

WIGWAG WEIGAND

PERCY KEESE FITZHUGH

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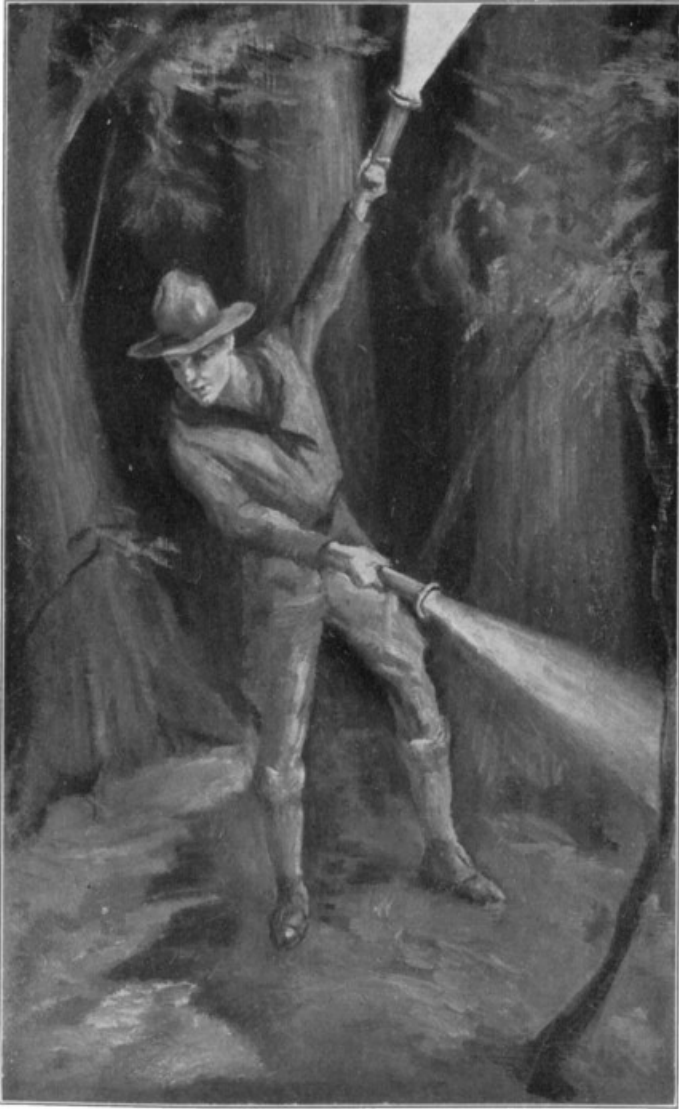
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WIGWAG WEIGAND



HE FLASHED HIS LIGHTS STEADILY IN THE
DIRECTION OF CAMP.

WIGWAG WEIGAND

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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WIGWAG WEIGAND

CHAPTER I

OUT OF THE NIGHT

At first Wig thought he was dreaming. In his semi-conscious mind it was akin to the striking of a hammer on an anvil, this tumult of voices keyed in angry pitch. Then gradually his drowsy senses awakened to the stark reality of things.

He sat upright inside his shelter, startled. A whispering breeze quelled itself into nothingness as if fearful of obtruding into that midnight realm of sound. The hum of mountain life that had so pleasantly lulled him to sleep a few hours earlier had ceased. All living, moving things seemed suddenly held in the tense grip of those three portentous words.

"I'd kill you!" shouted Delmar in those unmistakably clear tones of his, "I'd kill you sooner than I would a helpless animal or any kind of dumb creature. I've never been given to that sort of thing yet, thank goodness!"

Wig threw his blanket aside. Oblivious of his bare feet he jumped up and ran, dodging in and out of the trees toward Delmar's shack. At the thick, moss-covered trunk of a stunted tree he stopped, prudence overcoming the impulse that had first borne him onward.

The yellow light of the lantern gleamed through the partly opened door and threw into relief the figures of the game-warden, Andrews, and the man, Delmar. They stood facing each other, their features distorted with anger, their rifles in hand.

“G’wan,” said Andrews, with a quick, peremptory flourish of his free hand. “You can’t make me believe you’ve never taken a sly shot at something ’round here. Not the way you seem to handle a rifle. No sir!”

“Very well,” Delmar retorted tersely. “I don’t purpose to argue further. I’ve told you that my bullets haven’t been aimed at anything but targets and I meant it. My conscience is clear.”

He gazed squarely at Andrews as he made that declaration. His firm jaw was set and his kind eyes blazed with righteous indignation. As Wig watched him he felt suddenly imbued with faith in this man whom he hardly knew. He wanted to defend his new friend and tell the game-warden that the accusation was unfair.

He *would* tell him! Wig moved upon the impulse and hurried back to his shelter to get into his clothes.

