the boy said, “but a lot he don’t know about scouts, else he’d teach us like that; he’s a dumb-bell. I got to be one all alone. Are you a detective maybe?” he asked suddenly.

Tom shook his head. “No, I’m a scout, a kind of a head scout, and I’m going to be lookout here for a while. Go on, how did Mr. Peck get killed?”

The boy stared at Tom as if to tell him not to dare to lie. “You know about good turns?” he asked.

“I’ll hope to tell you,” Tom said.

“That man—he was the one sent my father to jail with a lot of lies. He stole our well, that man did. Wouldn’t you want to kill him?”

Tom was silent, interested, keenly observant. “The war’s over, Henny,” he said.

“Not here, it ain’t yet,” the boy said. “I got a red lantern to-night out of the barn. In school yesterday Sally Kane told me Mr. Peck is coming back to-day to sell his house—he wouldn’t live here any more. In New York, near there, he lives now. So——”

“Just a minute, don’t get excited,” said Tom. “You live with your mother in that little house near Mr. Peck’s—beyond the white fence?”

“My mother is dead,” said the boy. “I work on Mr. Sterrett’s farm.”

“Oh,” said Tom; “yes, go on.”

"I thought of a good turn and I got the lantern they hang under the wagon when they take the milk to Connington station——"

"A red one?"

"Yes, and I went to the Bend with it—you saw that Bend maybe?"

"I'll say I did."

"I was going to stay there on account of Mr. Peck coming home. I guess that's all right for a good turn, hey? Because it was good and dark and raining hard and blowing and everything. I was going to wave the red lantern whenever I'd see a car come. Not many come up that road. But, anyway, I'd know Mr. Peck's car if it should come because the lights are far apart—it's a Pierce-Arrow. He's some rich—I mean he was—that man. *You* wouldn't know a Pierce-Arrow coming in the dark like that," Henny added with an air of triumph. "The lights are out far apart on the fenders. But I would know it."

"Good," said Tom.

The boy glared at him with a fine look of challenge in his eyes. "You got to remember things like that," he said.

"O.K.," said Tom, "you'll do."

"I was going to wave that red lantern when I would see those lights come. Because he was away a long time and maybe he'd forget just where that place is, and if he didn't slow down and turn he'd go straight ahead down into the swamp——"

"Yes, I know."

"I knew a car went past before I got there, because there were fresh tracks. But I guess that was in the daylight."

"Yes, that was my car," said Tom.

"You got different kinds of tires right and left," said Henny.

Tom studied the boy with increasing interest. "Right," he said.

The boy looked frankly triumphant for a moment, then continued, "I stayed there most an hour in all the rain; it was blowing just like this, too. Then I went down off the road into the swamp because I knew there was a box there——"

"You had noticed that too, huh?"

"Sure, everything I notice. I went into the swamp, down away from the Bend, maybe I guess twenty feet. All of a sudden while my foot was stuck in the mud I could see two lights coming—far apart. Then in a minute the big car came *kersmash* down into the swamp. And it turned over and over and he was dead. Can you tell if a person is dead—where to feel?"

Tom did not answer. But there was a thrill in the steady scrutiny of his half-closed eyes.

“He thought the Bend was further off yet,” Henny said. “He thought it was way down as far as I was, hey? Where he saw the red light, hey?”

There was a wistful note of pathos in that little query, *hey*. The poor boy, victim of his own noble impulse, seemed pleading, begging, for Tom’s confidence. “Hey, that’s what he thought, I guess.”

“Yes, that’s what he thought, Henny,” Tom said. And he laid his hand gently on the frightened boy’s shoulder.

“I—I didn’t murder him? That isn’t murdering him?” the boy almost plead.

“No, that wasn’t murdering him,” Tom said quietly. “You’re all right, Henny.”

“They said I did it on purpose,” the boy cried. “They put Bentley’s bloodhound on the trail, *I know*. That was him you killed. I tried to shout to Mr. Peck while he was driving, but the wind made too much noise. So he came *kersmash!* But I started it for a good turn anyway ... *Do you say I lie?*” he suddenly demanded with that heroic glare.

Tom only looked at him.

CHAPTER XI

DAWN OF A GREAT DAY

Here, thought Tom, was a pitiful sequel indeed to one of the noblest instances of a scout good turn that had ever come to his notice. The boy's desperate predicament went to his heart. To undertake to save his old enemy and in that very act to send him crashing to his death! And with that foolish boyish threat of his still cherished in the memories of those ignorant and bigoted villagers! Poor kid, thought Tom.

If he had known more of Henny Vollmer's life in the village, he would have been even more fearful for the poor boy's safety. The sympathy and kindness which goes out to an orphan found no place in the hearts of the unsentimental people of Watson's Bend. Remoteness breeds narrowness, even hardness. You have read of the great, heartless, cold world. But it is not the great world that is flinty and heartless and unforgetting; it is the little village.

Carl Vollmer, the fire lookout, was an honest man of German birth who had taken out his first citizenship papers. He lived with his wife and son near the Peck mansion. He had an imperious manner (quite unconscious) and that fierce and proud glare which was inherited by his son. His case was as sad as the later predicament of his son seemed likely to be.

Wolfson Peck, the Bend's one prosperous citizen, had wanted the well which was on the Vollmer land. It was a sorry tale of greed and sharp practice and the power of wealth against a man both poor and unenlightened. No one knew where the right lay. Peck could not strike water on his own land and laid claim to a strip of the Vollmer land which included the Vollmer well. It was a question whether the law would sustain him and if Vollmer had kept his mouth shut all might have gone well with him, notwithstanding his unpopularity after the war started.

But he had made that unhappy remark about the poor man's rights in Germany. Here was Wolfson Peck's chance. He made a fine gesture of having the lookout station searched for a wireless, he claimed that Vollmer's first papers could not save his land from confiscation, and while these matters were in the air, Vollmer was subjected to summary action. He was taken away from the village and interned and died in a detention camp. His good wife died shortly afterward. Then Peck bought up the land and put up a handsome cupolaed affair over the old well and painted the structure white

to match the fence and the house and the barn. And that was the end of the Vollmers.

Except for Henny. If Henny had been a wise boy he would have held his peace. But he was too much the son of his father to do that. He had not yet reached the minimum scout age when he swore that the first time he saw old Wolfson Peck he would kill him.

That was a pretty big threat for so small a boy. The trouble was that this boy had one scout virtue, he always kept his word. And people had learned to take him at his word. At the age of ten he had said that he would lick little Clyde Venner, a schoolmate, and he had done so with a vengeance. He had said he would smash every window in the schoolhouse if Dumb-bell Denny punished him, and he had indeed done that. He was the bad boy of the village and his being the son of Carl Vollmer did not help him any.

So when Henny proclaimed that he would surely kill old Peck, Watson's Bend paid him the compliment of taking him at his word. But old Peck closed up his house at the Bend and moved away, so that tragedy was averted. Henny was then about fourteen years old, and he continually reiterated his threat. As he grew older and the Peck-Vollmer episode mellowed into village history, the boy's oft-repeated declaration of vengeance came to be taken more and more seriously. "If he ever comes back once, I don't care when it is, I will kill him," the boy said. But the Pecks did not come back.

The monarch of the white house and the white fence and the fancy well-house had found Watson's Bend too small and remote for his ideas and sumptuous living. But the threat lived on; it was more conspicuous in the village than the gorgeous well-house. The fine place was closed up tight and was not much thought about. But Henny's threat of vengeance lived; he saw to that. So it befell that his contribution to the village was, in a sense, greater than that of Mr. Wolfson Peck....

Then, one fine day, Henny ran plunk into the Scout Handbook for Boys. He was walking home from Connington, where he had been on an errand for his guardian and employer, Mr. Sterrett, when he happened to see the book lying on a stone wall. He sat down to rest and began looking the book over.

Curiously enough he stumbled into some matter about the scouts' need of being thorough; how scouts must remember all they see, must never forget anything. "He forgets his book a'ready," said Henny. "He forgets to put his name and where he lives in it too."

Here was Henny Vollmer's uncanny, instinctive efficiency brought to bear upon scouting. He was a scout before he knew it. The orphan boy whom Watson's Bend was quite ready to take at his word had certainly the makings of a scout. The boy who always did the things he said he would do

would not remain long in the tenderfoot class. The only trouble was he was always saying he would do the wrong kind of things. But perhaps even that is better than being a false alarm.

The boy who instantly perceived the incongruity of a scout leaving his handbook on a stone wall had the makings of a winner. The boy who looked for the name and address of the sender, so that he might return the book, and was disgusted at the owner for not having written it on the flyleaf intended for that purpose, was certainly a scout in spirit. Why, here was a flyleaf dear to the heart of that little statistic-loving devil! All the traditions of Henny's race and ancestry would have impelled him to fill in all the dotted line spaces on that enchanting page.

Name, town, state, age, height, weight, member of (blank) patrol, troop number (blank). Dotted line for name of scoutmaster. How the heart of Henny Vollmer longed to fill in those seductive spaces! And the spaces below, intended to be filled in with details of the scout's history and progress in this wonderful strange field! What was all this delightful business, poor Henny wondered? Qualified as tenderfoot (space). Qualified as second-class scout (space). First-class, life scout, star and eagle scout, awarded honor medal—all with spaces to be filled in. What was this new country that poor Henny had discovered? "And he forgets it and don't put his name in," Henny said.

Then he settled himself on the stone wall and plunged into the book as a regular scout plunges into the woods or the water. That was a great day for Henny Vollmer. And it was a great day for the Boy Scouts of America....

CHAPTER XII

THE BLIND TRAIL

Of course Henny knew that this enchanted land was not for him. He had his chores to do. And besides he had about as good a chance in Watson's Bend of getting in with these adventurers as he would have had if he had resided at the North Pole. What he read about forest fires was a revelation to him. "We didn't get nobody up there yet neither," he said. He was especially interested in the matter on page one hundred and thirty-one about keeping records in a field observation book, records about the wind and the weather and about birds and their songs and their colors. Henny Vollmer felt like Columbus discovering a new world.

"That's good too about good turns," he said. "A lot of them you can make stunts." And he would keep a record of them too, trust him for that....

Then Henny's enraptured eye paused at something on page twenty-three. He read with the wildest interest. Could this actually be?

In case it is not possible for a boy to affiliate with a troop ... he may upon application be enrolled direct with the National Headquarters as a pioneer scout. He is entitled to all the benefits and privileges granted to regular scouts. Blanks may be secured upon request, etc.

That night, after his chores at the Sterrett farm were done, Henny concocted a weird letter to "Scout Nations Headmaster New York" in which he asked for "those blanks like you said in the book. This is good place for those good turns," he added; "even one I made up my mind to a'ready, it's a big one, it's a fine kind because you can keep it up. So I hope to hear from you soon Henny Vollmer Watsons Bend it's over the mountain from Connington that's the nearest they have stores but none of those suits like you see. P.S. please hurry up."

So Henry Vollmer was enrolled as a pioneer scout. He did not tell Farmer Sterrett because he was afraid scouting might be thought to interfere with his arduous chores. Likewise he did not tell young Mr. Dennison because he had an instinctive dislike for him. He did not tell anybody. Watson's Bend was no longer a part of his world. He had a contempt for the people who were afraid of the old lookout station, especially Mr. Dennison, who encouraged the idea of the place being haunted. "If my father come back he would come to me and not stay up there," the practical, sensible boy had said.

Off with the old love, on with the new. Henny even forgot about his oft-repeated vow to wreak vengeance on the man who had caused his father's downfall and death. Wolfson Peck's long absence had much to do with this. Probably scouting had more to do with it. But Watson's Bend did not forget the threat of the little "seeditious, bloodthirsty devil what if I had my way would of been packed off ter the deetention camp with ole Carl, the little rebel of a Hun. The only thing saves him is the war's over." And so forth and so forth. Meanwhile, Henny glared at them even more imperiously than before, for was he not of the tribe of Daniel Boone and Kit Carson and Buffalo Bill?

And so the day came when he started out to do one great thing and ended by doing another. Any one with sense in his head could have predicted that this boy would never do anything on a small scale. He would never make trails in the back yard and stalk grasshoppers. Nature set the scene for him on this fateful day of his young life. She stirred up a great storm that blew down haystacks and ripped the roof from Sterrett's barn and smashed in the conservatory window in the Peck house, where old Aunt Carrie Holbrook was kindling a fire against the arrival of the master. He was expected that very day, and would depart again in a day or two.

The coming of Wolfson Peck was the subject of conversation at the village store and of whisperings in the little schoolhouse. Young Mr. Dennison cut out the afternoon session on account of the increasing storm and remarked to his little group of pupils that Squire Peck had a bad day for traveling.

On his way home he paused in the driving rain long enough to make the same remark to old Aunt Carrie, who was staggering against the wind and rain to the empty mansion. It was a big event in the life of Watson's Bend. "I don't want he should come afore I git a fire started," Aunt Carrie said....

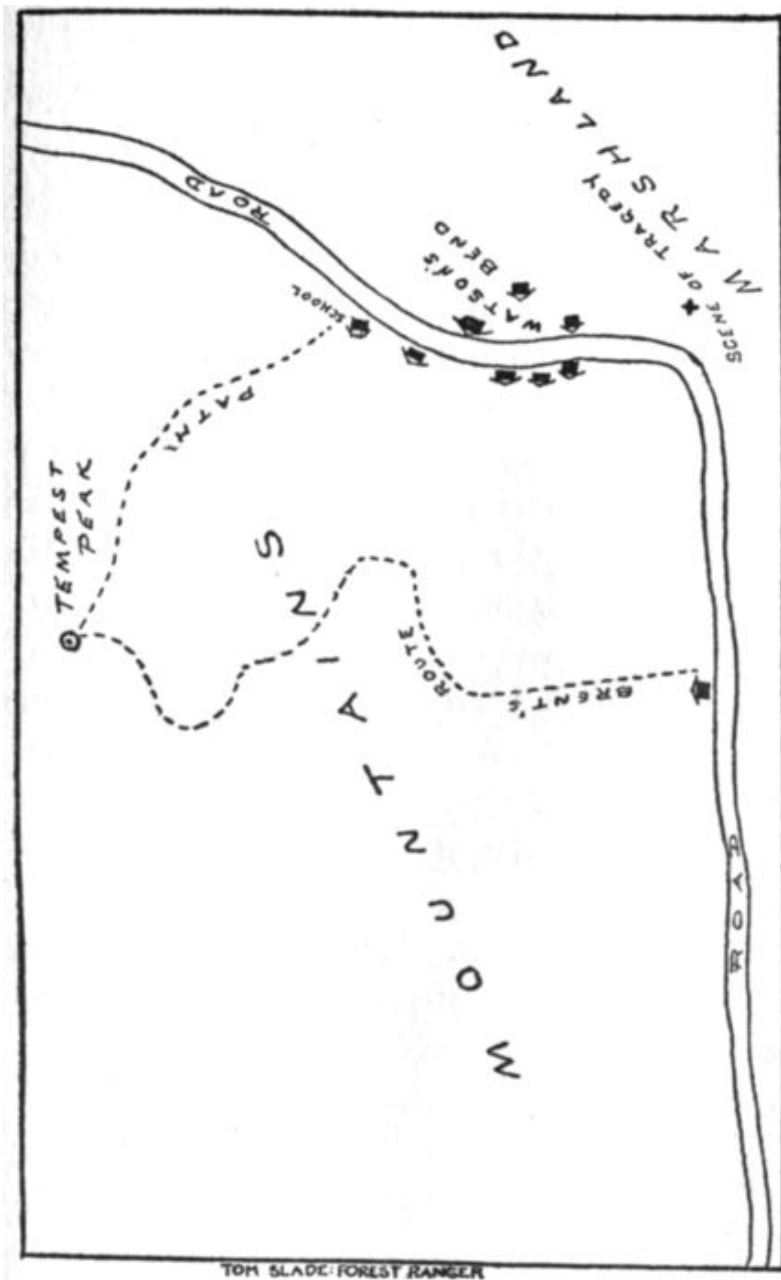
And all unnoticed by any one, Tom Slade's little flivver came rattling merrily through the drenched village. All unknown to any one, Henny Vollmer, pioneer scout, stole out to the roofless barn of Darius Sterrett and got the red lantern that hung under the old buckboard. Poor boy, he could not see where the trail would lead. But he balked at neither storm nor gathering darkness. He was no parlor scout, this secretive, lonely young pioneer. So perhaps it was appropriate that the roaring demon of the storm should be with him as he went forth on his adventures.

CHAPTER XIII

THE BLACK SHEEP

You know how the road turned, but it would be as well to glance at the crude map which Tom Slade later made of the neighborhood. In his anger and disgust I saw him crumple that map up and throw it on the floor. I picked it up and had it reproduced to make clearer the narrative of these events.

Tom's flivver had already gone around the Bend, proceeding westward toward the village, and was parked behind the schoolhouse when Henny approached that outrageous turn. He was thinking mainly of Squire Peck, but he was thinking also of any one else who might be approaching in a car. At the spot marked with a cross on the map he managed to get the lantern lighted and there he stood where he could be seen from both directions. I think he must have made a pretty good picture of a scout, though it must be confessed that he did not look much like the picture of the natty youngster waving a flag, on the cover of the scout handbook.



Whenever Henny heard a noise which he thought might be a car in the distance he waved the lantern back and forth and sometimes over his head.

The storm raged, darkness was coming on fast, and he was soaked and weary. His face was sore from the force of the wind and the driving rain.

Now and again he drew his wet sleeve across his eyes to clear away the water that was dripping from his hair. And he stood there. Scouts are not all alike; this was Henny's idea of a good turn.

Then he bethought him of the old grocery box that he had once noticed lying down in the swampy land below. He thought he would get that and sit on it. He crawled down off the road into the oozy area which stretched away to the north. This was, perhaps, eight or ten feet below the level of the turn and the descent, though not precipitous, was steep. With his lantern Henny groped about for the box, found it and started up toward the road again.

He was still some twenty feet from the road when his foot sank in the swampy ground which was made worse by the rain. In trying to pull his foot out the other one sank too, and for a few moments he believed he was in a predicament perilous to himself. It was dark and he was trapped. The lantern stood on the box. By laying his body across the box he was able to obtain enough resistance to the marshy land to draw one foot, then the other, free. The box did not sink even with his weight upon it. He took a chance with one released foot and stepped again in the yielding ground. His foot went down.

He might now have feared for his own safety, but he gave no thought to that. For just in that moment he heard amid the storm the unmistakable sound of an approaching car. In a few seconds more two lights, wide apart, appeared. Half-sitting, half-lying on the box, he shouted and waved his lantern. But the wind carried his voice in the wrong direction. Then suddenly, as the lights loomed near, he realized the horrible issue which was imminent. He called again, he screamed, he swung the lantern frantically.

But it was too late. Of all the mistakes old Squire Peck had made in his willful and aggressive career this was the most horrible. He thought the red lantern marked the turn of the road and he held his course straight for it. In ten seconds more his Pierce-Arrow sedan plunged off the road, turned a complete somersault forward and with the appalling sound of breaking glass and splintering wood settled on its side in the marshy land below the road. The stern, hard, dominant man who had ruined Carl Vollmer, the lookout, and made his boy an orphan, lay dead and mangled in his sumptuous car.

The black sheep and pioneer scout had done his good turn.

CHAPTER XIV

FLIGHT

Henny had never looked upon death save on the two occasions when he had seen his father, and later his mother, lying in the dim stillness of their little home under the shadow of the big white house. They had sent his father's body home from a detention camp where he had died of the flu, and Henny had seen little in the figure which lay in peace to remind him of his father.

When his mother lay in that same musty little room later, he had thought she was smiling at him. Added to his tragic bewilderment at this sudden loss had been a fear about what would become of him. He had believed that old Wolfson Peck would somehow get hold of him as he had got hold of the well.