The night air was cool, almost cold. Hurriedly he pulled on one shoe and then the other, listening the while with bated breath to Andrews’ continued tirade.

Dressed, he ran back again and stumbled over a stump. He bruised his leg and stood for a moment nursing it when he heard Delmar’s voice again. What he said was unintelligible to Wig, except that it had a decisive sound. Then the stinging sound of a rifle cleaved the stillness of the midnight air.

Wig was out of the thicket with one step. Delmar stood rigid and Andrews was tottering backward, two—three steps, and finally sank to the ground with a long, stifled gasp. He hugged his rifle close to his enormous chest, the butt resting under his gaping jaw.

Wig felt himself moving forward like an automaton. Horrified, he gazed at the prone Andrews and then at Delmar

who stood like some startled apparition with his rifle shaking visibly in his long, trembling arm and the muzzle pointing groundward.

Their eyes met. Wig's frank blue eyes searched those of Delmar but found in them no trace of guilt. He met the steady gaze of the scout, unflinchingly, but none the less sadly.

Slowly he raised his left arm toward his forehead as if to scatter for all time the memory of that tragic moment. "I didn't do it, Wigwag!" he said in a hushed voice. "I couldn't do it! You believe that, don't you?"

"Yes," said Wig firmly. "Somehow I do."

CHAPTER II

WIG LAUGHS FIRST

Wigwag Weigand was a crack signaler and a scout of the first class. The patrol that had the honor of his membership was none other than the famous Silver Foxes. Roy Blakeley, its hilarious leader, claimed in vociferous accents that that fact was a distinction. No other patrol of the First Troop of Bridgeboro, New Jersey, was as widely heralded as they.

Wig was never so cognizant of his patrol's popularity as when he was a participant in one of Roy's crazy hikes. And that was just it. He was just an ordinary scout at those times—one of the Silver Foxes. And he longed to be the scout extraordinary, the hero of his patrol.

Let not the reader construe that thought of Wig's as an indication of egotism. He had no more than the ordinary boy's ambition to heroism, but he did have more than the ordinary boy's aspiration to worthiness. Singularly, he associated this meritorious trait with popularity and his signaling had never brought him that.

All the scouts of his patrol thought him a good fellow. This recommendation was enough for almost any scout—they were willing to let the praise rest lightly upon Roy Blakeley's sturdy shoulders. But at heart Wig was not entirely satisfied to bask in the light of another's popularity. He wanted his deeds to shine alone.

And why not? He was past sixteen, he would reason. In a few more months he would be a veteran scout with five years of faithful membership as his record. But not one act of his

was there so outstanding that it would ever bring him the warm handclasp of his superiors in Administration Shack nor a vote of thanks from his scoutmaster.

Wig had never saved a life, human or otherwise. At swimming he had shown no great prowess—he had an ungovernable fear of being under water, and to his credit let it be said that he admitted it. He was not an Eagle Scout.

Therefore, one fine summer morning in early July he stood before the bulletin board outside Administration Shack. His eyes were fixed upon the glaring black letters and he stood like a statue drinking in their significance.

The sun shone down upon his black head and the breeze from the lake lightly touched the patch of tanned skin exposed at his throat. He shifted his weight to his left foot and read off the printed words in a jerky monotone.

EAGLE SCOUTS!

ARE YOU GETTING IN LINE FOR
YOUR BIG CHANCE THIS SEASON?

ARE YOU PLANNING ON PACKING
YOUR RECORD FOR THIS SUMMER
FULL OF ACHIEVEMENT?

IF NOT—DO SO NOW!

IT WILL HELP YOU IN THE FINAL
CONTEST. BE THE SCOUT SELECTED
FOR THE RIVER OF DOUBT EXPEDITION.
YOU WILL BRING HONOR TO YOUR

TROOP, YOUR CAMP, YOURSELF! THE CHANCE MAY NOT COME AGAIN!

He laughed softly as he finished reading the bulletin but his quiet mirth was not hearty in sound. Rather it had that quality in it that conveyed to a chance bystander a hint of self-mockery and deep disappointment.

Mr. Ellsworth, Wig's scoutmaster, stood listening. He waited until the hollow laugh had spent itself, then spoke. "That does not do you justice, Wigley," he said smilingly.

Wig turned around, grinning sheepishly. "What?" he asked, fully aware of what his scoutmaster meant.

Mr. Ellsworth nodded his head understanding. "You underrate yourself. Why?"

Wig stared down at his right shoe and kicked some loose earth around the corner of the shack. Then he looked up. "Aw, I don't know," he answered frankly. "Any feller that's been a scout for five years and isn't an Eagle Scout ought to laugh at himself, I think."