But his nervous bewilderment (which was the form in which his grief showed itself) was as nothing to the bewilderment which gripped him after that shocking catastrophe in the storm. *He had, after all, brought old Wolfson Peck to his death. His threat had been carried out.*

Henny was utterly bewildered and cold with fright. His usually stolid temperament was shaken. He was afraid to look in the car. He was afraid to return into the village. He tried to pull his foot out of the muck and was glad that he could not, for that kept him from doing anything.

But presently he found himself. Perhaps the victim was not dead and he could render service like a scout. He knew how to make a tourniquet; he had practiced that. With difficulty he drew his foot out of the marsh and for a few moments lay crosswise on the box like a seesaw. It was uncomfortable, even painful, but he did not sink. He listened, but could hear no call for help, no moaning even. Only the raging storm. It blew out the light in his lantern and he could not relight it, for the matches in his pocket were soaking wet. He could not remain as he was, that was sure.

Suddenly he heard a sound, as of a door closing on its latch. He craned his neck and looked at the dark bulk of the wrecked car which lay about fifteen feet from him. Had a deathly hand within it softly closed the door so that the prying eyes of life might not look upon the ghastly sight concealed there? Henny was not exactly conscious of such a thought, but he trembled at the sound. Such a sequel to a scout good turn!

Wind and rain. They beat in his face and glued his clothing to him and made him look thin and lithe in the sudden flashes of lightning. The

elements, which had brought him into this frightful predicament, seemed to have furnished him with a disguise. He looked small and different, like a bird when its feathers are soaking wet.

The thought came to him that the sound which he had heard might after all mean that the victim was alive. He drew his legs up and stood upon the box, a statue of fright on a wabbling pedestal. His clothing was so wet and clung so tightly to his body that he looked indeed as if he might have been chiseled out of black, wet stone. He was just going to jump in the direction of the wrecked car, where he thought the saturated ground was more solid, when there was a sudden gust of wind. He paused. And in that pause the word STOP appeared before him in a little circle of red light.

Surely no suffering victim in need of help would present that forbidding sign. Only death. Ghastly death that wanted to be alone and unseen. Could it be that Squire Peck, in death, or near death, had recognized the diabolical triumph of his young enemy and was beseeching him not to approach and add to the horror of his deed? STOP. It appeared again, very faint, as if the hand that controlled the warning sign were weak.

Then Henny knew what it was. It was the stoplight of the car, lighting when the gale shook the wrecked machine and it settled in the mud. Some freakish contact in the wiring happening when the car was jarred. But it seemed dreadful in the stormy darkness to see that little red word of warning.

Henny jumped and landed on comparatively solid ground. The whole area below the road was not deeply marshy; he had only happened into a sort of hole. He now plowed through the mud to the car and sat upon it just a few seconds to rest and collect his nerves. If the car body had been shattered he would have been less fearful. But its form was not destroyed; only broken in places and the windows shattered. The rain pelting down on the metal side of the car made a loud, almost a metallic, sound. The car jarred and settled a little in a fresh gust of wind.

Henny looked within through the broken front window. He saw something, but not clearly. He waited, trembling. Then a sharp flash of lightning brightened the sky and bathed the interior of the car in dim light. He saw the body of Squire Peck hunched up in the corner just below him. One leg was out through the broken window, buried in the mud. The body was held behind the steering wheel and one hand lay upon it. The head with its white hair was thrown back, and presented the ghastly effect of a driver, utterly heedless, enjoying the exhilaration of speeding. The hand laid lightly across the wheel suggested a kind of rash bravado. The eyes were open and staring.

Henny knew that no living human being could look like that. It was worse than the sight of death, for it was death assuming a horrible simulation of life. Then the picture was withdrawn into the darkness, from the eyes of the sickened and panic-stricken boy. With all his might and main he plowed through the mud and scrambled up to the road. A violent blast of wind struck him just as he was about to run pell-mell, he knew not where. He was frantic, aimless. Glancing around for a last look at the wreck which he had caused, he saw the little red spotlight of Wolfson Peck presenting the warning word of STOP in the black, wild night. No doubt the wind had moved a switch, or some derangement of the system caused this startling effect.

But it had no effect on the unnerved fugitive. Wolfson Peck could not give orders or impose his iron will any more. It was quite preposterous how he seemed trying to order people even after he was dead....

CHAPTER XV

TRAILER BENTLEY

Through the storm and darkness he ran with a kind of aimless desperation. He was running away from that horrible, ghastly thing; away from scouting that had brought him to such a pass; away from the people who would not understand; away from himself, from everything and everybody. He ran as a wild animal runs when it is liberated from a cage.

He did not know where he was going or what he was going to do. Scouting and good turns were of no use, that was sure; he was just going to run. And in his running and climbing that night he triumphed in another phase of scouting.

Yet he did have one thought, one immediate purpose. He ran for all he was worth to the schoolhouse. On the way he passed Mrs. Mira Kenley, who with a shawl drawn over her head was scurrying across the road from the Peck mansion to her little house. She carried something that shone; it was an empty dishpan in which she had taken some vegetables and hot crullers over for the returning master. The driving rain beat a tattoo on the dishpan.

"Where on earth be you going, Henny Vollmer?" she called as he ran past. "You better git home with you ter Mr. Sterrett, his roof is all blowed in. They was lookin' for you. What you up to now?"

He neither paused nor heeded. Mrs. Kenley was a woman who believed that any one who harbors an orphan is a saint. And that the orphan who does the chores is always vicious and lazy. At the schoolhouse Henny tried the door, though he knew it would be locked. Then he forced open a window and clambered in. The place was dark and musty, with a smell which comes from old wood worn shiny, a schooly smell that he hated. He groped his way to "Denny's" desk and got some matches out of a cigar box. By the light of one, then another, of these he could see upon the blackboard the sentence "with a conjunction and a pronoun in it" which little Ann Maria Coverly had written on the board that very morning. *Mr. Peck is coming and we are glad he is.* There was also his own sentence with a conjunction and a pronoun in it. *We are going to close cause the wind and rain are so bad.* How strange it seemed to see those sentences still there; they were like ghosts.

Henny rummaged in the pencil-box (another cigar box) and got the knife-eraser, for he had no scout knife, this pioneer scout. On the under shelf of his own desk was some of his carved handiwork, the words, *I'll Kill Old Peck*, cut in the soft wood. Probably no one had ever seen this but himself

and little Ellie Todd, who had said, "Mr. Smarty, you'll get kilt." He now sliced and scratched and mutilated the whole area where those telltale words were until the vengeful sentence was entirely eliminated. It was the one permanent memorial of his hatred that he could remember in his fright and haste.

He then climbed out through the window and it was not until that moment that the thought of taking refuge in the lookout station entered his mind. They could not follow him on the trailless mountain on such a night. Perhaps their superstitious awe of the place would deter them from going there at all. Perhaps they would never even think of his being there. There was a refuge, a refuge attainable with difficulty, but he knew a way.

It was up Old Nick's Grin. That was a long cleft in the mountain which, seen in the naked wintertime, was supposed to bear a resemblance to a tremendous smile. From the neighboring Hawk Summit it did look as if Tempest Peak were smiling a fixed and cruel smile.

It was just as Henny was about to act upon his sudden resolve that he saw the canvas-covered bulk of Tom's flivver in the wood's edge back of the schoolhouse. He paused long enough to find out what it was, but the agent who sold dog-power churns usually came once in the springtime, and he thought it was the churnman's car. How many times had he watched Bentley's old bloodhound (who wasn't good for much else) trudging around upon his treadmill.

But Bentley's old bloodhound's offspring, he was a vicious beast! An *Uncle Tom's Cabin* company had wanted to buy him, but they had not money enough. "And besides he kin do more'n play act," old man Bentley had said. "How 'bout that there tramp, 'et stole Sairy Horn's missionary box after nigh on killin' her?" Oh, he was a vicious brute, and something of a scout, was Trailer Bentley; that was his name. Henny and all the other boys had always been afraid of him. Next to poor old Squire Peck he had always enjoyed a greater measure of respect than any resident of the village.

CHAPTER XVI

THE VOICE OF THE VILLAGE

There were three people out in the storm that night, a storm memorable in the annals of a little village that never forgot anything. Tom Slade, already more than an hour on his laborious and circuitous journey, was lost in the black wilderness when Henny Vollmer, pioneer scout, took the short-cut which no one had ever before shown the hardihood to attempt.

He had an ally in his own desperation. If he had failed in one phase of scouting, he would at least succeed in another. It was perilous following the cleft in the darkness. It was full of little tributary clefts which he might stumble into and lie wedged between rocky walls till his skeleton fell apart and went rattling down into unknown depths. The long, ascending cleft itself was concealed here and there by rank brush hiding its yawning perils. But the cleft followed a pretty straight course up the mountain. There was a legend that it was the handiwork of an earthquake. But that was before the fire which had destroyed Derry Conner's woods. It was before the epoch of Lizey Henk's man who got burned because he was tipsy....

Henny was scarcely well upon his difficult ascent when a car on its way to Connington approached the Bend. That was Doctor Wythe's car and the doctor knew the Bend and approached it slowly, with his searchlight turned on. He saw the sedan lying sideways in the mud and went down to investigate.

So it happened that while Henny was following his perilous short-cut up the mountain, Watson's Bend was aroused by the news of the terrible thing that had happened. The tidings spread like fire. Men hurrying to the spot paused long enough to summon others from their homes; there was a general outpouring into the storm. Women with rubber coats thrown over their heads, men heedless of the furious elements, all hurried questioning, incredulous, to the scene. Some held back fearfully from the gruesome sight within the car and stood in little groups, talking in the pelting storm. Lanterns moved about on the road and dotted the distant darkness like lightning-bugs.

And Henny Vollmer's name was on every tongue. Farmer Sterrett picked his red lantern out of the mud and this was enough to identify the bloodthirsty little varmint with the catastrophe.

"Yer mind I told yer not ter take 'im," said Eb Horn. "I says he'd bring disgrace onto yer; I says it to Sairy, too. I said hands off when yer told the

Orphan Home people you'd keep him fer a spell."

"I hain't ready ter think of him with blood onto his hands," said Farmer Sterrett solemnly.

"Not when I seed him runnin' through the rain and wouldn't stop?" vociferated Mrs. Mira Kenley. "Not when I seed him this very night scurryin' helter-skelter and wouldn't say where he was goin', runnin' like a thief in the night? 'You go home with you,' I says to him; 'you go home where you belong sech a night and help the man what gives you board and lodging that has his barn roof blowed down.' He couldn't look me in the face with the red sin that was on him, God forgive him."

Farmer Sterrett glanced from her to the young schoolmaster who stood, lantern in hand, in the largest and increasing group, "Yer had the fetchin' up of 'im more'n me, schoolmaster," he said. "Jedge not that ye be not jedged." The telltale lantern, bespattered with mud, hung from his hand, and in the dim light of the other lantern his face shone stern, but not unkindly. "He would be skeery about doin' this here, Mr. Dennison, him a young lad?"

It was a declaration, but also a question. "The most I could say, Mr. Sterrett," the young schoolmaster replied, "is that he's a queer sort of young lad. He never yet said he would do a thing that he didn't do it. He said a good many times that he would do this."

Farmer Sterrett looked down and did not answer. Strangely enough, he of all the village people had been most stern and hard to the fugitive boy.

"And put it down in black and white, too," the schoolmaster added.

"Not of late, schoolmaster?" Sterrett queried.

"He cut it into his desk in school," piped up the shrill voice of little Ellie Todd; "'cause I seed it—how he would kill Squire Peck—I seed it! He says he meant it too and if you cut a thing in wood you gotter do it.

"Things yer say is on'y heard;
Cut in wood yer keep yer word."

He says it just like that a lot of times 'cause I heard him. Now he has to get kilt, now he does."

"Show me that!" thundered Farmer Sterrett. "If the guilt was in his soul I'll know it afore I lay my head ter sleep. If the red is on his hands God save me fer the part I had ter give 'im shelter."

He was a religious man and essentially just, but relentless and a hard master. The flint of that great overshadowing mountain which had frowned on him since babyhood was in his stern nature. "If I gave him shelter against the County House with the blood in his soul it'll be fer me ter make my peace with God fer it this night and ask His mercy and put it in the hearts of

the Squire's folk ter forgive me—Missy and the young squire. Yer have the key ter the schoolhouse, Mr. Dennison?"

"You have one yourself, Mr. Sterrett," said the schoolmaster.

With a tough and hoary hand that trembled a little Farmer Sterrett pulled out a bunch of keys. They were the keys to the church and its little Sunday School building. And with them was a key to the school which, never having used, he had forgotten. He handed the telltale red lantern to the schoolmaster and took the lighted one from him. The schoolmaster yielded it readily to this man who was a leader and stronger than he.

"Come along, Dave Bentley, and you men," said Sterrett. "The others of yer lift him out easy and carry him up ter the mansion. It'll be better fer the youngsters if you women folk send them home ter their beds. It's a bad sight ter see that, and they'll get the ague in such a night. Throw a cloth over him, you Clyde. Come along, the rest of yer."

CHAPTER XVII

BAFFLED

It would have been interesting to a keen observer how this strong, rugged man, Sterrett, took the leadership and was dominant, while young Mr. Dennison, respected for his book learning, followed along carrying the telltale red lantern. Perhaps that was why he was in Watson's Bend; because he was lacking somehow.

Whatever dubious significance might have attached to the poor fugitive's handiwork, there was no need to see that telltale carving. The frenzied boy had left every evidence of guilty flight. They saw these things as he had not considered them in his panic fear and frantic haste. All his stolidness had deserted him. If he had really been guilty he would probably have been more careful. But there was none discerning enough to perceive that.

A sorry mess he had left, eloquent of crazed fear. There were long slivers of fresh wood cut and pulled from his desk; he had not even picked them up from the floor. The very recent elimination of those fatal words was more conspicuous than the words had ever been. Penholders from the cigar box lay spilled on the master's desk; the knife-eraser had not even been closed. Burned matches lay about.

"It was after dark, he was here," said one.

"It was after dark Miry Kenley seen him," said another.

"By thunder, we'll have him!" roared Farmer Sterrett in mounting wrath. "I'll not touch head to pillar till he's safe got with all his sin on him. He'll answer! Young or old, he'll answer! We'll open the store and 'phone to Connington; he'll be on his way there, I reckon." The store contained the nearest of the two or three 'phones in the village.

"The wires are down," said young Mr. Dennison.

"Then I'll have my hound on him!" thundered Bentley.

"Would you do that?" the schoolmaster was moved to ask. The thought seemed to shock him.

"*Would I do it? And why not?*" Bentley roared. "You're not mindin' of the poor squire layin' dead at the hands of murder, Mr. Schoolmaster. Would I do it! If you was here ter see the old man when still he was young yet, growin' up here like us, you'd not put sech a question, Mr. Dennison."

"I was only thinking of my pupil, one of my——" The young schoolmaster broke off, then added weakly. "It will be a bad night to follow

a hound.”

“Get him and get him quick,” said Farmer Sterrett in a way of command.

It was a wretched business. They brought the dog, pulling, sniffing, into the little schoolhouse. Bentley, holding him in leash, followed him as he jerked and pulled here and there, concentrated on his own savage business, detached, heedless of the lookers-on. There was something ignoble in the way Bentley submitted to the beast.

And so, having caught the scent of the poor fugitive, Trailer Bentley leaped upon the window ledge and, dragging his leash after him, was gone in the stormy night.

Bentley was left in the schoolhouse. He could not in any case have held the beast in leash up that mountain wilderness with all its pitfalls and obstructions. But of course he did not know the hound was going up the mountain. It had not occurred to any one that Henny would seek refuge there on such a night. No one even knew that Tom had gone up, and in their excitement they did not even see his little car parked in the partial shelter of the woods. Farmer Sterrett denounced Bentley for letting go of the leash; he swore at him, and it was one of the very few instances of his swearing in all his life.

If Henny was not skillful in his getaway, he showed an uncanny skill upon the mountain. It was significant that flight in that direction was thought to be out of the question. Up the yawning, perilous brink of the cleft he scrambled, braving the storm and testing every step he took in the darkness. The cleft was a guide, but a dreadful guide, leading either to triumph or quick death. A guide which had to be fought and baffled; a treacherous guide which might turn upon the wayfarer at any moment.

But Henny followed the cleft. Then suddenly he became a pioneer scout again. Somewhere in that black forest he heard the barking of a dog. In a little while he heard it again, clear, appalling; perhaps not a hundred yards away.

He knew what it meant, he had even feared they would put that local celebrity upon his trail. One moment of frantic thought, thought kindled into inspiration by his desperate peril, and then he acted. No one will ever know what chances he took. He grabbed hold of a vine and lowered himself into the cleft till he reached a point where he could stay his descent by the pressure of his legs against either side. He knew there was water in the bottom and that was his one hope. Trailer Bentley could track him even through a storm, but not in flowing water.

Suppose he became wedged between those walls of rock before reaching the bottom? He had thought of that. But he took a chance and fate was kind to him. He descended, chafed and sore, into a stream, swollen by the storm,

which hurried through the bottom of the cleft. And in this stream, protected by the cooling water in which no telltale scent was left, the pioneer scout who always did what he was resolved to do, ran with all his might and main till the cleft widened into a rocky cañon and the lookout station stood darkly outlined before him.

He had done in less than an hour what it took Tom Slade five hours to do. And he arrived while Tom was still lost in the woods. He had no key to the little shelter on the tower, and besides he was afraid that the uncanny dog might yet pick up his scent in all the rain and tumult and follow him up the zigzag stairs. But Trailer Bentley could not shinny up one of the steel supports like a monkey, making use of girders and cross-bars. He could not do that.

So Henny Vollmer, who had started out to do a good turn and made a tragedy of it, ended by doing a colossal scout stunt. Any way you look at him he was a scout. After crouching for hours among those girders, protected only by the cozy enclosure perched above him, he had, to his consternation, seen a figure approach the lookout tower and go slowly up the stairs. And then still later, as he crouched concealed, he heard the voice of Bentley's bloodhound at the foot of the tower. But he was not afraid, not just then at least, for had he not "baffled him away"?

No, he was not afraid now. He would climb up very carefully and wriggle out and catch hold of the platform with one hand and brace himself with his left leg while he scrambled up onto the balcony around the tiny house. And then he would peek in and "see who was there a'ready."

CHAPTER XVIII

SEEN IN THE STORM

And that frightened, staring face with soaking hair streaming down over it was the face that Tom Slade saw. It was indeed a spectral face, an apparition to strike terror.

“Why didn’t you tell the truth and stay where you were?” Tom asked.

Henny glared at him. “They wouldn’t believe it,” he said. “*You* don’t believe it, I bet. Even if I cross my heart you don’t—I bet.”

Tom cocked his head and looked amusedly at the boy. “So you came up here by a short-cut, huh? And you baffled the dog away. What are you scared of anyway, a fellow like you? How long have you been baffling him away down there in those girders?”

“Maybe four hours a’ready.”

“Well, I think you went to a lot of trouble for nothing,” Tom said, observing the boy with keen interest.

“If I stayed on those stairs he would have got me—Trailer Bentley. Everybody’s got to be scared of him. He broke away from them, I guess, hey?”

“Well, he’s all through,” said Tom.

“Sure, and you’ll get it for that,” Henny said fearfully.

Tom smiled at his fear. “I mean you shouldn’t have come up here at all. Because you see you’ve only got to go back. You’ve got just as much right there as anybody else has—now haven’t you?”

“I got to get arrested if I go down there,” Henny almost pleaded.

“Take off your clothes,” said Tom, “and I’ll rub you down with that old blanket over there. Then you can go to bed. To-morrow we’ll talk things over. I don’t think anybody will try to get up here to-night. You and I and Bentley Trailer, or whatever you call him, are the only ones who are fools enough to do that. Get those wet things off while I make you a cup of coffee.”

All through that wild night Henny Vollmer slept the sleep which comes from utter exhaustion, but before Tom slept he sat for an hour or more pondering on the poor boy’s predicament.

It was all very well to speak lightly of Henny’s peril, but Tom knew that the boy was, to say the least, in an uncomfortable situation. He mused upon all the facts in the case. There was the ill-repute which the orphan boy had inherited from his unfortunate father. There was Henny’s reputation for

being as good as his word. There was the oft reiterated threat, written in anger a hundred times for a school punishment.

All this was bad enough, but it was made worse by Henny's desperate flight after the terrible sequel of his intended good turn. His breaking into the schoolhouse and mutilating his desk to destroy that incriminating carving was a crazy act, even for a boy of his age. He had advertised, too, that he could distinguish Squire Peck's car by the unusual headlights. He had made this boast in proof of his faculty of observation and memory; it would have been better if he had come out frankly and mentioned it as a faculty of the scouts. But his scouting was as a secret order to Henny. In short, he was in bad, as the saying is, and Tom knew it.

Tom was not exactly fearful about having killed Bentley's dog. But he knew that this would react against Henny. What he was mainly fearful of was not simply the mess which the distraught boy had made of things, but the effect that all this would have on those bigoted, grudge-cherishing, ignorant people down at the Bend.

It was necessary for him to go down and get the bulk of his luggage out of his car and he decided to do this the following morning and to take Henry with him. But the storm continued unabated throughout the next day, and the journey down through that tempestuous wilderness was not to be considered.

"Well, Henny," said Tom in the morning as he looked ruefully through one of the streaming windows, "I guess we're storm-bound; how about it? I think you and I have had enough of mountain climbing in storms; what do you say? We'll go down to-morrow and face the music. I guess nobody will bother us up here to-day."

"I have to get killed in the electric chair, yes?" Henny asked with pathetic eagerness.

"Not so you'd notice it," said Tom.

"You got to get it too, 'cause you killed Trailer Bentley," Henny added.

"Well, Henny," said Tom, slapping the poor boy on the shoulder, "if you don't worry to-day any more than I do, we ought to have a chance to get acquainted. I wish we had a set of dominoes or checkers or something or other up here. What do you think; will they come up here?"

"They wouldn't, no," said Henny. "Maybe the sheriff might, hey, from Connington? Not anybody in the Bend, they wouldn't."

"Well, then, the ghost has done us a good turn," said Tom. "I bet they're hunting for you in another direction."

"I bet it too," said Henny.

"The dog slipped his leash," Tom said; "they weren't following him. Now, Henny, we're not going to worry till there's something to worry about."

You made an awful bull of it coming up here, but I guess we can straighten it out. I've got eats enough for to-day. To-morrow I think we'll go down and have a talk with Mr. Dennison; he's got some brains, and you're one of his pupils."

"He's got so much brains he's scared of ghosts; he wouldn't even come up here a'ready," said Henny. "Chevy Ward, he was scared of them too; he got killed being scared; he jumps away from one like he says. Denny he was scared to come up even before they found that Chevy; he told me how he was. If I was a teacher and knew a lot of things I wouldn't be scared; not of ghosts, I wouldn't. My father never was no ghost."

Tom watched the boy with keen interest. There was something pathetic about the way Henny's sensible mind would be caught by a general topic while all the time that fear of what he had done hovered like a shadow in his eager face. His practical talk about one matter, during his overwhelming fear and suspense on account of another, went to Tom's heart. The boy sat on the edge of one of the two bunks, startled by every gust outside; Tom sat on the round table, his legs dangling.

Suddenly he jumped down and pulled one of the windows a little wider open, for the tiny aerial room was getting stuffy. The rain beat in, but that was better than the stifling air of the place. Then he noticed a tiny figure moving along on one of the lower reaches of the mountain. The figure seemed spectral in the enveloping rain. It disappeared in a minor hollow, then after a few moments emerged and could be seen more clearly. Again it was lost in some wooded patch or irregularity of the rugged land. Tom reached for the field-glass and waited. Henny watched him and sensed something in his eager manner.

"Now they are coming to get me, sure," he said, jumping up and grasping Tom's arm. "Now I got to go."

"Let go," said Tom, raising the glass to his eyes. "We'll see; don't get excited, Henny."

CHAPTER XIX WHO?

Scan the mountain as he would, Tom could not find that slow-moving figure again. He swept the whole irregular slope with the glass, but the moving object did not emerge into view. There might have been two figures, he thought; the one he had seen was only just visible. If the strong arm of the law had pointed up that forbidding, unhallowed mountain, there would be at least two men to brave the storm and make that wearisome ascent. They might be county officials from Connington, Tom thought. But he had seen only the one figure moving like a snail in that wild expanse of ravines and lesser hills.

“Well, maybe I didn’t see anybody,” he said, by way of relieving Henny’s suspense. “We won’t worry till we have some cause to. We’re not afraid of those people, only I’d like to see Mr. Dennison before they do anything. I’d like you to tell him all about what you did, just as you told me. They’ll listen to him.” Then, after a pause, he added, “You say Mr. Dennison told you he was afraid to come up here, even before they found that, what’s his name, Chevy? How did he happen to tell you that? When was it? I don’t think Mr. Dennison really feels that way.”

“You know the Fourth of July?” Henny asked. “Not last one, but the one before that?”

“Summer before last? Yes, well?”

“There was no school,” said Henny, “and I was catching crawfish in Hobert’s brook. You know that?”

“The brook? No.”

“That’s down the mountain. Then I says I guess I’ll walk up here to the tower; I know a good, easy way.”

“I bet.”

“Sure I do. Then I meet Denny in the path. He says he was going up too, only he guessed he wouldn’t. He says he was never up there a’ready. I says I’ll show him a good, easy way that he won’t get so tired. Then he says he guessed he wouldn’t go up on account of what they said about it. And he says I got a right to not go up there too on account of it. He’s got a right to say because he’s teacher, that’s how he said. So I got to promise I wouldn’t go up and he says he wouldn’t neither. He wouldn’t have nothing hurt none of us, that’s how he says. Pretty soon they found Chevy and then he says in school how all of us have to be glad we didn’t bother around up here.”

Tom had listened intently, and with a measure of disappointment. Despite his own talk with the young schoolmaster he had permitted himself to hope that this enlightened resident of the village would join him in his resolve to protect Henny and see him through his predicament. Now he looked at Henny with a touch of pity, the boy seemed so distraught and friendless. During his talk he had several times looked furtively through the window down across the cheerless landscape, and now he made no pretense of concealing his fear. He gazed fixedly through the turbulent storm far down the chaotic mountainside to a point where the rain enshrouded the country in haze.

“Yes, how soon?” Tom asked.

“Soon what?”

“How soon afterward did they find Chevy?”

“Soon,” the boy said abstractedly. “Now they come—I see,” he added excitedly; “look, see?”

Tom saw what Henny pointed at and raised the field-glass to his eyes. It brought into clear view a figure plodding along the mountainside, not toward the summit, but probably along a circuitous way to the surmounting station. The figure seemed to move very slowly, so small was it and so great the mountain. Now it was moving away from the tower as if going down the mountain in diagonal descent. Then it was lost in a dense coppice. In a little while it reappeared, plodding, plodding, plodding ... A grim, ominous apparition moving as irresistibly as fate, in and out, up, up, up, through the jungle and storm. Nor wind nor driving rain stopped it. Around, now seen, now passing into some concealment, or hidden by a ridge, then out again, up, up, up.



TOM SAW A FIGURE PLODDING ALONG THE MOUNTAINSIDE

“Now, Henny,” said Tom, to the excited boy, “I haven’t got you sized up as a coward. You’re such a big scout that they don’t know you’re a scout at all; you’re so big they can’t see you. You’re not going to start being a baby

now. If anybody's coming for you you'll just have to go. I'm your friend, no matter what; and I know you're innocent. Now brace up!"

"Do I get to the electric chair right now?" the terrified boy asked.

"You don't get to it at all, Henny. Now brace up. If this man wants to take you you've got to go, that's all. If he does I'll go down too. Only we're not going to make a fuss."

He pushed the boy down onto one sleeping bunk while he sat upon the edge of the other. So these two sat facing each other, the round map-covered table between them, while the rain beat against the panes. The boy sat, twitching nervously, his hands clutching the edge of the bunk, his gaze fixed on Tom as a dog's gaze is fixed on its master. And so the two sat—waiting. They could not talk, they were too full of suspense.

In a few minutes Tom's gaze fell upon the table and he studied the map idly. By a system of lines radiating from its center the lookout could verify the location of the faintest suggestion of smoke in the unpeopled country roundabout and inform the authorities by 'phone of the exact site of an incipient fire. The map showed plainly all the contours of the mountain, the cleft called Old Nick's Grin up which Henny had come, and all the intervening elevations. A line drawn with lead pencil showed the path from the village, following the 'phone wire. This reminded Tom to try the phone, and he found it useless as it had been the night before. Doubtless the wire had gone down in the storm.

He paused for a moment, gazing from the window against which the driven rain was beating a tattoo. There were finger marks all over the sill, silent reminders of former habitation. These memorials of human life seemed like ghosts, as the old magazine and the candle did. In that lonely place they had a strange appeal for Tom, familiarly commemorating the occupancy of some one gone and dead. There was an old, dirty calendar hanging near the 'phone the heavily figured leaves of which had been torn off day by day by Chevy Ward or Carl Vollmer as the weary days wore away. That would be the event of the day in such a place, thought Tom, the tearing off of those leaves. On the dirty, faded top leaf that confronted him was written just below the huge figure, "Get bread and cereal." Whoever wrote that needs no bread and cereal now, he mused. Those written words brought the former habitancy of the place more vividly before him than did anything else in that little hermit's cell in the lofty wilderness.

He scanned the dim, storm-swept slopes with the glass, then drew a box up as a seat and, resting his elbows on the table, held his head between his hands and fell to studying the big circular map. He became so absorbed that he did not notice Henny sitting in pathetic suspense on the bunk. The boy rose and gazed from the window.

“He’d be too near to see him now,” said Tom abstractedly; “he’d be in the woods just below. Sit down and take it easy, Henny.”

Ten minutes passed. Twenty minutes, half an hour. Tom bent over the table, silently absorbed. Henny sat on the edge of the bunk watching him, nervous, expectant. The wind beat and simulated a human sound and Tom looked up, then became absorbed again in his perusal of the map.

The minutes passed. Rain, rain, rain. And lashing, tireless wind.

Then there was the unmistakable sound of a footfall on the long, sectioned stair. The steps creaked, and the creaking of the warped boards sounded nearer—nearer....

CHAPTER XX

THREE'S A COMPANY

The trap-door which was the only means of entrance to the surmounting enclosure moved slowly up on its squeaking hinges and a bespectacled face almost completely concealed beneath a wide-brimmed rubber hat peered about in a manner ridiculously calm and philosophic considering the wild storm which the owner of that face had braved for at least two hours.

"May I come in?" said a familiar voice.

"Well—I'll—be—— Brent Gaylong!" Tom gasped. "What—in—the _____"

"I'm not interrupting you?" said Brent, as his lanky, rubber-coated form arose like some drowsy jack-in-the-box to the level of the floor. "Is this blamed thing safe? Feels kind of rickety," he added, testing the floor gingerly with one foot.

"Well—I'll—be—jiggered!" was all that Tom could answer, while Henny stared. Then impulsively he grasped both of Brent's hands and shook them for full half a minute. "You old—philistine! How in all creation are you? Where did you come from? Safe! Hear that, Henny? Well, there's one ghost that lives up here with a spirit dog, and another fellow, a real man, went crazy and jumped out of one of these windows and broke both his legs and died, and this kid here caused a man's death yesterday and the authorities are out after him, and I shot a dog last night, a real one, and I suppose his owner will be out gunning for me. You can judge for yourself whether it's safe or not."

"Sounds like a movie play," said Brent, leisurely removing his rubber coat.

"If I was at the North Pole and you walked in on me——" Tom broke off, shaking his head incredulously and laughing. "Why, I thought you weren't going to blow in till around July, you skinny old four-eyes! For goodness' sakes, don't tell me *you* killed somebody and are running away from the law. Did you forge a check or see a spook or something?"

Brent methodically raised his duffel bag strap up over his shoulder and laid the bulging receptacle on the table. The stolid Henny was compelled to laugh, he knew not why. He gazed at Brent and laughed. He liked him. For the moment his ready smile seemed to dispel his fears. It was always so; boys laughed instinctively as soon as Brent spoke. He was so absurdly calm and leisurely. And his old-fashioned spectacles!

“Ellsworth was driving up to camp with several of the menagerie in Temple’s car,” he drawled, “and the chauffeur said he’d hit the old detour and come in around this way and drop me off at Mr. Watson’s Bend if I cared to come. They didn’t decide till last night. Everything’s all right in the old home town; they miss you.”

“I only left there early yesterday morning myself, you big chump!” laughed Tom.

“Well, things are just the same as when you went away,” said Brent. “I didn’t see Mr. Watson’s Bend. I started a bend of my own before we got there and picked a trail up the mountain. I got out at a house and asked them how to get up the mountain. They said the only way was to walk. I had expected to take a bus up. The man said if I went around in back of his barn, I’d see a path up a hill and to follow that till I got to a clump of woods, then go round the woods to the left till I came to a brook, and to follow that till I got to a place where the woods were burned down, and to cross that and I’d see a pond and to go around that till I came to another brook that flowed down into the pond and to follow that and after a while I’d be able to see the lookout station. He said I’d be able to keep it in view.

“Whenever I saw it I went toward it—I made that a rule. When I didn’t see it I usually went away from it. But I never lost faith. I believed that sometime or other I would reach it. I said if millionaires can begin at the bottom and work their way up, why can’t I? Four times I saw some houses down below; I suppose they were Mr. Watson’s Bend. Why did he have a bend, anyway, Tommy?”

“I’m sure I don’t know,” laughed Tom. “It’s a nasty place, that Bend, and it’s the cause of all the trouble.”

“I suppose the ghosts just flew up,” said Brent. “Did you ever follow a ridge, Tommy? They’re very interesting. You follow one that goes up and when you emerge you’re farther from the summit than you were before. They turn around while you’re on them. Every time I took my eyes from the lookout station it popped out of sight as if it were on a spring. I knew the road where they set me down ran north and south and when I got up a ways I saw that Mr. Watson’s Bend was east. I had a fine view from a rock. Then I entered a cleft—do you know anything about clefts, Tommy?”

“I entered a cleft that ran east and west and when I came out of it I saw (you’ll hardly believe this, I admit this region is haunted) I saw that Mr. Watson’s Bend had moved completely over to the west. Now as the Bend is southwest of the lookout station, that would place the lookout station in the low country beyond the road. It would not be on the mountain at all. I was on the point of heading down the mountain to hunt for the outlook station _____”

“Lookout station,” said Tom.

“Well,” said Brent, “I was on the point of hunting for it in the swampy land the other side of your Bend, when all of a sudden I got mixed up in a bramble thicket and when I emerged Mr. Watson’s Bend had moved back to the east again and pretty soon I saw the outlook station on the top of the mountain. It had moved completely around from the southeast and gone up the mountain to its old position. I hope that after my interesting journey you’ll be able to stir up a good forest fire; of course, there’s no hurry about it.”

“Would next week do?” laughed Tom.

“And meanwhile, I brought a pack of cards and some crossword puzzles. I wonder if you have any iodine about the house, Tommy; my finger is scratched from a bramble bush. Has this jumble of mountains got a name?”

It did Tom good just to look at Brent and listen to his drawling talk. “Well, you’re here,” he said, “and I’m mighty glad of that. This kid’s in a dickens of a scrape——”

“You say he committed a murder?” Brent asked leisurely.

“I said nothing of the kind,” snapped Tom. “That’s just what he didn’t do.”

“Excuse me, I’m sorry,” said Brent.

“I said he caused a man’s death,” said Tom. “Look here, old man, this is no place for airy jesting.”

“I don’t see how a jest could be anything else but airy up here,” said Brent. And he glanced at Henny in his funny way. It was good to see the poor boy’s face brighten with a smile just as if the recreant sun had peeped through that dull sky and bathed his stolid countenance.

“Sit down while I make you a cup of coffee,” said Tom, “and I’ll tell you all about it. We’ve got our work cut out for us up here. This kid is a scout, Brent.”

“Happy to meet you,” said Brent.

“He did the biggest kind of a good turn *you* ever heard about,” said Tom enthusiastically, “only it worked out wrong, that’s all, and the big man of that little burg down there under the mountain got killed.”

Brent glanced at Henny curiously, wondering, no doubt, how such a young boy out for service could kill a man. There was something friendly in that whimsical look of inquiry which thrilled the boy and gave him hope and confidence. Here was a queer sort of young fellow whose humorous squint was backed up by a kind of easy-going shrewdness. He did not seem to have learned a lot like Denny. Yet somehow, now that he had come, Henny felt measurably safe. He had not heard him say one important or serious thing. Brent had just refused to get excited before hearing the whole story. And

poor Henny expressed this intuitive consciousness about Brent in the only way he knew.

“I bet you know a lot about people getting killed not on purpose,” he said. “I bet you stuck up for people that was right, hey? Lots of times, hey?”

“Yes, do that,” said Brent, addressing Tom as he settled himself in one of the bunks, “while I rest. Tell me the whole business. Three lumps in my coffee, Tommy. It’s good to have a roof over us even if there’s nothing but a rickety trestle underneath it. How high up do you suppose we are here, Tommy? You’ll find some sugar in my vanity case in the duffel bag—don’t disturb anything.”

CHAPTER XXI

DOWN IN BLACK AND WHITE

Tom told the whole story—all he knew and had heard about the old lookout station. And Brent reclined in the bunk propped up with everything he could find to put at his back. They were a good pair, Tom and Brent; Tom full of purpose and action, eager to take matters in hand; Brent lazy and unruffled and looking whimsically philosophical in his outlandish spectacles perched halfway down his long nose. Poor Henny felt that he was in the hands of the gods.

“Now, wait a second, Tommy,” said Brent. “What we’re after is to get this kid out of his scrape. He threatened a couple of hundred times to kill old Wolf, or whatever his name was, and he had a motive. Then he did kill him—accidentally. Of course they’ll pinch him, maybe they’ll even try him; they might even convict him—he’s in bad. He’s not exactly popular and his folks weren’t exactly popular. Maybe a lawyer could get what they call a change of venue—try the case in another county where there isn’t any prejudice.”

“Even then his case looks bad,” said Tom. “Now, Henny,” he added, “don’t get excited; just keep still and let Brent and me talk this thing over.”

“I’d like to see this schoolmaster who believes in spooks,” Brent mused. “This intelligent gazooka who starts up here and meets the kid and then changes his mind and decides he won’t make the trip; and makes the kid promise he’ll never come up either. Spooks! Maybe he was on his way *down* instead of on his way up. What’s his name, Chevy, got shocked and fell out of this place on the Fourth of July——”

“Did I say that?” snapped Tom.

“Look at the calendar,” said Brent. “You could see that *four* a mile off. July third was the last leaf torn off. I’d just like to know for curiosity when it was that this kid met Mr. Dennison down the mountain.”

“Well, it was the Fourth of July that the kid here met Dennison down below,” said Tom, clearly astonished at this tallying of events.

“Well, that seems to have been the day that Chevy went off on the Fourth, or out on the Fourth, or down on the Fourth,” drawled Brent. “Probably the ghost was out shooting firecrackers.

“What’s all that got to do with this kid killing Squire Peck?” Tom asked.