"I don't see your point, Wigley," Mr. Ellsworth said, sympathetically. "I would if you had exhausted all that scouting has to offer and came out empty handed. On the contrary, you have more than most Eagle Scouts in your. . . ."

"Signaling," Wig interposed half-heartedly.

"Yes, your signaling," smiled the scoutmaster. "Why do you mention it so indifferently?"

"Aw, because it never made me an Eagle Scout," Wig mumbled. "It never helped me so much that I can see. It never helped me to help anyone else either."

"That isn't all true," said Mr. Ellsworth. "If it hasn't helped you that's your own fault. Nothing done well is done

in vain and I think signaling has helped you more than you realize.”

“Maybe,” Wig conceded, smiling in spite of himself. “But if it has, I don’t know it. That’s all.”

Mr. Ellsworth reached out and gave Wig’s shoulder a fraternal pat. “You’ll know when you most need to know, I guess,” he said. “I wouldn’t worry about it. You have the whole season in which to become an Eagle Scout.”

“I’ve thought that every summer for the last three years,” Wig said a trifle bitterly. “But I go home just the way I come—without being one.”

Mr. Ellsworth sensed the thought that prompted Wig’s statement. He said, “It isn’t your fault, Wigley. Everyone in camp knows that the life saving badge is beyond your reach—that it’s impossible for you to try.”

“Yeh,” Wig grunted disgustedly. “Everybody sort of pities me. I know! I’m worse than a baby—can’t stand my head under water. I’m not afraid—nobody need think that. It just suffocates me like, and I have to get out quick. But to have the fellers pitying me—*man*, I’d rather suffocate!”

“Don’t be foolish, Wigley. No one would ever think of laying it to cowardice. It’s just some queer trick that nature plays on you. Cheer up and make the best of what you have. Our solitary hikes start tomorrow. You can be the first one of your patrol to go. You’ll have twenty-four hours alone—a lot of time to think and be observant. Try and get all you can out of it.”

“I’ll try,” Wig said, brightening.

“I’d go up in the mountains if I were you,” the scoutmaster continued. “Your written report ought to be interesting. There’s bound to be some obstacle for a solitary

scout on a hike in the mountain wilderness. If you're worthy of the Eagle Scout badge you'll get some adventure out of it. Someone has said that 'all trails lead to Rome.' Perhaps you'll find a good one."

Wig laughed heartily that time. "Gee, I hope so," he said. "But don't worry. Nothing great ever happens to me."

CHAPTER III

WHERE THE TRAIL ENDS

Administration Shack was the capital of Temple Camp. From its rustic interior came many rules and regulations and one of them was the solitary hike order (as the scouts called it).

It had been issued to encourage self-reliance and observance in the scouts and was received joyously. Its requirements were much to any scout's liking, asking no more than that he should hike alone to a distance of at least four miles from camp. He was to cook his three meals, build a shelter and find his way back alone the following day. And the most difficult part was that the scout should hand over to his superiors a written report of his activities.

Perhaps that is what Wig dreaded most of all when he started out on his solitary hike. He wondered what activities he'd have to write about, for the cloudless, windless heaven and silent countryside bespoke peace and contentment. Certainly it wasn't an incentive for a scout of the Silver Fox Patrol. They wouldn't call a hike *a hike* unless something happened, ludicrous or otherwise. And he agreed with them thoroughly.

Mr. Ellsworth accompanied him to the outskirts of Temple Camp. He looked at the scout quizzically when they halted. "Which way is it going to be?" he asked. "North, east south or west?"

Wig smiled. "Man, it doesn't make a bit of difference to me," he answered. "One direction looks as exciting as the

other and that's not saying much."

The scoutmaster laughed. "Perhaps not. But you must admit that you have a vast area to choose from. Why not take the path of least resistance?"

"A bee line from where we're standing now?" Wig returned promptly.

"Exactly," Mr. Ellsworth answered. "It saves time in thinking anyway."

Wig followed the line with his bright eyes and noted the thick forests coming within its range. "That's the hardest direction of all," he protested, laughingly.

"Of course it is," said Mr. Ellsworth. "That's what you want, isn't it? Something a little difficult—blazing new trails. You're looking for adventure—excitement, aren't you?"

"Yes, but not work," Wig answered good-naturedly. "I'll try it though."

"That's the talk. Go ahead now. We'll see you sometime tomorrow morning. Perhaps you'll have saved a baby bear from an eagle by that time. It would make a dandy report, Wigley."

"Sure, it would," Wig agreed. "But it wouldn't make me an Eagle Scout, would it?"

Mr. Ellsworth looked at him thoughtfully. Then he shook his hand, heartily. "Be patient," he said. "You'll be everything you desire to be when your turn comes."