“Well, I don’t know as it has anything to do with it,” said Brent. “Only from what you say this blackboard shark doesn’t like Henny, he’s got the

knife in him. I was wondering if he might be a little afraid of him. He talked with you and called him a little devil and said he had a German mind and intended to commit a murder and all that. Of course, he doesn't believe in spooks. That's all nonsense. He was even a little nervous when he heard *you* were coming up here."

"How's all this going to help Henny?" Tom asked.

"Well, I don't know as it is," Brent drawled. "We're just sitting here nice and comfortable with the rain beating outside and chatting about things. And I just happened to think something was kind of funny, that's all. Of course, one killing is enough, but if we could have two that would be better. A couple of summers ago on the Fourth of July, Ellison——"

"Dennison," said Tom.

"Dennison meets Henny down below and says he's on his way up, but suddenly decides he won't go. He makes Henny promise never to go—spooks. Forbids him to go. Well, that was the very same day that Chevy got shocked to death. Now what I'd like to know is whether Mr. Dennison was really on his way up, or on his way down that day. He seemed to have an interest in keeping folks away from here. But here we are nice and comfortable. What's that over there on the window sill; finger marks, Tommy?"

Tom glanced about, but was not greatly interested. "I don't see any reason for thinking that things didn't happen just the way the people around here think they did," he said. "I don't know why Mr. Dennison should believe in spooks, but I sure don't think he had anything to do with the death of Chevy Ward, if that's what you mean. Chevy wrote a note and left it; they found it in his pocket. Why, Dennison was one of the party that came up and found him ... Do you know what I think? I think the loneliness of this place and all the spooky stories about it got on Chevy's nerves, I think he got crazed. I saw that happen to boys on the other side; trench crazy, we called it."

"Chevy, he was in the war," said Henny.

"He might have had the after effects of shell-shock," said Tom. "I'm not puzzled about Chevy's end at all. This is a spooky, lonely place, all right. He flew off his axle, that's all. Why, the reason Henny is in so bad is—why? Because he had a *motive* to kill old man Peck. What motive did Mr. Dennison have to kill Chevy Ward?"

"Not the slightest as far as I know," said Brent. "Have you got enough coffee for another cup?"

"Well, then," said Tom, as he refilled Brent's cup.

"Well, then," said Brent.

“We’re not interested in Mr. Dennison or Chevy Ward,” Tom said; “we’re interested in Henny.”

“You’re perfectly right, Tommy.”

“This place is enough to give anybody the willies,” Tom continued.

“I hope we don’t bore you,” said Brent.

“I mean if a fellow’s up here alone. Chevy went daffy, that’s all there is to it.”

“He had some jump,” said Brent. “I wonder how long after he jumped they found him?”

“It was three or four days,” Henny said. “They got scared like ’cause he didn’t ever come down.”

“I’m not worrying about Chevy,” said Tom; “I’m worrying about Henny. Why, this place is worse than a shell hole.”

Brent glanced around in a kind of leisurely consideration of the place. It did seem lonely and depressing enough for a solitary occupant. “Well, that’s that,” he drawled, not in the least inclined to argue his point. “Then we’ve only got one killing to think about. Do you suppose we could start a fire in that old stove, Tommy? I’d kind of like to have some bacon to-night; I brought a chunk up.”

“We could if we could get some dry kindling,” Tom laughed. “We’d have to keep the windows open, it would get so blamed hot in here. I don’t see how we could do that with the rain beating like this.”

“What do you say to a game of pinochle?” Brent drawled.

Suddenly, Henny burst forth. “I got a thought all of a sudden,” he said. “You know that Handbook they got—scouts? All about woods and everything?”

“Yes, what then?” asked Tom.

“There’s pages for you to write in it,” said Henny excitedly; “for you to make rememberandums like. I wrote down there a rememberandum how I would do Mr. Peck a good turn when he comes home—I did.”

Tom’s interest was caught. Brent, too, looked curiously at the boy. “You mean you wrote down on one of those blank pages in the handbook how you were going to save Mr. Peck’s life?” Tom asked. “You put down just what you were going to do—about the Bend and the lantern and all that?”

“Sure, that’s like what those pages are for, if all of a sudden you think of something. I thought of that big thing all alone,” he added with that air of conceit which Tom found amusing.

“I thought you never knew till yesterday that Mr. Peck was coming home,” Tom said. “And besides how did you know he would be coming after dark?”

“Maybe you’re not a scout a’ready that you don’t think,” said Henny.

“One for you, Tommy,” said Brent.

“If you start from New York to Watson’s Bend you get there after dark,” said Henny. “A week ago I saw they was washing windows in Peck’s place and I guess he’s coming back, I says. So then I thought up how I wouldn’t kill him, but I’d do him a good turn.”

Tom and Brent couldn’t help laughing. “It was just as well,” said Brent in his funny way.

“I wrote down all about how I’d do,” said Henny. “Then I marked a cross over it and that means you got to do it; it’s like crossing your heart. I got a heading to it. It says biggest good turn. I got bigger one than any other scout could think about yet.”

Tom glanced at Brent and laughed again at the boy’s quaint Teutonic boastfulness. “All right, you little devil,” he said. “Why didn’t you tell me that before?”

“When you started talking about Denny, I thought of it,” Henny said. “’Cause about four days ago he saw me reading that Handbook under my desk while there’s spelling and he says I got to give it to him and he’d keep it. So I got to give it to him and he read all in it what there was and I told him he was a big ’fraid-cat starting up the mountain that time and then afraid to go. I says he was a thief if he didn’t give it back to me, too.”

“Did he give it back to you?” Tom asked.

“No, ’cause he never does. Balls and apples and bean-shooters and marbles and everything he keeps. He don’t give nothing back. But I ain’t scared, I tell him he’s a thief, and I tell him I’ll talk all around about him, so that got him mad. I wouldn’t say no more to him, he’s a big thief of a ’fraid-cat. He says how would I talk to people? I just tell him he’s a big thief of a coward.”

“Do you make rememberandums of the names you call people?” Brent asked. “I think I can begin to see why Henny is not loved.”

“So you lost your precious Handbook,” said Tom, greatly pleased. “Well, all we have to do is to get hold of that and let them see just what you planned to do, *how you wrote it down*, and that will be the end of the whole affair. Why,” he added, turning to Brent, who still reclined in the bunk, “that’s all there is to it. What this kid might say to-day would be—well, they’d just say it was a story fixed up for the authorities. They’d say he killed the old man and they’d point to his threats, written and carved and shouted. But that stuff written in his Handbook and *taken out of his possession several days ago* shows what he really intended to do. There it is in black and white—written down four or five days before the—the accident. There’s his certificate of innocence! Why, probably Mr. Dennison

has sprung that already on those spookmongers down there. But we'll go down just the same to-morrow and see what's what."

"Yes, I'd like to meet them all," said Brent.

"Probably you can come back up here with us if you want to, Henny," said Tom.

"You can be office boy," said Brent. "If we do well and have plenty of fires, we'll raise your salary. But I suppose business will be slow this rainy weather."

"Why, it's just a lot of fuss about nothing," said Tom, ignoring his friend's levity. "We've got the kid's real motive in black and white."

"We haven't got it yet," said Brent, "The village may move all the way around to the far east before we get down there. What do you say we have a game of pinochle?"

CHAPTER XXII

STRAIGHT TALK

Tom and Brent played cards most of that day. Late in the afternoon the storm subsided and the occupants of the lonely tower saw the sun go down in a clear sky, bathing the dripping trees in its light, and making them glisten like crystal. Here and there a broken tree could be seen on the adjacent slopes, its exposed fresh wood painted white by the declining sunlight. They could see now what an extensive view the station commanded. They threw open the windows and let in the balmy air, and a fragrance of wet foliage permeated the little shelter. Nature smelled like a pine cushion after her debauch as if she would woo these lonely sojourners into forgetfulness of her mad escapade with soothing odors.

Brent leaned out of one of the windows to see if the newspaper man had come, he said. "I have to have my daily crossword puzzle," he explained. He could not even see the trestle immediately below, only where it spread out toward the ground. "What are you going to do about that 'phone wire?" he asked Tom.

"I'm going to notify the fire warden," Tom said; "it's got to be fixed. No use watching for fires if we can't call up when we see one."

"I hope we're not on a party wire," said Brent. "The fire might have to wait till Maud gets through talking to Alice."

"Here's his name," Tom said, pausing long enough in his work of clearing out the old, rusty stove to throw a slip of paper on the table. "Dennison wrote it down for me. When I get down to the Bend, I'm going to call Barrett up in Chesterville. That's where he lives. There are forty-'leven things I want to speak to him about." As he was engrossed in his work and his hands covered with soot, Brent stuck the slip on a projecting nail.

"This will be our letter file," he said. "Do you know, Tommy, I think we ought to have a radio up here; we might want to give a dance some night."

"Guess we'd have to go as far as Connington to get one," laughed Tom.

Henny went down and gathered some wood, but they were an hour getting a single piece of it dry enough to burn. They tore up the old magazine and sacrificed their precious grocery box seat to dry a chunk of oak which steamed like a kettle in the little stove till it finally caught fire. Then they had a cozy supper of fried bacon, griddle cakes, raisin bread and coffee.

“I’ll bake on Saturday and we can have some pies over the week-end,” Brent said.

If the people down in Watson’s Bend saw that curling smoke rise in the clear evening sky up on Tempest Peak, they knew then, if they had not already discovered, that the young stranger was as good as his word, and that whether they would or no their village and the surrounding country was under surveillance at last.

The next morning the three started down the mountain, Henny nervous and fearful. The poor boy seemed like a lamb being led to the slaughter. He had grown to like Tom and Brent and he wanted to stay with them. The ugly duckling had found his place among the swans at last. Occasionally he gazed wistfully back at the tower until they could see it no more.

“Are you sure going to stick up for me?” he asked once.

“I’ll say we are,” said Tom.

They followed the trail where the fallen wire lay and came out in back of the little schoolhouse. There stood the flivver where it had been pushed into the woods. Its old canvas cover was plastered with leaves. Evidently no one had even investigated it.

In the schoolhouse hard by could be heard the drowsy hum of voices reciting in unison. Tom had an odd feeling that it was a long time since he had seen his car and that little building almost concealed in darkness. Now the windows were open and lessons being heard within. The village seemed to be about its routine affairs as usual. Beyond, just a few feet, was the road. It was very quiet—no one passed upon it. Now, inside the school could be heard a thin voice saying, “*The Mississippi is the greatest of our country’s rivers.*”

“You two wait here,” said Tom, and he walked around to the door and into the school.

The young schoolmaster, blond, pale, neatly clad in contrast to his score of pupils, acknowledged Tom’s presence with a nod and heard the lesson through. Then he turned and shook hands with Tom. There was just a touch of concern in his light blue eyes.

“So you came,” he said. “I thought that might be your covered wagon over yonder. You’re a creature of storm and night, eh?”

Tom wasted no words. “Mr. Dennison,” said he, “would you mind stepping outside a minute so I can speak with you?”

Now a very perceptible look of concern was on the young man’s face as he followed Tom out into the vestibule where a score or more of hats hung in a row.

“I didn’t want to talk in front of those kids,” said Tom. “Mr. Dennison, I know all about what happened here day before yesterday. I found Henny

Vollmer up at the lookout station night before last. I got there myself after dark,”

“You had some climb.”

“Oh, that’s nothing,” said Tom. “This poor kid is in a heap of trouble. Of course, it may not turn out to be so bad after all. He’s told me all about it—it was a terrible accident.”

“You mean you’ve got him?” Dennison asked, astonished. “They’ve been hunting for him high and low.”

“Well, they didn’t hunt high enough,” said Tom laconically. “I understand you’ve got a Scout Handbook belonging to him. I’d like to get that—it has something written in it which ought to clear him. It knocks the theory of a criminal intent in the head, anyway. Maybe you’ve used it in his interest already.”

Dennison paused a moment, considering. “A handbook?” he queried. “I don’t know what you mean. I think you’re getting yourself into pretty stormy waters, Slade. They had a bloodhound out after this boy night before last——”

“Yes, I shot the bloodhound,” said Tom quietly. “He was the only one in the village who knew enough to come up to the tower.”

“Golly! I’m afraid you *are* in hot water,” said Dennison.

“Do I look as if I was worrying?” said Tom. “What would *you* do if a bloodhound jumped at your throat? The kid says you took his Handbook away from him——”

“Oh, yes, I remember—for lying,” said Dennison. “I must have thrown it away. Look here, Slade, my advice to you is to turn the boy over to the constable here and wash your hands of the whole affair. This is a pretty serious business.”

Tom gazed at the young schoolmaster, astonished. “You don’t think that boy committed a horrible murder?”

Mr. Dennison only shrugged his shoulders. “My advice to you, Slade, is to turn the boy over and clear out of this neighborhood before you get in trouble. You’ve got time enough. Turn the boy over to me and clear out. Don’t go up to that place again. Get away before Mr. Bentley knows you shot his dog and before they can nab you for sheltering a fugitive. And don’t take too seriously anything that the boy tells you. He’s a bad egg and always was.”

Tom simply gazed at him. “Oh, is that so?” he said slowly and with a fine contempt. “Well, let me tell you this, Dennison. If you had looked over that book that you say you threw away you might have seen some things worth knowing. You might have seen something about loyalty for scouts. I’m one of that gang and I’m with this kid to the finish. You didn’t scare me

away with your spooks and you can't scare me away now. It seems to me you must have looked inside that book, and if you did you must have seen what the poor kid wrote there. It would have shown his intentions. You're his teacher and you say he's a bad egg." (Tom's voice rose in spite of himself.) "Well, I'm a hard-boiled egg! I don't scare worth a cent! This kid is outside in charge of a friend of mine. We'll turn him over to the constable as you say. He wrote a letter to Scout Headquarters and I'll get hold of that. Sticking around is my middle name, Dennison. Now where is this constable? And where is this dog man?"

He strode out into the open, the schoolmaster after him.

CHAPTER XXIII

TOM IN ACTION

The scene outside the schoolhouse was brief. The schoolmaster greeted Henny pleasantly enough, but perfunctorily, then disregarded him. Tom was too angry to prolong the talk. As for Brent, he watched young Mr. Dennison with keen interest while the latter spoke. What the schoolmaster said was to the effect that the strangers would do well to withdraw from this serious affair and from the neighborhood. He intimated that Henny was not to be believed. He said in a friendly enough sort of way that Tom and Brent had already involved themselves in a good deal of trouble. "I don't envy you up there," he said. "I wouldn't go up there myself." His friendliness made Tom furious.

"We see," said Brent, when the young schoolmaster had finished. And that was every word Brent said.

"Now, Henny," said Tom, rather grimly, as he hauled the old canvas off his Ford, "you see what a coward is like. You're not going to be like that, are you? A scout like you? I lived for nine days in a shell hole. You ought to be able to stay for a little while in jail. You'll know Brent and I are working for you and that we believe in you. We're going to get you off, see? We'll get a lawyer in Connington if we have to. But just you get it fixed in your little old dome that you're not going to be punished for something you didn't do. Brent and I will be up at the tower watching out for fires and watching out for you. Now are you going to be a scout or a cry baby?"

"I'm going to be like you say," Henny answered.

"That's the boy."

"Maybe I can see the mountain, even the tower maybe, from the jail," the poor boy said.

Tom made no answer as the three climbed into the car, Brent and Henny in the rear seat. His very manner of starting the car and backing it out into the road showed that he was full of fight, and he took it out of poor Lizzie. He was indeed in fine fettle, full of anger and determination and energy.

They drove to the home of Hiram Pettit, village constable, and Tom made no occasion at all of turning Henny over. "I'm not going to talk with this rube," he said. And he did not, any more than was necessary.

"Mr. Pettit," said Tom, "I understand this kid is wanted. I'm the new lookout up at the station and he came up there night before last. Of course, I

wasn't going to bring him down here a day like yesterday. I had enough of mountain climbing in a storm. Well, so long, Henny; see you later."

His cheery, brisk manner concealed the sting in his heart as he climbed back into his outlandish Ford. The last they saw of Henny he was standing in the door-yard, with Hiram Pettit, brown and gaunt, clutching his shabby coat sleeve at the wrist. A small dog came tearing out of the doorway, where a woman and a girl stared, and bounded joyously upon the captive boy. He was not a law-respecting dog.

"Well, that's that," said Tom. "In half an hour I suppose they'll be shooting off fireworks. Now keep your eye peeled for a house without any paint and a side porch, just up the road here."

With a fine disregard he drove, squeaking and rattling, past the village store with its loiterers, then past the Peck grounds. Far back among its trees stood the white house, a black crepe just discernible against the white colonial door. The shades were all drawn. Soon they came to an unpainted house which Dennison had described for Tom. This had been the imperial abode of Trailer Bentley.

It was necessary to resort to a distant potato patch beyond a field to talk with Dave Bentley, a square-jawed, thickset man with a hard visage. He advertised the tracking proficiency of his dogs at the County Fair and scrupled not to let them out upon the guarantee of their savagery. The renowned Trailer, who lay dead upon the mountain, had torn open the arm of a poor tin peddler suspected of theft. He loaned money in small amounts, this flinty rustic, and was a hard creditor.

Tom was in fine mood for encountering this cold, grasping man who stood in his potato patch watching the young stranger stride over from his car.

"You Mr. Bentley?" said Tom briskly. "I'm the new lookout up at the fire station. Your dog came up there and flew at my throat night before last and I shot him. I'm very sorry I had to do it." He did not think it necessary to say anything about Henny.

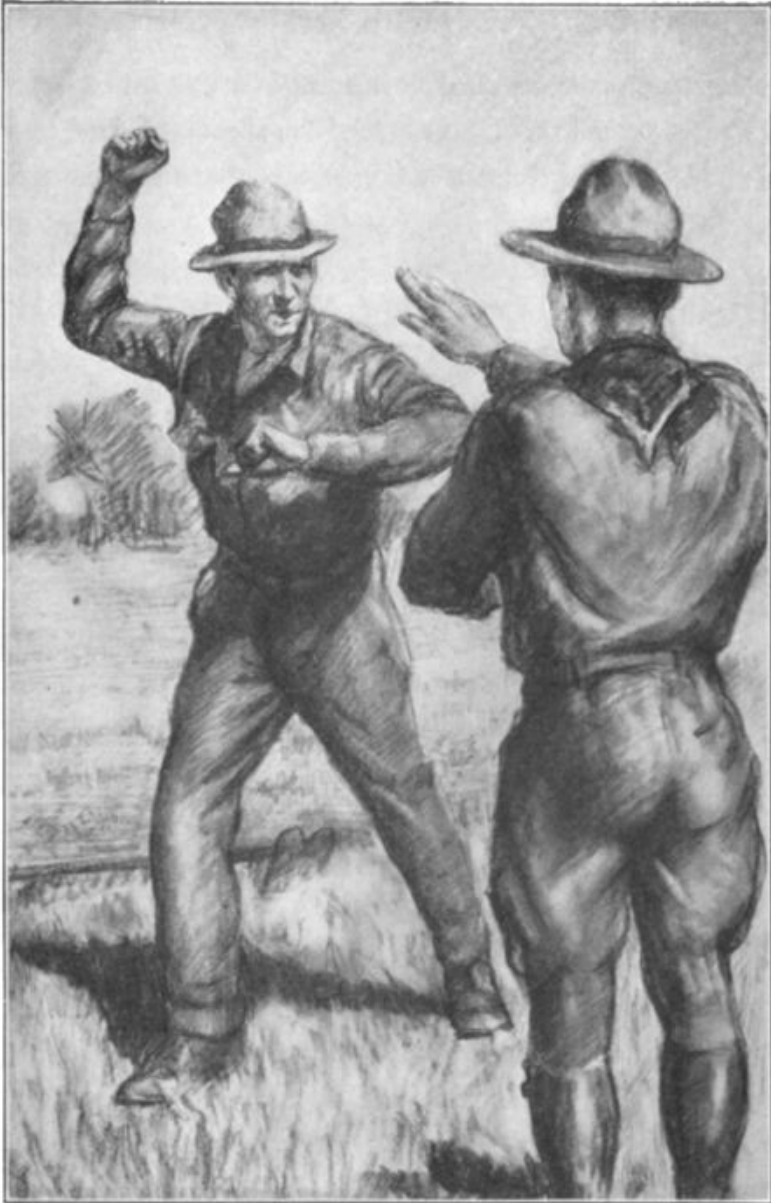
Bentley stared at him, almost gasping, leaning on his hoe. "What's that, young feller?" he said, with a searching look. "*Yer killed my dog—what?*"

Tom fixed the man with a keen look. "Yep, that's it; I'm sorry. No dog will ever get a chance to jump twice at my throat."

Bentley went red with rage. "Yer come here, yer city trash, an' tell me ter my face yer killed my dog. What's all this! I'll——"

"Just a second." Tom raised his hand. "I don't let any man lift his arm against me twice either. You try that stuff and in two seconds I'll lay you flat. I killed your dog because he was going to kill me. If you'll name the damage I'll pay it if it's reasonable. If not you can sue me or have me

arrested or do anything you want to do. I'm up at the station and you can find me any time you want to. What was the dog worth?"



“JUST A SECOND,” TOM RAISED HIS HAND.

“He was worth more’n ever you’d be able ter pay,” Bentley roared.

“All right,” said Tom. “I just came to tell you and if we can settle the matter I’m willing to do it. I don’t know much about law, but I seem to be getting into the game. I don’t think anybody is compelled to let a dog jump at his throat. Come up some time when you’ve calmed down—if you’re not afraid of ghosts.” He strode back to the car muttering unflattering comments about Watson’s Bend and its people.

“This burg is beginning to get on my nerves,” he said to Brent as they drove off. “The old geezer wanted to kill me. Let’s see, that’s all the business here. Let’s get out of this seething metropolis and hit the trail for Chesterville. If I’m going to see this fire warden, Barrett, at all I ought to take the time off now while the woods are wet.”

“You lack repose, Tommy,” said Brent, sprawling one of his legs over the side of the car.

“That ’phone wire has got to be fixed up,” said Tom. “Where the dickens is Chesterville anyway? It’s this side of Connington, I know that.”

As a sort of defiance to everybody and everything, he drove his rickety old car thirty miles an hour along the pleasant byroad which led to the county seat.

“I’ll be on the lookout,” said Brent, “and when we come to Chesterville I’ll tell you in time so you won’t run over it.”

Little did either of them dream of what they were to discover in Chesterville.

CHAPTER XXIV THE FIRE WARDEN

It was refreshing to meet Harley Barrett, the fire warden. He was a young man and lived with his wife and two small children in a modern bungalow on the road between Chesterville and Connington, which latter town was the county seat. He abounded in energy, holding half a dozen positions in the public service, the several very small salaries of which sufficed to support him.

He was fire warden, he was sexton, he was town clerk of Chesterville and of the Bend, which was within the Chesterville boundary. He had been a surveyor in the reclamation service of the government and, wearying of the extended traveling, had brought all his serviceable energy to this rustic retirement. It was not the least of his admirable qualities that he understood the people of that sequestered region and was liked and trusted by them.

Tom and Brent sat on the porch of Barrett's bungalow and chatted with him about all that was in their minds. He knew, of course, of the tragedy at the Bend and told them that he understood the authorities had hunted for Henny in the neighborhood of Connington (the nearest railroad town) and had asked the railroad people to be on the watch for him along the line. He laughed on hearing that the fugitive had climbed the mountain. He agreed with Tom and Brent that Henny was innocent, but added that "the little varmint was in a devil of a fix."

He said it was pretty hard to get anything done in that neighborhood, but that he would get the 'phone wire up somehow. Tom and Brent said they would help with the work. "You see the place has been out of the running so long," he reflected. "The station over on Skull Mountain takes in about all the region except the slope running down to the Bend."

"They'll have a bigger tragedy there some day," said Tom.

"That's what they need—excitement," Brent commented.

"Well, I guess you're both right," laughed Barrett. "We'll have to get busy. What do you think of our ghost?"

"I rather like him," said Brent.

"Poor old Vollmer," Barrett mused. "He was a good man; always on the job. The old Squire wasn't so bad either, only grasping. Funny how some people think money is everything. I'm having the time of my life making about fifteen hundred a year."

"How about Chevy Ward?" Brent asked.

“Chevy? Oh, he was a fine boy—lived over yonder at Todd’s Crossroads —’bout twenty miles. Year before last he came to see me to find out if I could help him about his pension; he was overseas, you know.”

“Same here,” said Tom. “My friend here wasn’t old enough.”

“I was over there,” said Barrett.

“You do pretty near everything, don’t you?” Brent laughed.

“I’m everything except president of the United States,” said Barrett. “Well, of course, I couldn’t help Chevy that way, but we got talking about the old station up on Tempest Peak and I asked him if he’d like to take a crack at it up there. Chevy’s arm wasn’t right and in a way it’s an easy job. He said he hadn’t been afraid of German cannon and he didn’t see why he should be afraid of a ghost. So I fixed it up for him same as I did for you, and he hadn’t been there a month when they found him dead with both his legs broken at the foot of the tower.”

“Spooks?” said Brent.

Barrett smiled, then grew serious. “Why, *I* think that Chevy went to pieces,” he said. “I thought it was just the right thing for him, and I guess it was just the wrong thing for him—alone up there. The war kept on hitting boys long after it was over, you know.”

“I’ll say it did,” agreed Tom. And he glanced at Brent with a certain air of satisfaction and triumph that his own surmise about Chevy was thus confirmed. Brent, accustomed to being squelched, took it good-humoredly.

“I’ll show you something,” said Barrett, as if with a sudden thought.

He went into the house and soon reappeared, smiling and holding a slip of paper. His manner was incidental as if what he was going to show; them was of trivial interest and merely suggested by the casual talk.

“I just happened to think you might like to see this,” he said, handing the paper to Brent. “I hope it won’t scare you away. I’m counting on having some one up there now.”

Tom looked over Brent’s shoulder as they read the few scrawled words which more than anything they had heard created a harrowingly vivid picture of Chevy Ward’s terrible end:

I jumped on account of his face—it’s horrible—he came close—the dog is yelping
but I can’t see him—both legs——

That was all. The last words of a crazed man to whose pitiful affliction were added the pangs of physical agony. Maimed, unnerved, shattered in mind, dying alone on a wild mountain! Tom shook his head. Brent was silent.

“The schoolmaster over there told me the war isn’t over yet at the Bend,” Tom said reflectively. “Humph.” He shook his head ruefully. “I was shell-shocked.”

“You look fit enough now,” Barrett said.

“He’s easily excited,” Brent commented.

“Well, that’s better than being an old philosopher at twenty,” said Tom, and they all laughed.

“I guess you’re pretty good friends at that,” said Barrett. “You boys ought to have a radio up there. You’ll find it pretty slow.”

“I was going to ask you about that,” said Brent.

“What about Chevy after that?” Tom asked.

“Oh, they took him back to Todd’s Crossroads, where his folks lived. He’s buried there. His folks have gone away somewhere—over to New England, I think.”

Brent had turned the paper over and seemed on the point of making a notation on the back of it; he appeared disappointed at hearing that Chevy’s folks had gone to a distance.

“Well, how about radios?” he asked. “Where can we get one? Do you suppose they have them at the feed and grain store at the Bend?”

“Fraid not,” Barrett laughed. “You’ll have to go to Connington. It’s just up the road about eleven miles. You’ll want to go there anyway.”

“Oh, yes, we might as well do our Christmas shopping while the woods are wet,” said Brent. “Shall we drive over there, Tommy?”

“Connington is quite a place,” said Barrett; “there are quite a few stores there.”

“And where can we get a radio?” Brent asked.

“Well, let’s see,” said Barrett; “try Hollingwood’s. That’s—well, you go up the main street till you get to Fair Street, where the County Fair grounds are. It’s up Fair Street about two blocks in the—it’s in the old Jeppernagen building. You’ll see a sign on it.”

“Jeppernagen?” said Brent, writing.

“Yes, but you’re not going to take that paper?” laughed Barrett.

“Oh, is it any good?” Brent asked innocently.

“Well, I don’t know that it is,” Barrett reflected. “It was an exhibit at the coroner’s inquest. I put it on file in my little safe.”

“It won’t save Chevy now,” said Brent casually. “It’s the nearest approach to a ghost I’ve seen so far.”

“Well, I guess that’s all right,” said Barrett.

“What we want to do now is to get the wire up and you fellows call up here in case of any suspicious smoke. I’ve got a lot of posters telling folks not to be careless, and what to do if they discover a fire. I’ve been trying to

steal a day or so to go round and tack them up. I'll come up and see you boys some day and meanwhile, I want you to read this little book of instructions. It tells about communicating with other stations and how to read the map and all that. You've got field-glasses up there?"

"Oh, yes," said Tom.

"Come up to dinner sometime," said Brent; "don't bother dressing up."

Barrett followed them out to the road instructing Tom in his new duties and talking about a hundred and one details of the interesting work. He knew all about the mountain, its trails and pitfalls, and about other mountains where there were other stations. He knew all about the rustic fire-extinguishing facilities. He had a warning poster on every old red barn in the countryside and he was going around with more. He had a contagious heartiness.

"It makes me physically tired just to hear him talk," said Brent, as they drove along. "My knees fairly ache from listening."

As for Tom, he was refreshed, invigorated. "I almost forgot about poor Henny," he said. "Well, we're going to have some summer, hey? *Boy*, but I'm glad you came early. Do you suppose they'll put the poor kid in the jail in Connington? What can we do, anyway, when you come right down to it?"

"Well," said Brent leisurely, "for one thing we can write to National Scout Headquarters and get a copy of the letter the kid sent in there about good turns. That will speak well for him. But it's what he wrote in his Handbook that would count—gol blame it all! He's a queer duck, that Dennison."

He whistled an air as he settled far down in his seat beside Tom. "He seems to dislike the kid all right, but he doesn't tell him so," he observed. "He didn't say a harsh word to him in our presence. Seems to me as if he's a little bit afraid of him."

"Nah!" sneered Tom.

"No? Well, then, I'm wrong again," said Brent.

CHAPTER XXV

BRENT IN ACTION

It was late in the afternoon when they nosed the flivver into the woods a little farther from the schoolhouse than before, at a point near the edge of the village. Tom selected this spot for a permanent parking place because here, he thought, his car would remain unmolested; it was almost completely hidden from view.

They followed the 'phone line up the mountain and had no difficulty, though the climb was long and tiresome. It was dusk when they unloaded their numerous purchases on the map table—a small radio set and provisions of various sorts needed on the mountain. They had also brought as much as they could carry from Tom's car.

"All modern improvements," said Brent, as he laid the old candlestick away and filled a lamp which they had bought. "You going to cook supper, Tommy? All right, I'll sit down here and attend to my bookkeeping."

"Poor kid, I wish he were up here," said Tom.

He did not notice Brent, who sat on a box bending low over the map table until the latter straightened up rather suddenly for him and said, "Now, Tommy, I don't want you to jump out of your skin, but here are two slips of paper. One of them was given to you by Dennison. He jotted down Barrett's name on it. The other has the last words of Chevy Ward written on it—found in his pocket after he died." Brent gazed rather ruminatively at one, then at the other of these slips which lay on the glass before him. "They were both torn out of the same notebook—or at least the same kind of a notebook. The handwriting doesn't look just the same, but it sort of—what d'you think—has a resemblance? No?"

Tom stared, a saucepan in his hand. Brent was very thoughtful and calm. He cocked his head sideways looking at the two bits of paper. "Of course, the reason I made a memorandum on that one," he said, "was so Barrett would let me have it. I wasn't exactly what you might call suspicious. I just felt I'd like to bring the slip of paper along with me. Well, what do you say, Tommy? Begins to look interesting, huh? Look here, here's another thing." He held one slip, then the other, before the lamp. Each piece showed a watermark of three initials, a trademark of the paper manufacturer. "Pretty good, huh? I couldn't swear those were torn out of the same notebook, but it looks that way, doesn't it?"

"Well—I'll—be——" Tom began in blank astonishment.

Brent pursed his lips and contemplated the two slips without the least trace of excitement. "It looks to me," he said, "as if our friend Mr. Dennison might have written those last dying words and stuck them in Chevy Ward's pocket. We'll have to find out. Dennison was seen by Henny—your bacon is burning, Tommy—let's see now, Henny saw Dennison on the mountain down below on the Fourth of July—summer before last. Remember, I was talking about that yesterday? And you were laughing at me? Well, now, let's see."

Brent might himself have been a school teacher considering those two exceedingly suggestive leaves out of a pocket notebook. "All right," he ruminated, "this is a blamed funny business. Henny met Dennison down there and Dennison said he was on his way up. As I said before when you rudely laughed at me, he *might* have been on his way *down*."

"Brent!" Tom fairly gasped. "Boy, this is terrible! Do you blame me that I didn't take any stock in what you said yesterday? But what reason could Dennison have had to——"

"Kill him?" Brent inquired. He shrugged his shoulders. "Well, I'm glad I brought my magnifying glass to study botany. I'm going to compare the writing on those two slips, stroke for stroke. Then I'm going to see if there's any character left to those dirty finger marks on the window sill, and if so I'm going to compare them with these finger marks on this slip that Dennison gave you. How do you suppose those got there, Tommy?"

"Why, that's easy enough," Tom said. "Dennison gave my car a push to help me back it out of the woods that day I first met him. I suppose he got his fingers greasy. It was after I backed out that he gave me the memorandum of Barrett's name and address."

"Well, then, your Ford has done some good in the world after all," said Brent. "He tore it out of a book, didn't he?"

"Yep," said Tom. "I remember that. Boy, but this is interesting—and serious. Did Dennison seem to you that kind?"

"What kind?"

"To kill a man? Why, man alive, what reason did he have?"

"That will be for us to find out," said Brent.

"Gee, I never dreamed of anything like that," Tom said, incredulously. "You've knocked me silly, old man."

"What I'm thinking of is Henny," Brent mused. "We came up here and Dennison is uneasy about it. He was uneasy when you first told him. Can't you imagine that he might be worrying for fear the kid might say something sometime or other about meeting him on the mountain only two or three days before Ward was found dead? Maybe he thinks the kid knows more than he really does know. Of course Dennison doesn't really think this place

is haunted. But he wants to keep people away from here. He's uneasy at the thought of any one coming up here. A guilty conscience is a blamed funny thing, Tommy."

Brent lifted his magnifying glass out of his breast pocket and fell to scrutinizing the slip of paper that Dennison had given Tom. You would have thought that he was analyzing a guilty conscience under this long-handled, circular glass with which he prosecuted his scout studies.

"I follow you all right," said Tom; "but *jimmies*, I just can't believe it. Would you accuse him?"

"No, not the way it stands now. But I might scare the life out of him. You see, Tommy, he never should have taken advantage of that spook stuff—an intelligent chap, a teacher! Anyway, there's one thing plain enough without any magnifying glass—he's afraid of Henny. He thought he had Henny fixed so he'd never say anything about that Fourth of July meeting. Probably he's been thinking less and less about it all the time. But just the same, every time he looked at Henny——"

"I know," said Tom.

"Now after the whole thing is a closed book, along we come, and open up the station and get in with Henny, and start him talking about the past and all that. If these slips of paper, taken together, really mean anything—I mean if Dennison did really commit a crime up here, can't you imagine how the very sight of Henny makes him nervous? How much has the kid been saying? How much *will* he say? What will happen? The poor kid doesn't suspect his teacher. Dennison knows that. But suppose now after everything is all fine and dandy, Henny happens to remember meeting his teacher down near the foot of the mountain——"

"That's just what he did do," said Tom.

"And that's just what started me thinking," said Brent. "And here's the schoolmaster's chance to get rid of Henny—to get him out of the way, away from Watson's Bend. He warned him not to come up here. He as much as asked him not to mention that he met him on the mountain—folks would laugh. Humph. If I'm right *he'll* never do anything to help free Henny. He'll do everything to discredit the poor kid and to get rid of him."

Tom shook his head, ruefully, incredulously. "We sure have got into some dark business up here," he said. "What gets me is the reason, the motive. That's what has got Henny in so bad. They've got him nailed on the motive."

"Henny believes in advertising," said Brent. "Look here, Tommy. You told me Dennison said to you, speaking of spooks, that there are a lot of things we don't know anything about. Well, he said a lot. If he did it, we'll have to find the motive. What d'you say we get busy and eat? Then I'm

going to do some handwriting expert stuff and a little finger-print stuff. Do you know, Tommy, I believe I'm going to have a good time up here. You're almost as good as Pee-wee Harris for scaring up adventures."

"Yes, but you're so gol-blamed easy-going," said Tom.

"I'm gol-blamed hungry, I know that," said Brent.

CHAPTER XXVI ON THE WINDOW SILL

They did not play cards that night, nor even touch the new radio. Brent laid the two bits of paper side by side under the big glass top of the table and studied them with his glass. Thus flattened and slightly magnified by the plate glass, the writing seemed especially clear under Brent's fairly powerful lens.

But the two specimens of writing did not afford a very good opportunity for comparison. One was written with a pen—doubtless a fountain pen. It was only a name and address, three words; *Harley Barrett Chesterville*. The other specimen was scrawled with an indelible pencil.

I jumped on account of his face—it's horrible—he came close—the dog is yelping but I can't see him—both legs——

The broken sentences were evidently written in haste; they seemed to have been written in fear and suffering. They might have been in a disguised hand. Tom and Brent were agreed that there was a basic similarity in the R's. There was, indeed, a very striking common character to the two A's of the one specimen and the four A's of the other.

"Let's try the finger marks," said Brent.

Tom held the lamp to the window sill where the finger-prints were, while Brent scrutinized them through his glass. They were old and for that reason not good specimens. But even Brent experienced a thrill at seeing how under his glass these stains became individualized by differing wavy lines, like contour lines on the map of a mountain. It was easy, by means of these lines, to distinguish one imprint from another; to find in each some kinks or broken curves which made it different from the rest. For indeed, as criminologists now know, the markings on a human finger differ from the markings on every other human finger in the world. And he who presses his thumb upon a surface where its imprint is retained, leaves the sure proof of his identity among a hundred million of his kind.

"Let's rip this window sill off and lay it on the table so we can study the marks easier," Tom said.

Thus while Watson's Bend slept in the shadow of that great mountain, and while Henny Vollmer lay in his barred cell in the county jail in Connington, these two novices in the study of finger-prints leaned low over the round map table in the lonely lookout station and compared the finger-

prints on one of those slips of paper with the older prints on the detached strip of wood, a strip wrenched from the crude woodwork which was permeated with the greasy emanations of a cooking stove used year after year in the close confines of that little aerial room.

Somewhere in the darkness outside a lonely screech-owl hooted its dismal song. The window, loosened by the removal of its sill, rattled with every gust of the night breeze. At intervals the *ha ha* of a wildcat could be heard in the distance. So these two companions sat in that isolated shelter, like mariners cast up on a sea-swept islet, and analyzed the marks on the slip of paper and on the wrenched off strip of wood. And down in the village the young schoolmaster slept and dreamed, perhaps, of the reading and writing and arithmetic which would engross his attention on the following day.

Brent straightened up, stretching his arms. "Well, Tomasso," he said, in his customary drawling way, "you always ridiculed me for studying botany and hanging out with buttercups and daisies. You see now what the buttercups and daisies have brought us—to say nothing of the modest violets. It's good I brought my little glass, huh?"