Wig went on after that. At intervals he would turn and salute his scoutmaster until after fifteen minutes of steady climbing the thick foliage shut off his view of camp completely. Then he concentrated his thoughts and vision upon the trackless region above him.

It was almost noon when he came out upon a ledge that was fairly free of entangling growths. He sat down to rest and heard the unmistakable tinkle of a mountain brook. Curious, he got up, going in the direction of the sound and came to it within a few minutes.

It plashed along, carefree and gay, under the shadow of austere trees and giant weeds, veering west of the ledge and thence down the mountainside. Wig wondered if its bubbling rivulets ever found their way into Black Lake. He liked to imagine they did, so decided to camp there. It was dim and cool and one had only to take a few steps out to the ledge to see the lake, looking for all the world like an oversized puddle.

He was thoroughly tired and perhaps a little lonely. At any rate it gave him a comfortable feeling to peek through the trees and know that four miles below the ledge was camp ringing with the shouts of the “fellers.” They must be piling in the eats shack, he thought. He could almost hear them.

He wouldn't admit that he was lonely. It was just too quiet, especially after a scout was used to hiking with Roy Blakeley. Consequently, he threw down his knapsack with a vehement gesture just to hear the stillness broken. And on a quest for firewood he scuffed his feet around and over the twigs to hear them crackle noisily. That not being enough he shouted, rather than sang, an old but still popular ditty.

The echo of his efforts delighted him and he set about making a fire and preparing his lunch. As the flames hissed and the bacon sizzled he wished for the noisy, troublesome presence of Pee-wee Harris. He was a pest at times, there was no denying it. But he'd welcome the kid's noise and appetite at a time like this, he told himself.

He whistled half-heartedly as he brought his plate and other things out of his knapsack. A blue jay in a neighboring tree screamed an accompaniment to the frying of the bacon. Wig listened with new interest and hated taking the pan from the fire.

He stuffed a few saltine crackers in his mouth and flopped down on the ground to eat. Suddenly he heard a sound somewhere near. He rested his crunching jaws and listened.

It came nearer and he knew it to be the sound of someone trampling dry twigs under foot. Whether it was human or animal, he could not tell then.

He sat waiting.

CHAPTER IV

DELMAR

Suddenly the sound ceased and Wig looked across the rushing brook. Just beyond two giant oaks stood side by side, their wide low-hung branches intermingling with a great profusion of wild fern. One could stand behind that natural screen unseen.

He felt that someone *was* standing behind it. Instinctively he knew that that someone was watching him—studying his every move. And in turn he gazed at the feathery curtain between the trees.

After a few seconds passed and no further sound came, he jumped to his feet and grinned. His eyes disappeared somewhere in his tanned round face and his frank, generous mouth opened, exposing two rows of teeth. There was open declaration in Wig's grin—a sort of unconscious triumph over fear.

“Come on!” he shouted to the one unseen. “You're it! Now it's my turn to hide.”

There was an audible chuckle behind the fern. The flimsy foliage parted slowly and he saw a flash of red appear between the twin oaks. Then a young man came into view looking a trifle disheveled in his khaki negligee. He had a shock of curly red hair that glinted mischievously in the bits of sunlight that strayed down through the branches.

He looked at the scout inquiringly and his deep blue eyes seemed to sparkle with life. Then the corner of his mouth

drew up in a smile. “So you’re going to hide, eh?” he asked in a clear, boyish voice.

Wig liked him at once. “Not unless you say so,” he answered. “I’ll be it again if you want, but anyhow I’m glad you came. Man, I was wishing I’d have someone to eat with so now you’re invited to stay and have lunch. I’m Wigley Weigand at home and Wigwag all the rest of the time. Some of the fellers in my patrol even call me Wig.”

The stranger laughed pleasantly, “That’s an earful, all right,” he said. “But Wigwag suits me fine. What did you do, wigwag your patrol out of the deep forest when they were lost?” He sauntered leisurely up to the scout and looked longingly at the crisp brown bacon in the pan.

Wig noted that and hastily reached into the knapsack for a can of beans which he opened. “I’m doing this in your honor,” he said. “I made Chocolate Drop (that’s our camp cook) give me extra rations this morning in case I was lucky enough to have someone drop in.”

“That’s a good scout, Wigwag,” the stranger said, flopping down on the ground. “I sure am honored but you didn’t tell me what great deed you did to come by your name?”

Wig liked to hear him speak. He liked the way he had said Wigwag. No one had ever said it in just that manner. “I didn’t do any great deed,” he answered. “I never did anything for my patrol or my troop and that’s why I get mad at myself. Gee whiz, I wish we *would* get lost in a deep forest sometime so I could wigwag them out. Then I’d amount to something.”

“Then wigwagging *is* your specialty, eh?” the fellow asked.

“Yeh, sort of my only one,” laughed Wig. He grew thoughtful for a moment, then: “Say, you seem to know something about scouts, don’t you, Mr.—”

“Call me Delmar,” the stranger interposed quietly. “Cut out the mister part, though. And I’ll confess that I was a scout myself.”

“Gosh!” Wig exclaimed admiringly. “Then you’re still a scout. You know what it says in the handbook, don’t you?”

“Uh huh. Once a scout always a scout. I’m twenty-one that’s all, but I have a feeling that they wouldn’t even want to hear my name coupled with theirs. Not now.” He stared wistfully into the flames.

Wig served the beans and wondered. He waited for Delmar to attack his portion before he spoke. “Gosh, I don’t know what makes you feel like that because in our troop we always want a scout’s name to stay on the list. I bet they do in your troop too!”

“Oh, they would all right, considering,” he said with a suggestion of irony. “Circumstances alter my case, Wigwag.”

“Oh,” said Wig rather apologetically. He felt that he had intruded upon some personal phase of Delmar’s scouting career and by way of saving him from further embarrassment added, “Anyway, I bet you were a peach of a scout.”

Delmar fixed his bright eyes full upon Wig and smiled. “Thanks a lot. It was nice to hear that. I tried to be a peach of a scout. I’ve always tried to be one.”

“Man, you don’t have to tell me. I knew it right away!” Wig exclaimed naively.

Delmar’s answering laugh resounded through the woods. “Well, as long as compliments seem to be the order of the

day, I'll do my share for you. I think you're a peach of a scout but I think your name's *peachier*."

It was Wig's turn to laugh. "Like fun," he said. "I'm five months short of being a veteran scout and one merit badge short of being an Eagle Scout. So what's in a name, huh?"

"More than most of us think. We all learn that sooner or later, but with you it's more than a name to live up to. It's a job."

"Gee," said Wig, not quite following Delmar's philosophy. "I never heard that before. The fellers just called me that because I took to wigwagging right off the bat."

"There you are," Delmar said. "If they called you that they expect just that much of you. Don't have them say 'he used to be Wigwag'. Do you know what I mean?"

"Sure, but don't worry about that. I'd like to be a scoutmaster some day so how could they forget me?"

Delmar smiled. "Human beings are fickle, young scout. Don't fail to remember that. They want to be known by what you are and do, but just do something that can't be explained—like being accused of a crime that you had no part in. See how quickly they forget you. They'll say they give you the benefit of the doubt but in their hearts they don't. I know that well—I've seen it happen."

There was a bitterness in Delmar's tones that didn't escape Wig. He talked like one who has experienced all that he speaks and for the first time the scout was aware of his haggard, worn look and disheveled appearance. Who and what was he?

A dozen questions piled up in Wig's brain, but he did not ask one of them. There was something about Delmar that

held him back—one took his silence for granted and felt that it would be broken in his own good time.

Into such thoughts Delmar intruded. “It’s only fair that I should show you my quarters, Wigwag,” he said. “You’ve taken me without the proverbial grain of salt and now I’ll let you see where I rest my weary head at night.”

Wig’s face registered surprise. “Where?” he asked.

Delmar pointed toward the twin oaks. “About one hundred and fifty feet from here.”

“Gee,” said Wig. “You don’t live here—I mean you don’t stay in these mountains all the time, do you?”

“No,” answered Delmar. “And I hope I don’t have to!”

CHAPTER V

TWO MEDALS

In truth if the shack that Delmar had called his quarters had been any less humble it would have been a shanty. Two rare books lying on the broken, rustic table were all that saved the old structure from being classed in the category of the sordidly decrepit.

A bunk at the left wall and a rusty stove under the back window gave it some semblance of a dwelling. There was also a front window that had long since lost its pane of glass. A suitcase stood under the table on a broken floorboard. Wig drank in the vagabond atmosphere of the place as he stood in the doorway. He liked it immensely.

Delmar looked at his eloquent face and smiled. "This is just the way I found it after I invited myself in," he said. "That is, all except the books. I brought them in my suitcase."

"You don't know who the place belongs to then, huh?" Wig inquired.

"Nope," Delmar answered seating himself carefully on the edge of the table. "I stayed here a day and a night before I unpacked my suitcase and rifle. There were a few of the necessities of life standing on the stove. Canned beans, canned soup and mouldy sugar. When I was certain no one was billeted here I just commandeered the shack, rations and all."

Wig grinned. "Man, did you say you unpacked a rifle?" he queried enthusiastically.

A slight tinge of color crept into Delmar's haggard cheeks, but his eyes smiled into Wig's. "I guess I did say it all right. Maybe it's because I'm conceited about it. I'm as crazy about my rifle as most men are about golf."