"If you only wouldn't carry it in your handkerchief pocket," said Tom.

Brent laid a long finger ominously on a print on the wood, then on another on the memorandum that Dennison had given Tom. "Those two prints were made by one and the same finger, Tommy. Hey? And these two. This other one I'm not so sure about. The home-work hound was up here, Tomasso. Whether he came up to correct examination papers or not is the question. If these marks tally up for us, what will they do for an expert? Those two bits of writing are on leaves of paper out of the same kind of a notebook. I'm stumped on the handwriting, but I *think* that they're the same and one is disguised. But these finger-prints—hey, Tommy?"

"Well, we've got enough," said Tom. He found it hard to realize that he and Brent had wrenched an old secret from that sequestered spot of ill repute; not a secret, but at least the indisputable evidence that the schoolmaster had been there. And the less conclusive evidence that the memorandum given to Tom and the paper found on the body of Chevy Ward came from the same pocket notebook. And were written by the same hand?

"Gee, but we're swimming in black water," said Tom. "I don't know what to think of this blamed place. It's a right enough hangout for spooks, and that's no joke. What's what, anyway, do you suppose?" he queried. "And what are we going to do next?"

It was characteristic of Brent that he should have continued his analytical scrutiny long after Tom was satisfied. He looked for all the world like a professor of biology as he studied the greasy old window sill, checking up with the newer prints on the memorandum slip. He turned the

strip of wood this way and that, squinting at it through his glass as if it were a body subjected to vivisection, or some rare fossil. "I'll tell you what we'll do next when I'm all through," said Brent. "And I will not be hurried by the spirit of adventure."

Tom, thoroughly aroused, but wearied of following Brent's engrossed scrutiny without a glass, fell to examining the old visitors' register which he found on a shelf. There had been a time, probably before old Vollmer's incumbency, when it had been quite the fashion among the summer people at Connington and Chesterville to hike up to the lookout tower for the panoramic view that it commanded.

This register was a souvenir of that heyday in the old station's history. It contained the names of boy scouts, drawn irresistibly to the wild, sequestered spot, and of hiking maidens too, and of week-enders on adventure bent. Tom wondered where Alice Baldwin was now—who hailed from St. Louis in nineteen sixteen; and of Maud Waring, who came from Vermont and whose name appeared significantly bracketed with that of Tony Colby. Perhaps she was Mrs. Tony Colby now. Or perhaps Tony had gone to the great war and been killed. What a fascination there was in running over those names scrawled casually so long ago, and given a certain romance by the witchery of time and remoteness! Tom turned the pages idly, pausing to read here and there where some name penned legibly stood out among the rest.

Then suddenly, as he turned a page, an envelope slipped out upon his lap and fell to the floor.

CHAPTER XXVII

READING, WRITING AND SPELLING

The envelope was addressed to Mrs. Nora Ward, at Todd's Crossroads, and was stamped though unsealed. The writing was quite unlike that of those harrowing last words of the crazed victim, Tom's predecessor.

"What do you know about that?" Tom asked, his astonishment modifying his tone almost to a whisper. "Talk about luck! It's all right to open it, isn't it? Two years old and not sealed?"

"Sure," said Brent.

Tom unfolded the letter and read:

DEAR MOTHER—I'm hear alright and its sum lonly place I'll say. didn't see any gots and not worrying about them, gess I'd like there company in this place, well how are you mother. I gess its going to be alright here, all the fokes down in the bend talks about gots they have to go sum to skare me after I seen fire in france. I see a chap down in the bend was next to me in france we was in the same company, he deserted over there I never see him till I clap eyes on him in this little berg, well he turned white and the look he give me was horrible. he turned away like he never see me before. gess he thinks I don't no him. I'd like to put the army dept, wise to him letting us poor guys do his fighting for him. well mother I gess that's all and don't worry I like it up hear and if any gots come I'll give them the glad hand, can't mail letters often on account of it being so far from P.O.

loving son CHEVE.

If Tom had discovered a gold mine he could scarcely have been more elated. As for Brent, he took the letter, reading it over again carefully. "Well, there *was* a ghost up here after all, and this is it," he said.

The unmailed letter of Chevy Ward seemed indeed like a missive from the dead. It was the first real glimpse they had had of Chevy and it brought him very vividly before them. Tom could almost visualize that unlettered young fellow from Todd's Crossroads. Loyal patriot, good son, with a wholesome common sense to make up for his lack of education. *He* had come up this lonely spot scorning the ignorant superstitions of the village. And he despised a quitter and a coward. What poet could have given a finer voice to that scorn? Poor Chevy Ward.

"Well," said Brent, "now you've got your motive. I hope you're satisfied. Let's see just what we've got in our grab-bag—let's take account of stock."

"And please remember *I* was the one to find it," said Tom.

“You remind yourself of Pee-wee Harris,” said Brent. “Well, in the first place we know now that Chevy Ward didn’t write the note found in his pocket. He spells *account* with one C, and he spells horrible with one R. The person who wrote the note found in his pocket spells them correctly—naturally. He can spell even if he can’t fight. He uses dashes, but Chevy doesn’t use dashes. All right, that’s what the lawyers call Exhibit A. *We know for a dead certainty that Chevy didn’t write those last dying words.* They were written with an indelible pencil so even rain wouldn’t hurt them. All right.

“Now for Exhibit B—you like a large helping? Well, then, somebody wrote that horrible face and yelping-dog stuff and stuck it in Chevy’s pocket. Who? Why the gazabo with a motive! Who was up here? The slip of paper Dennison gave you came out of the *same kind of a notebook* as the slip found in Chevy’s pocket. All right. And here’s the part of the exhibit with a big punch. Dennison got his fingers greasy on your greasy old Ford and left three finger-prints on the memorandum he gave you. And these finger-prints were made by the same fingers that left their prints on this old window sill or I’m the biggest false alarm that ever disgraced the name of the Boy Scouts of America. Now what do you say, Tommy? Does the plot grow thicker? I doubt if I’ll get down to my crossword puzzles and botany before Labor Day. You certainly picked a quiet spot, Tommy. Why, the way things stand now I’m expecting old Carl Vollmer to blow in any minute and say he didn’t die at all—that he and old Peck’s ghost have started a frankfurter stand along the road somewhere.”

“Don’t speak like that about Squire Peck,” said Tom. “The old man isn’t buried yet.”

“Right, Tommy. But what do you think of me as a Boy Scout detective anyway? Bring on your crime waves!”

“What are we going to do?” said Tom.

“We’re going to hear the schoolmaster say his lesson,” said Brent. “And that will be to-morrow morning, and you’re going to keep still and let me do the talking.”

“What I’m thinking about is poor Henny down in that jail,” said Tom.

“I’ve often wanted to be in jail so I could cut my way out,” said Brent. “I even go round without my driver’s license card when I’m home, but they never nab me. Do you know, Tommy, I’ve never been inside of a jail in my life?”

“Well, don’t lose hope,” said Tom.

CHAPTER XXVIII

NEWS OF HENNY

Tom was too excited to sleep that night, but Brent slept soundly. The next morning their plans were interrupted by the arrival of Harley Barrett, who breezed in full of business and good cheer. He knew all the byways and short-cuts on the mountain and had come up the back stairs, as he said, having spent the night with the lookout at the fine new station over on Lion's Head.

"I didn't know we had such near neighbors," Tom said.

"I hope we're not going to be quarreling with our neighbors," said Brent. "If they mind their business, we'll mind ours."

"Oh, I guess there's not much danger of that," laughed Barrett. "It's about eleven miles from here—beyond that second ridge. Well, how do you like the neighborhood?"

"I don't think there's anybody around here who'll object to a loud speaker," said Brent.

"Tommy's going to put up our aerial to-morrow." And he winked at Tom as if to warn him that it would be as well not to speak of their suspicions and discoveries. "Hear anything about the Vollmer kid?" he asked.

"Oh, yes; looks pretty bad for him," said Barrett. "He has a hearing before the magistrate in Connington at ten o'clock to-morrow morning. I suppose they'll hold him for the grand jury. Bobby Decker was telling me they've got a chunk of wood, a big splinter out of his desk in school, with *I'll kill* cut into it. It's just a part of a threat he carved there. Three or four kids are going to testify to how it read before he slashed it out. He's a little devil, that kid. Why, he never lost a chance to say what he was going to do, and write it down."

"Yes," drawled Brent, "he seems to have done everything except have an electric sign made. He should have sent out circulars."

"Hatred and vengeance are terrible things," Barrett said.

"Cowardice is pretty bad too," said Brent, in a way of leisurely discussion. "Henny's no coward."

"No, but he's a bloodthirsty little Hun," said Barrett. "That was a terrible thing for a kid that age to do. I doubt if they'll send him to the chair, but he'll go up for a good long term. They say he's too proud and stubborn to speak. They can't get a word out of him."

"Poor Henny," said Tom.

“Talk is cheap,” said Barrett, “but what you write out comes back like a ghost to accuse you.”

“More ghosts!” said Brent. “Will he be tried by a jury of spooks, do you suppose?”

Barrett was not bitter against poor Henny, but he reflected the sentiment of the countryside. Perhaps if it had fallen to him to talk personally with the unfortunate boy, his confidence might have been aroused, or at the least, his sympathy. But it appeared now that Henny’s inherent arrogance was manifest in a stubborn silence. If there were any to befriend him they had no encouragement to do so. Henny’s only supporters were the two strangers up in the lonely lookout station.

Moreover, Barrett was too much engrossed with his wholesome activities to harbor any morbid interest in crime. If he lacked vision and sympathy he at least was vigorous and clean. He seemed to cleanse the air with his heartiness and energy. He was soon launched forth upon the subject of fire prevention and of the particular duties and responsibilities which Tom must assume. He had already effected an arrangement with the telephone people by which they would replace the wire if the poles were replanted by local workers and Tom and Brent were quite ready to help in this task. Barrett’s active mind was busy with the consideration of whom he could get and whether any of the inhabitants thereabouts would be willing even to work in the neighborhood of the haunted tower.

“I dare say Dave Bentley would have been after you about his dog before now,” he said, “except on account of the spooks. We’re going to have a devil of a job getting any cooperation around here.”

“I thought Henny might help some,” Brent said in his half-interested, reflective way.

“Henny!” exclaimed Barrett.

“No? Well, then, I’m wrong again,” said Brent. “We might mobilize a working crew of spooks, I suppose. They’d probably want big wages and an eight-hour day. Though I guess they wouldn’t work daytimes anyway. They’re all night workers—ghosts ... Well, if we can get our radio working we ought to hear some bedtime stories to-night. Can’t you come up and bring your knitting sometime, Barrett?”

When the fire warden had gone, Brent withdrew to his favorite reclining place in one of the bunks, stuffed every available article behind him and drew a long breath. “Barrett’s worse than you are, Tommy,” he said. “He reminds me of a dynamo. Why should anybody want so many jobs? Do you suppose he goes roaming around over mountains every day?”

“Well, you’ll never get much work done lying there,” Tom said.

“Listen, Tommy, Mark Twain and Robert Louis Stevenson were always in bed. They smoked and wrote in bed. They liked to have breakfast in bed. I work with my brain, Tommy. The hike I had coming up here in that storm, I don’t think I’ll ever get over it, Tommy.”

“Well, what are we going to do about Henny?” Tom asked. “You don’t seem to be very excited about it—what we’ve found out.”

“I told you what I’m going to do, Tomasso. And you can come along if you want to. To-morrow morning I’m going down to visit school. I’m going to take my home work in. After that, you’re going to drive me to the magistrate’s court in Connington—if your Ford is working. If it isn’t working, I’ll have to go to the exertion of killing you. I need my rest to-day, Tommy.”

“Well, I can’t rest,” said Tom, rather irritably, “with Henny down there in jail, and what we’ve found out and all, and we don’t know what we’re getting into or what we’re starting—jimony Christopher! I’m going down to plant a couple of ’phone poles—I’m nervous!”

“That’s a very good idea, Tommy,” said Brent.

“Why can’t we go down and see Dennison now?” Tom asked.

“Because we’re going to Connington,” said Brent, “and we’re not going to make two trips—at least I’m not. I’m going to stay here and think up my speech to the jury.”

Tom was restless and annoyed. “They don’t have juries in magistrates’ courts if anybody should ask you,” he said.

“I’m wrong again,” said Brent. “Hand me my window sill and those papers and my magnifying glass, will you, Tommy?”

“Anything else you’d like?” Tom laughed.

“Nothing else—thank you.”

Tom found an outlet for his energy that day in planting several poles in the neighborhood of the station and clearing away the brush just beneath it. He was restive, nervous. The morrow loomed large and he wondered what the sequel would be. The time passed more quickly when he was busied. He stirred up a great pother in the vicinity of their aerial abode, and every swing of his ax or his spade had a certain nonchalant defiance in it—a challenge to Watson’s Bend and all its ghosts and its dogs and its people.

As for Brent, he reclined on his rough couch, occasionally leaning toward one or other of the windows to scan the slopes for signs of fire. Then he would methodically set the field-glass on the floor and continue his endless study of those telltale notes and finger marks.

CHAPTER XXIX

HENNY'S CROSS

Tom's heart beat with suspense as he and Brent neared the foot of the mountain next morning. He had an odd feeling that their sensational discoveries were part of a dream, that their deductions were strained, and their errand absurd and visionary. He could not repress a misgiving that they would be laughed at, and that they might even get themselves into trouble. It was only the sight of Brent, ambling and clambering down the difficult slope in his quiet, funny way that gave Tom confidence about the issue of their errand.

They dragged the canvas off the old Ford and drove along the road to the schoolhouse. Brent entered the little building, followed by Tom. As on the occasion of their former visit, school was in session. Young Mr. Dennison came out on hearing the visitors, who waited in the musty little vestibule, where the hats hung in a row. He had a piece of writing chalk in his hand and he wore a hurried, inquiring look as if he were stealing a moment to make certain that some one had entered.

"Good morning," said Brent in his drawling, casual way. "Eh—we heard that one or two of your pupils are going to testify in the hearing at Connington. I was wondering if you'd like to have us drive them over in our chariot."

"Why, they were to go directly from their homes," said Dennison. "They're not here to-day. You're going over?"

"Why, eh, yes, we thought we would—take in the show."

He hesitated. It might have been just his easy, never-failing poise. A stranger might have thought it diffidence.

"Is there anything I can do for you?" Dennison asked. "You know this is a school day."

"You like indelible pencils?" Brent queried. "I see you carry one. I use a fountain pen."

There was just the shade of something in Dennison's look. It might have been only impatience.

"Why, yes," said Brent, "you might give me that Handbook of the Boy Scouts of America that you took away from Henny Vollmer—the one he wrote something in a week or two ago. I guess that'll be about all this morning."

"Why, I told your friend I haven't it," said Dennison.

“Yes, I know you told him that,” Brent said, almost sociably, “but I want you to give it to me just the same. We’re interested in Henny and if you bluff us off and get us mad the first thing *you* know we’ll be getting interested in *you*. See?”

“No, I don’t see,” said Dennison, looking rather anxiously from Brent to Tom and seeming annoyed.

“Well, then, I’ll tell you,” said Brent, looking straight at him. His look gave the young schoolmaster a start and he reached behind him, closing the door into the classroom.

“We know you have no use for Henny,” said Brent. “We know you don’t feel easy while he’s here. We know you’d like to see him sent away. We know you met him on the mountain and told him you were going up, when all the time you were on your way down. We know you’ve always been afraid he’d mention that. We know what you went up there for and why you couldn’t sleep nights for fear others would go up there. We know you knew Chevy Ward in the army and we know you deserted and we know you were afraid of Chevy—afraid he’d tell on you. We know he didn’t write the note found in his pocket and we come pretty near thinking you did. We know it was written on a page out of a notebook like yours. We know how he spells *account* and how he spells horrible.” Brent paused, while the young schoolmaster went pale. “*And we’ve got your finger-prints, Denny; we’ve got them on a memorandum slip you gave Tom with Barrett’s name and address. And we’ve got them on the window sill up there. What did you do, Denny; kill that poor fellow?*”

The last sentence was uttered quickly, accompanied by a cold, searching look from Brent’s eyes. The schoolmaster blanched and seemed on the point of collapse. “I—what do you mean—I don’t—what are you talking about?” he said weakly.

“Why, I’m talking about the Scout Handbook,” said Brent.

“Suppose I did know him,” Dennison said. “Suppose I went up there. Does that prove I killed him?”

“No,” said Brent. “I don’t think you’re big enough to kill anybody. That’s why you skipped from the army, I suppose. But you went up to see Chevy because you were afraid he’d squeal. I think I know why you’ve been laying low in this God-forsaken place ever since the war. I’m willing to believe that Chevy’s death was accidental. Maybe you had a tussle with him; maybe he fell out. But, anyway, you put that note in his pocket and then you rounded up a quartet of these goops and went up and found him—accidentally on purpose. That was a pretty good note, Denny, only Chevy didn’t spell the same as you do.”

“Let’s get this right,” said Dennison in a contemptibly weak pose of coöperation. His lack of anger, his attempt to make himself, as it were, a party to a friendly dispute, made him despicable, and enraged Tom. In this weak attitude he saw not a murderer, but the coward and deserter.

“You needn’t tell us anything, Dennison,” said Tom coldly.

“Just give us the book,” Brent added in a tone of disgust. “Whatever you did or didn’t do, that’s one thing you’d better do. We don’t need to stand here talking. We’re not interested in you, Dennison, except as a curiosity. I don’t think you deliberately killed Ward, if that’s what you’re worrying about. The safest thing for you to do now is to get that Handbook.”

“You—you’re going to start a fuss, I suppose?”

“Just at present we’re busy with another matter,” said Brent. “Now, Dennison, you get that book.”

“Why, I—I’m not sure I can find it,” Dennison said. “Let’s see—I——”

“Well, you try to find it. That’s your lesson for to-day; now you see how well you can do it.”

If Dennison was stung by Brent’s slur he did not show it. It was almost amusing, but pitiful too, to see how docile he was in the hands of these two quietly determined strangers. A little autocrat in his petty realm, he was the very picture of blank terror before the easy-going young fellow who held him so surely in his power. Yet he did make a decent pretense of searching for the Handbook and carried out his fiction of having lost it by keeping his callers waiting ten or fifteen minutes. Then he reappeared with it apparently as pleased as they were at its discovery.

Without the least ceremony of acknowledgment, Brent took the book as if it belonged to him, and let the leaves come back to front and slip through his fingers till he came to the page which is blank, save for the printed title *Handbook for Boys*. Both sides of this leaf were filled with crude writing. Brent read this while Tom looked at it over his shoulder.

“It’s very lucky I found it,” said the schoolmaster during the silence.

“Very lucky,” said Brent, intent upon his reading.

The leaf was covered on both sides with crude writing, and the phraseology recalled Henny—it was all his own. As a sort of mystic heading to his singular effusion he had heavily marked a cross, the blackness of which somehow bespoke tremendous and immovable resolve. It was no milk and water cross with which Henny had thus figuratively crossed his heart. It was clear that he meant what he meant.

This was what Brent read:

Biggest good turn

This is better than anybody else thought of and I cross my heart I'll do it and sure because what you write down you got to do and you can't change your mind. This is a regular one sure.

In those laws it says you got to be ready to save lives and you daresent want to kill people even animals.

Law 10: It says you got to be brave no matter what. You got to do public services to. That road where the bend is that's a rotten public service to leave it that way.

You got to notice things, it says it on page 251. It says like that on page 6 to

Saving lives page 9
“ page 14
good turns page 18

rememberandum

I heard Sally Prat say Squire Peck is coming home pretty soon maybe, if he comes at night I'll take a red lantern and stay at the bend so he'll go safe. I'll stand there and swing it. That's the biggest good turn because I used to hate him but not anymore I don't. I'll save his life even maybe. Cause now I'm a scout even if I don't get any uniform just the same I'm one. Now I know you got to help people.

P.S. rememberandum Maybe if he sees I did a good turn for him he'll get sorry how he treated my father, that's better than killing him. if you kill a man he can't be sorry.

P.S. maybe they'll fix that road to. that'll be 2 good turns.

P.S. rememberandum if I do those things that means theres 4 merit badges I can get maybe 5 for doing 2 things.

P.S. thats a good idea how I make him help me in scouting; its good joke.

Safety first badge (page 61) Honor medal that you get saving lives (page 66)

LAW 3 about saving lives.

It belongs to others { page 61, page 66 }

If you make a cross you got to do it

That was all poor Henny had written, for it was all that the leaf would hold. But not in all the printed pages of that book was there a finer proclamation of scouting than this lonely pioneer had there set down. He had drunk deep of its teaching, nay, of its very spirit. In finding it he had found himself. Here in these crude notations a scout of scouts had been at

work, comparing, remembering, matching badges to laws, and working out a program unassisted and alone which would show to any one who was not blind that he had in him the very essence of the scout. He had got on the trail at last, he had seen the light, this ugly duckling who was waiting in a cell in the Connington jail.

“And you took this away from him a couple of weeks ago and knew what was in it!” said Tom contemptuously. “You knew that what he wrote here before this thing happened would be the one witness in his favor! Dennison, you’re the lowest kind of skunk I ever met.”

Brent never dealt in expletives. “Dennison,” said he in his easy-going way, “if it wasn’t for your school I’d make you go with us, though goodness knows we’re not keen for your company. You go inside and write on a piece of paper that you’re returning this book that you took away from Henny Vollmer a couple of weeks ago. You’d—let’s see—you’d better say you thought it might throw some light on his case. Now don’t stand talking, Dennison; just do what I say. And be quick about it—we’ve only got just enough time to get to Connington.”

Dennison was like wax in Brent’s hands. “Shall I address it to you?” he asked.

“Yes, you’d better address it to me,” said Brent.

As the schoolmaster withdrew into the classroom, the buzz of talk and mischievous laughter ceased. It was odd how helpless young Dennison was before Tom and Brent, and how potent and terrible before his little class.

CHAPTER XXX

LIZZIE

“Boy!” exclaimed Tom, “I’ll have to step on her some. Nine-thirty now.”

“Well,” drawled Brent, leisurely looking back to where Watson’s Bend had disappeared behind the leafy trees, “I’d consider it rather difficult convincing any one that our present position was a stationary one!”

“Brent,” Tom said, “you’ll never be serious, will you?”

“I hope not,” he answered soberly. The sparkle in his eyes alone betrayed the suppressed humor that Tom could feel but not see. His job was to keep his eyes on the road and his mind on the gas.

They rode along awhile in silence—that is, they were silent, but the flapping fender on the speeding car engagingly supplied all the noise needed to keep one company.

“Covered quite a few acres so far,” Brent remarked dryly.

“Sh-sh—she’ll hear you!” warned Tom.

“Who?”

“Lizzie.”

“Oh! In the future I shall be more careful in her presence.”

At this point, they were making a turn in the road, when the engine began to sputter and miss. Then, finally it ceased to even miss at all, coming to such an abrupt stop that Brent was almost minus his spectacles for a few dangerous moments.

Tom turned from the wheel and bestowed upon Brent a look that left nothing unsaid.

“Well, now what?” Brent asked in the most unruffled manner imaginable, adding: “Where do we get from here, Tommy?”

“I told you not to speak so loud, Brent!” Tom said as a reminder. “You don’t know Lizzie as I do. Unlike most of her sex, she has a distinct aversion of flattery.”

“Ah,” answered Brent, “then after all the time that our poets and writers have wasted singing the praises of the fair sex, are you trying to imply that we still don’t understand them?”

“Exactly!” Tom emphasized and raised the hood with determination.

“Then, to use the vernacular of the day,” continued Brent, “we’re all awet, isn’t that it?”

“Say,” Tom shouted in mock-anger, waving a pair of pliers in mid-air, “you won’t budge little Lizzie one bit with all your philosophy, so conserve

your breath for a little run into Chesterville. Some one will give you a lift into Connington, you can be sure. Wait for me. I'll be three-quarters of an hour anyway coaxing this bus to start. Better sprint ahead if you want to get there at ten."

"Tom, my dear boy!" Brent exclaimed in his most funereal tone, "I don't like to discourage you, but I'm afraid that Lizzie will never be the same again. Good-by, laddie!"

"Brent, for heaven's sake——"

Before Tom could finish they were both aware of sounds in the distance. At first, it sounded like some one chopping down a tree, but gradually, as it came nearer and nearer, they realized with something of a thrill it was the hoofs of a horse.

"Aha!" mused Brent, "either a friend in need or Trailer Bentley to wreak his vengeance upon you, Tom."

"I'll say this much for you, Brent," Tom said, his eyes fixed thoughtfully in the distance. "There are times when you do have the most comforting thoughts. A veritable cheer dispenser, as it were!"

"Yes, I thought you would notice sooner or later that there's really no limit to my attainments. But, hark, the rider approacheth us!"

Just then, rounding the clump of trees that had so recently witnessed the near demise of Lizzie and her occupants, a rider appeared. "A typical Galahad," Brent afterward recalled, "sans armor."

Hatless and almost sleeveless, he came cantering toward Tom and Brent as if to impress the fact thoroughly upon them that he was out for comfort and not speed.

The animal was a typical farm drudge, huge in proportions. As the driver approached, he drew up majestically to the side of the road. The horse seemed to shy at the grass under him and deliberately moved out onto the mud-caked road.

"That goes to prove," Brent whispered into Tom's ear, "the old nag has pulled so many loads of hay in her time that she can't bear to even look at a little blade of grass any more."

"Howdy!" Tom greeted the rider. "Do you happen to be going into Chesterville?"

"That I be," he answered pleasantly. "Kin I help ye any? I be Cal Ricks from the Bend."

"Another bender," murmured Brent.

"Sh-h!" hissed Tom, then: "Could you give my friend here a lift, Mr. Ricks? It is imperative that he gets to Connington as quickly as possible."

"That's where I be goin' myself," the obliging Mr. Ricks informed him. "Jump up, young fella—what be your name?"

“Gaylong,” said Brent, clambering up in back of the rustic horseman. “I could do this more gracefully if we had a stepladder handy. Even horses come high these days, Mr. Ricks, don’t you think?” He felt for all the world that something was accomplished when he finally gained the old nag’s back.

“Giddap, Jennie, ol’ gall” Mr. Ricks commanded imperiously.

“Farewell, Tomasso, farewell!” Brent called, simulating grief at parting. And as an afterthought: “Oh, Tom!”

“Yes?”

“Don’t you think I am imposing up here? I should think, by comparison, Paul Revere would look like a subway guard! How about it?” Brent called back over his shoulder.

“There isn’t the slightest doubt about it, Brent,” Tom answered heartily. “Good luck to you both, old man.” He waved until they were out of sight.

“A great boy,” Tom confided to Lizzie a few minutes later, and reflected: “I’ll bet he’s as anxious as I over Henny, but he just doesn’t talk about it.”

A typical Slade smile of reminiscence remained on Tom’s features long, long after the echoes of the horse’s hoofs had died away in the still warm air.

CHAPTER XXXI

THE HEARING

The magistrate's court at Connington convened promptly at ten o'clock. The assemblage there represented every hamlet and village within a radius of thirty-five miles.

In fact, the village of Connington itself had taken on a sort of holiday spirit for the occasion. Even poor little Henny's sinking spirits were momentarily uplifted by the sight of all the country folk gathered there in gala attire.

But his joy was short-lived as he walked through the crowded courtroom with the constable and reached his seat. Frightened and bewildered for the moment, his eyes searched each individual face around him. It was not without a pang of grim disappointment that he saw nothing but hostility and condemnation written upon them all. Not a smile nor even a friendly nod from any one.

Of all these people, he thought, who had known him from his babyhood there wasn't one who believed in him. But yes, there were two at least; he mustn't forget that even though they were strangers—Tom and Brent. Where were they? They weren't in the courtroom, that was sure.

He decided to keep his eyes riveted on the door so that he wouldn't miss their entrance. It was something to keep his mind diverted, anyway, with that multitude of accusing eyes around him.

In spite of himself, his throat was dry and his heart thumped painfully under his blouse. Found guilty, he thought, before ever he was tried. Was that how his poor father had felt? he wondered. Had his throat been dry too and his heart beating the same nervous tattoo in his breast? But no, he knew instinctively better before the thought was fully formed in his mind. At all events his father was a man. Pride forbade him being nervous of any one or anything.

In this state of mind Henny tried to visualize how his father must have looked when they accused him of seditious utterances. He probably denied vehemently that he was guilty in any way. Having said that, he would say no more; but the proud way he held his head up and his eyes ablaze with indignation would undoubtedly say the rest.

Well, thought Henny, though he was only a boy, he could hold his head up too and try to act like a man. He'd show 'em, this bunch on all sides of

him, he'd show 'em, the narrow-minded lot. He was his father's son and they couldn't scare him one bit!

With all this inward show of bravado, Henny felt pretty forlorn and deserted as the court was called to order and the testimony introduced in the proceedings. He watched rather disinterested the spare form of the court clerk, standing there reading in a droning voice all the evidence needed to try and convict him. "Gee," he muttered to himself, "can't he skip some of it and get it done with? He sounds and looks like an undertaker."

There wasn't anything conducive to comfort in that thought, for Henny cast another glance toward the door and then up at the clock on the further side of the courtroom wall. It was almost a quarter after the hour; with no sign of his only friends as yet! What had happened? Surely they couldn't have forgotten about this morning?

Doubt and distrust, all the elements that Fear embodies, began seeping slowly into poor Henny's soul. It was like icy water dripping ever so slow; chilling his blood and gradually warping all the resistance that Hope had built up.

He shook himself with determination, realizing what it meant to let such thoughts get the upper hand of him. Didn't Tom warn him about showing the white feather? Well, he wouldn't—just for spite. They said they'd come; they'd come and help him and they would! But how? How could they help him? Oh, shut up! He thereby put a check on his gloomy thoughts for a while and glanced furtively at the clock. It had gained another five minutes. So he turned his attention to the magistrate for a change:

A stern, square-visaged man, but with eyes that were not at all unkind. "Funny," the poor boy mused, "I didn't notice him much before this." His steady observation of the law's representative soon caused the magistrate to look toward the boy.

As his eyes met those of the accused lad's, Henny unconsciously gave the man a look of deep appeal. The magistrate's features remained as immobile as ever, but Henny could have sworn that there was a ghost of a smile playing about the eyes.

His interest was soon diverted again as "that skinny Ellie Todd" came up on the stand. In her thin, shrill, piping voice she was testifying as to Henny's skill in the art of wood-engraving on school desks.

Watson's Bend being decadent as regards the progress of many other hamlets its size, was also decadent in fashions. Thus it was that Ellie Todd, while dressed in her Sunday best in accordance with the Watson mode, was also a picture of painful simplicity. Her hair had been combed back skin-tight with an air of revenge manifestly by her fond, loving mother. It was made fast to the back of her neck by a ribbon tied in a huge bow.

Henny wondered, while watching this effect, how it was that her skull didn't crack from the strain. There was a half-formed wish in his mind somewhere that he hoped it would some day. "Would do her good, I should think; relieve her of the pain!" he whispered to himself.

The next witness and then the next. All against him and nobody for him. What was the use even if they did show up—not a soul would believe them, anyway. He was as good as convicted right now, he decided. Still, it would be comforting to see them, if they couldn't be of any help otherwise.

The minutes were ticking away. Ticking and ticking away. Time, crushing out one's very hold on existence, while everything else moved on heedlessly in that universal desire to live, while Life is still to be had for the asking.

Who can say what poignant, what tragic, thoughts flitted back and forth in that keen little brain? Practically uneducated, yet withal intelligent in his knowledge of human nature. He knew, this old-young boy, what it would mean to be on the defensive side of Life; hemmed in by a civilization that was still rife with hatred and blind bigotry.

One minute more, and half of the hour would have passed into oblivion. There was a faint stir just then in the rear of the stuffy courtroom and Henny watched eagerly with the rest of the spectators as he saw the door opening slowly.

Brent's entrance was accomplished in quite a theatrical manner; without any disguise whatever. He had not intended it to be theatrical—nevertheless, it had that very effect.

As he walked contemplatively through the long room toward the court clerk's desk, his quaint manner and quiet demeanor caused more of a furor than if he had rushed in waving his arms frantically and cried in a tragic voice: "Henny, my boy, here I am!"

Reaching the desk, Brent looked at Henny, then nodded with smiling eyes and friendly assurance.

At least Henny interpreted the glance in that way, although he couldn't say for sure. A mist of joy had clouded his eyes just then and obscured his vision of Brent for a few short moments.

CHAPTER XXXII

THE SCOUT HANDBOOK

Brent leaned forward with an air of mystery and handed the court clerk the little black book, meanwhile speaking in guarded tones.

A few of those fortunate enough to sit close caught one or two of the words and generously passed on the information to his neighbor.

The court, at this juncture, was called to order and the clerk in that dirge-like tone introduced Brent to the magistrate, adding: "If you please, Your Honor, the young gentleman here has evidence with him of a very important nature."

The magistrate nodded to Brent and asked him to begin from the beginning as to his connection with the affair.

Indeed, Brent needed no coaxing whatever, for, as he often remarked to Tom afterward: "I felt right at home."

"Not much of a compliment to home," was Tom's rejoinder.

Brent did not stop to clear his throat or straighten his necktie according to the custom of the Connington courtroom. Any one, with even ordinary prestige, cleared his throat before addressing the magistrate at least twice or even three times. It wasn't considered decent or respectful to do any otherwise.

Of this Brent was blissfully unaware. His one thought was to get down to brass tacks and this he did, surrounded as he was by this mass of human skeptics.

"Your Honor," Brent began, after he had acquainted the magistrate with his own part in the affair and that of Tom's also, "I am here this morning, in Henny Vollmer's behalf, to prove to the court and those who think him guilty, that his intentions, on the night in question, were contrary to the popular belief both before and after the accident occurred. If I may, I would also like to add that, if the evidence at hand is insufficient in the eyes of the Court to prove the defendant's non-guilt, more can be produced in a very short time."

There was a subdued murmur as Brent hurried on, telling of Dennison's holding the book; of his dislike for the boy as the logical reason for withholding the evidence, seemingly conclusive.

At length, after the magistrate had ceased reading aloud Henny's quaint "rememberandums," and the schoolmaster's accompanying note, he leaned forward in his chair.

“This Court is of the opinion,” he began, “that the death of Mr. Wolfson Peck was due to accidental causes. Therefore, the Court releases the defendant without bail until further evidence can be submitted.”

That was all. It was over, yet no one seemed to be aware of it! The magistrate had arisen from his chair and was making his way toward an anteroom. The constable had also left Henny’s side and walked out.

“Why!” Henny muttered in breathless bewilderment, “I must be free then!” A voice was speaking slowly in his ear.

“Come on, you regular scout, let’s get out of this.”

It was Brent, good, true Brent, with his hand affectionately patting Henny’s shoulder. There was a struggle on the boy’s part to fight the tears back.

“Aw—I—oh, say, Brent! You did it a’right then, didn’t you? Jimminy, you got me free! I don’t know what to say, honest!”

“Then keep it to yourself, youngster. We’ll go and find Tom, if we can. If we can’t locate him by the time we get to Chesterville, I’ll buy a dog’s leash for Lizzie and we three can drag her the rest of the way back. What do you say?”

Henny’s face was radiant and he gazed with rapt admiration at Brent as they wended their way past the still seated spectators.

“I wonder what more they want for their money?” Brent asked. “The show’s all over! Still, they seem to wear the expression that they’ve been cheated out of something!”

Henny grasped Brent’s arm firmly as they passed out of the courtroom. It was to proclaim to his enemies that in Brent, the Stranger, he had found Brent, the Friend.

They know, these people do, Brent was thinking, divining the purport of Henny’s act, that there won’t be any further evidence submitted. They also are aware that the lad is as free as though he were acquitted by a jury. But still they were staying on!

Outside, as the sunshine broke full upon their faces once more, they beheld Tom, a broad grin of friendly greeting upon his countenance and his foot upon the running board of the Ford. The engine was running, sounding like a trip hammer hitting a tin pan.

“Thought I’d keep her going,” Tom explained. “Afraid she wouldn’t start again.”

“That’s fine, Tommy. Now *I’m* in that much on the leash. Economy first and last should be our motto. Did you get in on the last reel? The closeup was real touching, but the audience aren’t aware of it yet. They must be waiting for the comedy to come on now. We should have furnished a heroine

to kiss the hero in the final scene to give it a touch of pathos. How about it, Henny? Say that nice little Ellie Todd, for instance....”

“Aw—s-s-say now,” Henny stuttered and grinned joyously.

“He’s the whole show, don’t you think?” Tom said. “How does it feel, Henny, to be out again?”

“Fine! Gee, it’s great, a’right!”

“Talking about how it feels,” said Brent, looking up and down the street, “I’d say it feels empty. Let’s eat!”

When they were seated in the Connington bakery and lunchroom combined, everything else was forgotten in deference to the food before them. Henny admitted he was starved and they fully believed him in less than ten minutes.

The bakery was situated directly across the way from the courthouse. Sitting at a table facing it, Tom and Brent perceived that the country people were now emerging from the building at last. Here and there they loitered in little groups on the sidewalk, talking with animated gestures, notwithstanding the ear-splitting din that Tom’s Lizzie was keeping up at the curb meanwhile.

“Say!” Tom said in an impulsive tone, “do you realize, Brent, that we have done another fool stunt?”

“I’m always realizing it, Tom.”

“No kidding, we’ve committed a serious offense!”

“Another one? Horrors, Tom, you don’t say!”

“I do say! Has it occurred to you that we’ve left Dennison unguarded in our flurry to get to Henny?”

“We should have hired a nurse maid, I suppose. No use getting fussed about it now. He’s able to fix his own bottle at his age, I should think.”

“Brent, for goodness’ sake!” Tom’s eyes were pleading, while his mouth was full of mince-pie. “Suppose—say, we better beat it back quick! Maybe he’s never given it a thought, either, that we left him alone.” By that time they were leaving the restaurant, Brent, as usual, holding up the rear.

With Henny seated beside him on the front seat, Tom turned the car around and stopped in front of the bakery to allow Brent’s lanky frame to sink leisurely, if not luxuriously, into the back. Above the roar of the engine Tom shouted over his shoulder: “Say, Brent, won’t we have made an awful bull if— Why, we don’t even know for sure whether he did kill Ward. Suppose he has beaten it by the time we get there?”

They had gone fully a quarter of a mile before Brent spoke.

“Suppose he has, Tom? What of it? There’s been stranger things than that happen before now! If we don’t get him there’s no use worrying about it. Somebody will get him, some time!”

CHAPTER XXXIII

THE BIRD HAS FLOWN

There was nothing to interrupt the placidity of Lizzie's homeward course except the road, which, when viewed from a distance, resembled huge muffins thrown carelessly along the highway as far as the eye could see.

Henny was tired, exhausted from the strain of the last few days, and willingly sat quiet while Tom and Brent talked. He was wondering what was to become of him now.

Farmer Sterrett was in the courtroom and had not only averted his eyes from Henny during the hearing, but completely ignored him as he walked out with Brent.

"You should lay in a supply of baby carriage straps, Tom. They'd be effective enough to keep us strapped to the car, at least. I narrowly missed ever seeing Dennison again!" He chuckled.

"Probably won't anyhow," Tom said gloomily.

"Well, we won't be missing much, I guess. Are we to include Henny hereafter with our bed and board?" He winked significantly at the boy, who had turned around.