"Oh boy," Wig enthused. "That's something I'd be crazy about too if I could use one, believe me! My father won't let me have a rifle but I know I'd be a good shot if I could try it just once."

"Is that a broad hint?" laughed Delmar.

Wig nodded. "Oh, gee! Will you?"

Delmar gazed into space. "I made a solemn resolution not to take it out again," he answered smilingly. "But I might make a concession in your case, huh? Gosh, I know what a thrill it gives me to aim and bump a target on the first count. It makes a feller feel that his rifle is sort of human."

Wig listened with rapt attention. "If you don't want me to I won't ask you again but I'd love to see it. Just to see it would please me very much."

"But not wholly satisfy you," laughed Delmar. "I don't blame you, Wigwag. It's a satisfaction to know that your arm and eye are steady." He got down from the table and reached underneath for the suitcase which he opened and brought out the cherished possession—a gleaming army rifle.

"It's a peacherino!" Wig exclaimed as Delmar handed it to him. "I wish it was mine."

Delmar smiled. "I'll tell you, Wigwag," he said confidentially. "I put it away because I had a little trouble over it. It brought about an argument with a game-warden whose name is Andrews. Right after I came here it happened. He must have heard the shooting and traced it to me because he walked in and accused me."

“What were you shooting at?” Wig asked quickly, knowing the stringency of the game laws in the Catskills.

“Nothing more than the target,” smiled Delmar. “That’s all I ever shot at in my life, so don’t worry. I take no delight in seeing living things expire. I wouldn’t want to use my rifle again if it were stained with blood. In a way I’m still a scout,” he laughed.

“In every way,” said Wig admiringly. “It’s lucky you are because they’re strict up here and if they found you really violated the law it would go hard with you. That Andrews feller must have found you pretty quick.”

“Yes. I hadn’t any idea that I’d see anyone in this wilderness and here you’re the second one in a week’s time.”

“Man, those game-wardens know the mountains like a book. They can find anything when they start out for it.”

The color rose in Delmar’s face again. When he spoke his voice sounded strained. “Well, I convinced Andrews that I was only a target shooter. I had to prove it though. He sure was suspicious. Wanted to know all my business.”

“Some of them do that,” Wig said. “They like to show their authority and act as if they suspect everybody of something.”

“I don’t think Andrews took to me anyway,” Delmar said musingly. “He was peeved because I didn’t tell him who I was and why. The last thing he said was that he’d keep an eye on me.”

“You should worry about him,” Wig said stoutly. Then: “Too bad you didn’t tell him about your scouting record—he would *have* to respect your word. Believe me, I’d have made him if I had been here!”

“I bet you would,” smiled Delmar.

Wig sat down on the bunk. He fumbled with his tie for a moment, then looked up. “Were you an Eagle Scout, Del—Delmar?”

“That’s it, kiddo. Del for short. I like it,” he said, and by way of answering Wig’s question he bent down and brought out from the suitcase two shining pieces of metal attached to fading ribbons. One was an Eagle Scout badge and the other an honor medal. He handed them to Wig. “I’ve carried them with me ever since I got them because they always keep me reminded that no matter what happens I must think of myself last. It isn’t my life that counts, it’s the other chap’s. That’s what I say to myself every time I look at those two chunks of metal. That’s what keeps me feeling like a scout!”

Wig stared hard and succeeded in untying the much abused tie. He was lost in admiration. “Didn’t I guess it right that you were a peach of a scout!” he exclaimed. “You don’t get an honor medal and an Eagle Scout badge without earning it—*believe me! Man*, I wish I was in your shoes!”

“No, you wouldn’t, young scout. Not if you knew what it felt like to be in my shoes,” Delmar laughed ironically.

CHAPTER VI

WITH THE DARKNESS

Under Delmar's instruction, Wig learned to be a sharpshooter. He had a steady aim and missed the mark but a few times. It was a fine showing for an afternoon's lesson and before dark he knew many of the secret tricks of marksmanship.

"You were born to the rifle, kiddo," Delmar told him just before they said goodnight. "You're O.K. and as far as worrying about your Eagle Scout badge—don't! A scout that has your aim is worth more than a badge. Don't forget that."

It was pleasant to hear that from an expert's lips and Wig knew that Delmar was that. He liked repeating those words of praise over and over again. In the seclusion of his shelter he cherished every syllable that the older scout had uttered. Yet somehow he could not make up his mind that being able to aim was worth more than the coveted Eagle Scout badge.

He sat down and untied his shoe laces abstractedly. It had been a joyous afternoon in any case. In point of fact, he had never before been taken in—talked to as Delmar had talked to him. He had treated him as one grown up fellow treats another. And at the first time! That thrill comes to a boy once in a lifetime.