"I hope so," Tom answered, with a glance of interest at Henny. "Guess we aren't likely to have much opposition from Sterrett. He'll part with him gladly, no doubt—he's such a good Christian!"

"I have a little money," Henny confided to them both. "Mr. Sterrett's holding it in trust for me. Worked for my board while I was there."

"Oh! Well, don't worry, kid," said Tom reassuringly, "we'll map out something for you, somehow!"

"I know it! I'll like it up there 'n' I kin help yuh lots too, 'cause I know more about them mountains 'n' either of you'll ever know!" This he said without a shade of disrespect in his voice, for his benefactors' intelligence.

"All right, little autocrat," Tom said good-humoredly, "I guess you said a whole mouthful, at that. You're an A-1 scout right now and I'll tell the whole world you've qualified!"

"Have I?" Henny asked, eyes wide with wonderment at all this good fortune befalling him. "Things are coming my way at last!" he exclaimed half aloud.

"You bet they are and it will continue." Tom had caught the child's spirit.

“Always listen to Papa, Henny!” Brent interposed, nodding his head at Tom’s back. “Listen to Papa Tom and the world will always be full of sunshine and flowers.

“What do I remind myself of, Tom, when I speak so sagaciously! Can you tell me?”

“Do you want me to give you an honest, unbiased opinion, Brent?”

“Yes, Tom, but break it gently. I’m weak from the ride.”

“Since you ask me I’ll tell you that I think you’re a darn fool!”

“Them’s harsh words, Tommy!”

They had turned in at the edge of the village and had stopped in Lizzie’s parking place just back of the schoolhouse.

“Come on now, Brent, let’s see what luck with this bird Dennison!” Tom was fifteen feet away, with Henny right at his heels, when Brent was just stepping out of the Ford.

“Nothing was ever gained by too much haste,” Brent called after them.

“If that’s what you call haste,” Tom flung back (meaning Brent’s slow stride), “I heartily agree with you.”

As they reached the schoolhouse a dozen or more women stood about chattering in a dozen different voices. The children were running around and in and out of the building like a lot of caged birds suddenly set free.

Tom approached with Henny and they glared at the boy as though he were something unclean.

“He’s been acquitted,” Tom said, understanding their disdainful glances and anxious to make his errand as wordless and quick as possible. “Can you tell me where Dennison is?” he asked one of the nearest women. They all answered at once and Tom was quick to gather the cause of all the excitement.

He had been gone, they informed him, since ten o’clock that morning. Leaving the school, he told the pupils that he would be back after lunch, but he didn’t come back, and his landlady was in Connington for the day. One of the women said she thought she saw him with a suitcase in his hand walking toward the Bend about eleven.

He must have left immediately, Tom figured, after they went away to Connington. Well, there was no use sticking around, so he put his arm about Henny protectingly and walked back.

Brent was seated in the car as they approached, resting, his long, lanky legs on the front seat.

“I saw you starting back before I was halfway,” Brent explained perfectly unconcerned. “Thought I might as well not go any further. Came back and sat down to wait. We have a long walk back, you know!”

“No! Well, that bird of ours——”

“Flown?”

“Yes.”

“Don’t worry, old man, he won’t fly for long.” And silently they walked up the mountainside, on and up it seemed, straight into the very heart of the sunset.

CHAPTER XXXIV

BRENT THE PHILOSOPHER

It was clear that night, but moonless, and outside the inky blackness seemed but to emphasize the colossal structure that Nature had made of the mountains.

Brent was sitting by the window trying to penetrate the shroud that night had thrown around everything. Tom, at the table, was glancing over a newspaper he had bought that day in Connington. Henny, long since, had given himself unto Sleep, and from the sound of his breathing he was making use of every minute.

“I thought it best not to say anything down there to-day. About Dennison, I mean!”

“Good forethought, Tom. They would be on our necks for it. Would want to hold us as accessories after the fact, most likely, if they knew it. As it is now, they will never forgive us for stepping in on Henny’s show. They think he’s as guilty as he ever was and that we are as bad for abetting him.”

“What? You mean to say they didn’t believe in the courtroom there to-day, even after they heard what was in the Handbook before Peck came back?”

“It isn’t that they don’t believe really, they won’t allow themselves that much consideration. They had it all cut and dried that Henny couldn’t be anything else but a murderer in cold blood. He’s been as good as guilty for years, in their eyes. No doubt each one has made a sort of covenant with himself or herself that nothing short of his own death would deter the kid from carrying out his threats.

“They have fed on that for years. Been sort of a supplement to their barn-dances and quilting parties. Only diversion they know of. We all possess that morbid trend—more pronounced in some than others.

“Education and intelligence—embodying all the better and more wholesome things that the enlightenment of the human race has been able to produce in the progress of the centuries; if not obliterating the taint entirely, suppress it sufficiently to make it inactive during the course of a normal life.

“But these poor people”—Brent raised his arm in the direction of the Bend and dropped it again in an attitude of dejection, “they feed on their morbidity like a culture does on microbes. And what is more to be wondered at, they seem to thrive upon it. Instead of letting the sunshine into their souls, in this open space where they have the chance to expand and grow

both mentally and spiritually, they close their nostrils to the warm winds and their eyes to the beauty around them.

“Oh, they keep busy all right, those folks down there; they make good use of their mouths and ears, anyway. From the time they’re born until the day they die they talk all evil and hear all evil. They refuse to hear anything else. That’s why they’ll treat Henny like a leper all his life.”

“They won’t get the chance if I know it!”

“Of course not,” Brent went on; “I meant to imply that they would if the chance were given them.

“I could detect it in their faces this afternoon when the old boy was reading Henn’s resolutions——”

“Rememberandums,” Tom corrected, smiling.

“My error, as usual. As I was going to say, I could see the disappointment written all over them as the old duck finished. At first I thought it was the heat discoloring the faces, but it soon dawned upon me that it wasn’t anything but plain downright temper.”

“What were they sore about?” asked the incredulous Tom.

“What were they sore about? Just because that fundamental source, the quintessence of all that meant diversion and pleasure to them, was being snatched from under their very eyes by an alien. They felt cheated and abused after contemplating for so long and looking forward eagerly to the time when Henny would take his last curtain call for killing old Peck.

“After that momentous occasion they could gather in the general store ‘of cold nights’ and wag their empty heads with a sagacious ‘I told you so’ air.

“Then as Time went on the tale would have become so magnified that Henny would have gradually assumed the role of an ogre to the next generation. In the next century he’d be used as a bedtime story to all the bad little girls and boys of Watson’s Bend.”

“It certainly looks that way, I must admit,” Tom commented after Brent finished, “the way those females drew back from the kid and I to-day.”

“There’s no question about it, my dear boy! Look at the loving way they related to you about this place being haunted? Why, their one true love is old man Superstition himself.

“What do you think they’d do to us if we let the cat out of the bag about Ward and Dennison? It wouldn’t be that they cared whether Dennison murdered Ward or not. They’d be mad that we had discovered that the ghost was a live one. It would be heaping insult upon injury in their minds (what they have of them), to take away their only pleasure left. There wouldn’t be a darn thing for them to gloat over if we gave up their ghost now. We better

let Spooks stay put for a while—until we leave here, anyhow. What do you say?”

“O.K.,” Tom assented with a yawn.

“Not keeping you up?”

“Not now.” Tom was stretching himself lazily in his bunk. “How’s the weather out, Brent?”

“Very, very bad for business, Tom.” Brent’s head was out of the opened window sniffing the air. “Clouding up again for more rain; can even smell it. If it keeps on like this all summer I’m afraid our receipts will drop off considerably.”

“They will any way you figure it, you piece of cheese.”

“That last word suggests refreshment before I don my ethereal robes. Will you join me in a midnight snack, dear friend?”

“I should say not! Think I want to be up all night?”

“Ah, Tom, you should cultivate that dormant esthetic sense of yours and drink in the divine beauty of Night instead of doing a mundane thing like sleeping.”

“I will, Brent, the first time you drink in the beauty of morning instead of sleeping until noon!”

“Wow! That was a crack, straight from the shoulder all right.” Brent whistled cheerfully as he went about the making of his snack.

“Brent!”

“At your service, sir!”

“You can oblige me greatly by putting the mocking bird out into the beautiful night. I’d like to sleep.”

Brent whistled a few more notes and then the window came down with a bang.

“No trouble putting the bird out at all, Tom. Just out and away, you see. Anything more?”

“No, you can sign off now, if you will.”

“By all means.”

“Good night, old fanciful!”

“The same to you, Tom, and more than that!”

CHAPTER XXXV

AN ANSWER TO "WHY?"

Tom awakened the next morning to the accompaniment of more rain. He beheld Henny diligently preparing breakfast.

"Looks as if we don't get down to see Sterrett to-day, Henny!"

"No, siree." Henny's face looked brighter immediately, notwithstanding the dull prospects of the day ahead of them. Tom didn't exactly blame him, either.

"Mr. Sterrett always kind to you, Henny?"

"Well"—Henny pondered a minute over the question—"come to think of it, I guess he thought so, anyway."

"Atta boy!" Tom dressed hastily. "The gathering clouds are always worse than the storm itself, you know!"

"I'm glad to hear you talk like that, Tom!" Brent's sleepy voice trailed across the room. "You'll get there with close application."

"There's a little comfort in knowing that. Did you awaken to drink in the beautiful morning, Brent? If you did, I'll say it's plentiful right now!"

"Oh, Tom! And in my weakened condition, too!"

"You'll soon gain your strength when you get up and eat your breakfast."

"What's the use of getting up? Our business is all shot to pieces right now. A fire hasn't any more chance of surviving on a day like this than a snow-bird has at the equator."

"Well said; but there's other things to be done on rainy days!"

"What?"

"After you wash up the breakfast dishes you can clean up around the shack. Henny got the breakfast."

"What's your bit, then?"

"Say, I'd like you to understand that I'm the boss of this shebang—besides, I have to study the map."

"Fair enough, Tom. I noticed, by the way, that there was quite some dust accumulated on the map. By the time I get at my dusting it will be mid-afternoon, so you might as well give me a hand while you're waiting for me to come around to it. Better than sitting doing nothing."

"Brent! Some day——"

"We'll be better friends, eh?"

"Couldn't be better."

Another dawn broke upon the mountainside that was clear and glistening with spidery dew. The air seemed to diffuse a sweetness that morning—a sweetness not of a flower nor part of the earth; an intangible something; that was all. Henny felt it, they all felt it for that matter, and sensed the loss of its presence as they left the mountains behind them and entered the village of Watson's Bend.

There were a few loiterers at the general store who cast a glance or two at the trio as they passed. They walked directly to Farmer Sterrett's house, Tom leading the way.

"Mr. Sterrett," Tom met him at the barn door, "I've come to find out what you intend doing about Henny?"

"You kin have 'im 'n' all he's got long with it." Mr. Sterrett spoke with determination. "I want no part o' him no more with the sin thet's on him. Yere welcome to him and I'll turn him over to you right now with all his fixin's."

Tom wasted neither words nor time about the sin that was on Henny. He transacted his business in the Sterrett front parlor, where the shades had been pulled up for the occasion. The sun was allowed in the Sterrett parlor only on very special days and Christmas.

He signed the papers on an old marble slab-topped table that held the family photograph album and a glass case enclosing a stuffed parrot, whose expression in Death bespoke the fact that even in Life his sufferings in the Sterrett domain must have been of a long and tedious duration.

As Tom left the house and walked out into the road to join Brent and Henny he saw, as he looked back, that the shades were already down in the Sterrett parlor.

"True to tradition," Tom said aloud. "Brent has them down pat all right."

"I see you bear the Golden Fleece, Tom!" Brent hailed him.

"Yes, that's the one good thing you can say about the old critter; he's honest. Well, the kid's not bad off now at all!"

Henny grinned with sheer joy at Tom as he related all that had taken place with the farmer.

"You belong to me now, Henny," Tom spoke with mock gravity. "If you don't behave yourself I'll give you a trouncing."

"Well, you'll never have to."

"I know it, youngster. Now we won't think of what comes after the summer until it's time to go home. Have a real vacation for a change and Brent and I will teach you all there is to know about scouting."

"You can do the teaching, Tom," Brent put in, "I'll have to attend to our business."

Henny's gratitude to his new-found friends was mounting so rapidly in the last few days that he was overwhelmed completely.

On their way back again they found it necessary to stop now and then before they struck the mountains. The sun was gleaming mercilessly down upon the village and there didn't seem to be a breath of air stirring.

"If this keeps up for three days straight," said Tom, mopping his perspiring brow, "everything will be parched."

But then again, as they struck the foothills and finally entered the cool, green mountain paths, that sweetness seemed to come again hovering in the warm air. What was it—so cool, so soothing and refreshing to the weary wayfarers?

"What is it, Brent? Why?"

It seemed strange that Tom should ask Brent why, but there was that something about this lanky, bespectacled young man that gave people the impression he could answer this riddle of the ages.

"Perhaps, Tom, it's because up here there is God and Love and Tolerance and perhaps it's because down there all is Greed and Hatred and Intolerance. I cannot really say!"

CHAPTER XXXVI THE BIGGEST GOOD TURN

Not only did the sunshine glare mercilessly for three days—it stretched on out the whole week through and then came Sunday morning.

“They must be sweltering,” said Tom as he raised his field-glasses.

“I’m glad we’re not in the city if it’s anything like the Bend,” Brent remarked.

“Same here. Glad our phone is O.K. now, with all this dry weather. Something will turn up from it or I’m a poor guesser.”

“There’ll be more than something turning up and you won’t have to guess it. A number of trees, probably, and a few hundred livestock will be included in the program.” Brent sat down after that.

“Henny, old kid, how about getting little Tommy some wood so we can have a decent Sunday dinner?”

The boy, now qualified as a regular scout by his present superiors, was their constant and faithful attendant—always willing but never obsequious. He went out of the door and Tom turned his attention to the contents of their larder. Brent was meditating by the window.

“Say,” Henny shouted as he burst in the room through the open doorway, “I could have sworn I seen some smoke coming out the woods to Chesterville on the Bend side of the brook. I seed it fer a minute and then it went and disappeared.”

“Not very sociable smoke,” Brent interposed, “to disappear as quick as that.”

Tom was to the window, field-glasses in hand, and studied the distant horizon intently.

“Yep!” Tom exploded. “Another one!”

“What?” asked Brent.

“A curl of smoke, of course!”

“Oh, the cute thing!”

“Brent, be serious; there’s a cloud of it coming up now! There’s another! Gosh, I can see some sparks!”

Just then they could hear a faint rumble in the distance and they could see without the aid of any field-glasses that the whole lower portion of the woods leading into the village was ablaze.

“Say, Tom,” Henny said firmly, “I’m goin’ down and see if I kin help Farmer Sterrett. I can’t do much, but it might help a little.”

“All right, little man, you go on and Brent and I will be down there directly. I’ll have to call Barrett about this.”

Henny was down in the village and over to Farmer Sterrett’s house before Tom had connected with Barrett at Chesterville.

He had taken his short cut down the steep clefts in the mountainside, oblivious of the brambles that tore at his face, hands and legs. His only thought was to do his good turn for his former guardian, the man who wanted no part of him that had sin on him.

The desire was rampant in his brain as he rushed through the deserted village streets. The desire to help and do a service for those who wouldn’t believe in him!

He reached the edge of the woods, and as he joined the throng who were heedless of his approach he watched with awe the raging inferno before him. It seemed to screech with mockery to the little handful of people trying to fight the blaze that it would crush all those who dared to oppose his wrath.

Henny never quite remembered how it all happened, but almost without warning he heard a cry. Farmer Sterrett’s house had caught on!

The sun had gone under a black cloud. Then Henny looked and it seemed to be growing fearfully dark. Then a rush of wind came howling down from the mountains and fanned the flames fast and furiously over the village. Every one started running and Henny ran too!

Suddenly he heard Farmer Sterrett’s voice call his name in a shrieking voice. He turned to see that person, crazed with grief over his burning house, running toward him.

“How dare ye, ye little devil,” he was screeching, “come into our village again! You thet has put a curse on us ’n’ burning up our houses! How dare ye, ye little *murderer!*”

Henny was stung to the quick by his words, but he knew instinctively that it was insanity talking. However, the rest of the village had taken up the chase and the poor boy ran on, stumbling now and then, but still managing to keep a distance between him and his pursuers. They were calling and shrieking murderer after him, but he ran wildly onward.

Then he stumbled, fell, and found to his horror that his foot had caught in a wedge. He could not extricate it, try as he might.

He saw them coming! Farmer Sterrett, brandishing a horsewhip, and the rest of the villagers armed with stones. A roar and shrill cries and then Henny felt the sting of the whip on his body and the stones bruising and cutting his face.

He closed his eyes in an effort to protect himself. The horsewhip seemed to sting the very cries that came from his lips. It lashed him and weakened him so that gradually he realized he wasn’t able to cry out any more.

CHAPTER XXXVII MOONLIGHT

It was only a few moments that he was there when Tom and Brent came by and found his poor, bruised, torn and bleeding body in the road.

Enough to say that his friends understood what had happened when they found him utterly deserted at the edge of the blazing village.

The schoolhouse was in flames when Tom and Brent left the village behind and tenderly carried this much misunderstood boy to a more remote home, but none the less kind for that.

As they reached their little abode the rain came down mercifully in time to save any further destruction.

Henny was revived and nursed like an infant that afternoon. His cuts were bathed and his bruises soothed. Sore and swathed in bandages, he insisted nevertheless on sitting down to supper that night.

The rain had stopped and the sun was going down clear and scarlet in the west.

They fixed him comfortably in a chair by the window where he could rest and watch the sunset. Tom and Brent adjourned to the open doorway and sat down for a smoke, chatting inconsequential things for Henny's sole benefit. It seemed that they had only sat there a short time before darkness enveloped them.

"Shall I light up?" Tom asked.

"No, Tommy, not for a while. We are going to have a new moon to-night, do you know it?"

The stars came out glittering and shimmering in their gorgeous splendor. A line, then a light, broke through the deep blue. The virgin queen of the astral sphere had mounted her throne of silver and was casting her light for miles around.

Henny leaned forward and looked down into the valley. He could see it all. The moon made the night as day. He felt a tightening at his heart for a few minutes as he viewed the charred ruins of Watson's Bend.

Down there, he mused half aloud, was his home once. The home of his mother and of his father too. Wolfson Peck was gone also; his house smoldering with the rest. And Farmer Sterrett, who had lashed him that very afternoon, where was he? Where were they all now?

Tom and Brent had approached him and sat down beside him in the darkness, divining his thoughts.

“Never you mind, youngster!” Brent began, putting his arm about Henny’s shoulder. “You’ve done your good turn; the biggest and best good turn a scout can do. You’re more than qualified now!

“Down there,” Brent continued, “they’ve lost their property and their livestock perhaps, but there wasn’t any loss of life. We found that out. It seems to me that what they need down there now is a little enlightenment as the best good turn imaginable. But they don’t want enlightenment, that’s the trouble. They are to be pitied, after all! I never knew how enlightened I was till I saw that bunch. Why, Tommy, even you’re enlightened alongside of them. What do you say we have a game of pinochle to-night?”

Henny only gazed afar, down over the moonlit landscape. “I got to be satisfied a’ready how everything comes out,” he said. “But, anyhow, I got to be sorry about Mr. Peck; I got to always think of that anyhow.”

“Oh,” laughed Tom, “I think the best thing you can do is to baffle that away, Henny. You and I have got to put up with having Brent wished onto us for the rest of the season; we’re more to be pitied than blamed.”

“You ought to be able to stand it if I can,” drawled Brent.

THE END

[The end of *Tom Slade: Forest Ranger* by Percy Keese Fitzhugh]