An orchestra of bullfrogs tuned up from somewhere beyond Delmar's shack. Their noisy, guttural notes filled the forest, but Wig hardly heard them. He sat with one shoe off and the other perched ludicrously upon the tips of his toes lost in meditation over his new found friend.

They had talked of cities and places after supper but not once had Delmar mentioned himself. It made Wig wonder in a dreamy sort of way, although he knew from the vivid pictures that his friend had drawn in their talk that he had seen them—perhaps lived in them.

Small voices inside Wig's energetic young brain asked and answered many questions. He told himself that it was enough that Delmar said he was *Delmar*. And the proof of the pudding was his Eagle Scout badge.

He felt that Delmar was truthful. One couldn't help feeling it notwithstanding the young man's reticence. If he was keeping a purposeful silence about his presence in the mountains and at the shack, that was as it should be. One just accepted him and believed in him.

And Wig too was under this spell. As he crawled into his shelter a pang of genuine regret passed through him at the thought of having to leave Delmar in the morning. There was an even chance that he would never see him again.

He turned on his hands and knees and crawled outside again. "G'night, Delmar, old scout!" he called in lusty tones.

A passing breeze faintly rustled the screen of ferns between the oaks and the brook gave an answering tinkle. After that from inside the shack, Delmar's rollicking voice answered, "Goodnight, Wigwag, young scout! Goodnight!"

A sense of peace pervaded Wig after that and the warmth of his blanket and the crooning hum of mountain life lulled him to sleep. But from the shack, hidden by the trees, a faint yellow light glimmered out through the broken windowpane and open doorway. Delmar was sprawled out in his bunk, anxiously scanning the headlines of a San Francisco newspaper.

A great bulk of a man stepped out of the thicket with noiseless tread and walked toward the shack. For a moment he stood back in the shadows, watching Delmar within. Then he brought out a small rifle from under his coat.

CHAPTER VII

WHO?

Delmar's sensitive ears caught the sound of the movement and he thrust the newspaper under the straw mattress quickly. Then he jumped to his feet and walked toward the door.

He looked out into the darkness and the form of the huge man loomed up before him. "Oh, hello, Andrews," he said casually. "You're calling on me rather late, aren't you?"

"There's no special hours for calling in my job," Andrews answered in deep bass tones. "We don't stand on ceremony, believe me."

"I see," smiled Delmar pleasantly. "Won't you come in?"

"Nah," Andrews answered. "This ain't no social call. I'm tracing some shooting I heard this afternoon. It came from up this way."

"I was teaching a young scout some target tricks," Delmar said complacently. "Perhaps that's what you heard."

Andrews sneered. "Target tricks, nothin'. There was some real, honest-to-goodness shooting and it wasn't at no target either! I found this rifle below, too."

"Well, I know nothing about that," Delmar averred. "I can show you mine and the target, for that matter." He turned on his heel to get his rifle.

Andrews stood in the shadows and grinned. When Delmar returned with the firearm he watched him intently. "That ain't no alibi, young feller," he said, gruffly. "Your rifle's evidence enough, ain't yuh got sense enough to know that?"

“Since when was there a law against target practice in a wilderness like this?” Delmar inquired, his voice rising a trifle.

“You ain’t got no business target practicing if you don’t want to get in dutch,” the game-warden answered evasively. “It’s risky having a rifle so handy this time o’ year especially when we’re finding all kinds of evidence that deer is bein’ dropped around here.”

“What do you mean?” asked Delmar indignantly.

“I mean that I found a young deer this afternoon about a half mile below here. And she wasn’t dropped more than fifteen minutes before I come to her. About a hundred yards away I found the rifle.”

Delmar held his rifle before him, the muzzle pointing heavenward. He glanced at the one that the game-warden held and shook his head. “No rifle of mine ever did such a thing,” he shouted angrily. “I’ll bear accusations of any kind but never of killing such beautiful creatures.”

Andrews bent down to Delmar’s height and sneered tauntingly into his face. “Say, there,” he returned in bellowing tones, “you don’t look so gosh-awful chicken hearted that you wouldn’t take a chance at killing a nice young doe.”

Delmar clasped his rifle with cold, trembling fingers. He ached to stifle that unjust accusation in the man’s throat and he stepped forward menacingly while Andrews waited and sneered.

It was the sneer that maddened him for a moment.

Wig had forgotten time, space, everything, until he had spoken those words to Delmar. Then he remembered fully. He realized that he had witnessed a murder and that his new

friend had met his eyes unflinchingly, denying any part in it. And he, a scout of the first class, had given his word that he believed in him.

Who did it?

Instinctively, both young men looked around them, trying to penetrate the black veil of night that enveloped the mountains. An ominous hush seemed to surround it all. Nothing stirred save a stray lock of the dead man's hair caught by a passing breeze.

Wig shuddered and looked away. Delmar grasped his arm with trembling fingers, and whispered, "They got away, Wigwag! Whoever it was, they got away!"

"I guess so," Wig whispered mechanically. "I can't understand how it happened, *yet*."

Delmar stood as if dazed, his eyes transfixed on the ghastly, staring orbs of Andrews. Finally he released his hold on Wig's arm. "We've got to do something!" he said fearfully. "We can't find who did it and *he* can't lie there all night!" He pointed a shaking forefinger at the dead man.

Wig nodded. "I know. Let's look first, though. Some footprints or something—any kind of a clue would help. Which way did the shot come from?"

"Over my shoulder," Delmar answered half-heartedly. "But what's the use? We can't go hunting in this darkness. In any case, Wigwag, I'll be accused."

"Not if I can help it!" said Wig. "I'll go get my flashlight and look. I might find something."

He rushed off to his shelter and got the light. When he came back, Delmar was sitting on the broken down doorstep of the shack, his face buried in his hands.

Wig stopped a moment, a trifle disconcerted. Then he walked over and rather timidly touched his friend on the shoulder. "I'd do anything for you, Del," his voice quivered. "Don't feel bad, because I can prove you didn't do it. *I bet I could!*"

"How?" asked Delmar hopelessly, without looking up. "Some of your bullets went wild today. We can't account for them and Andrews has probably told someone he had it in for me. That's why he came back tonight. He accused me on the first evidence he came across."

"Even so, I could testify," said Wig doggedly. "I'm going to look now, anyhow. What am I a scout for?" He flashed his light and stepped over into the thicket from whence Delmar said the bullet had come.

Delmar looked after him and then at the rigid form of Andrews. He sighed deeply, fearfully, and stood up.

CHAPTER VIII

A PROMISE

Wig hadn't any idea of the time when he started back for the shack. He only knew that his search had been futile. Not one clue had yielded to his efforts. But he took heart when he caught the faint gleam of the lantern light trickling through the woods. Perhaps Delmar would have some suggestion to make when he got there.

A strange silence greeted him, however, as he stepped from the thicket into the tiny clearing. The door of the shack stood partly opened just as before, but no one stirred within or without. And the body of Andrews was no longer there.

A slight depression where it had lain in the dirt was all that remained of the tragic affair. To Wig it spoke eloquently of a swift bullet and a life snuffed out as a candle. It spoke of inexplicable things, mystery and Delmar. But not of doubt.

He shouted his friend's name with all the strength of his convictions. Twice, thrice, his calls pealed out into that tense silence. Even a comforting echo was denied him. In the hush that followed his voice seemed forever lost.

Puzzled, he walked about, inside the shack and out. Then over to his shelter he went and suddenly discovered Delmar's footprints—fresh ones. They went straight east and he followed them until the battery of his flashlight went dead.

He hurried back, thinking of the lantern, and got to the shack only to find that the isinglass was more than half gone from it. It wouldn't do outdoors, he decided. Besides, there

was precious little oil in it, he realized as he shook it carefully.

He stepped out on the doorstep and called once more but the strange silence still held the whole area in its grip. Disheartened, he sat down and hunched his shoulders tight against the jamb of the door. There was nothing for him to do but wait.

The more he pondered the more he realized that Delmar's absence was incomprehensible. And to connect it with the removal of Andrews' body was a little too strenuous for his overtaxed brain. He felt overwhelmed by mystery.

He couldn't and wouldn't believe Delmar guilty. But he wished for him to come back and explain. It was long after midnight and he was getting sleepier by the minute. His head sagged forward at intervals but the vivid thoughts that stalked his mind roughly jarred him back from slumber.

He sat on while the wee hours of morning came and went. His eyes burned for want of sleep and his back began to ache from the unnatural position that kept him awake at his long vigil.

At four o'clock the long, rose-colored fingers of dawn stole upward out of the east. Slowly, but surely, she thrust each black and laden cloud out of her path until a hazy, rising sun placed her in undisputed command of the heavens. It was then that Wig heard the familiar crunching sound of footsteps.

He jumped up and stretched his taut muscles. The sound came nearer; nearer. He listened. From the east it came. Then suddenly he heard the swish of dew-laden branches just beyond.

It was Delmar—*alone*.

Terribly haggard and drawn he looked but his eyes burned bright. There seemed to be a challenge in them as he drew near but Wig knew it was not for him—rather was it for the world that would doubt and question him.

He smiled at the scout ever so faintly. “Gosh, I’m sorry to have kept you up, Wigwag,” he said wearily. “I called to you after you’d been gone about five minutes but I guess you were too far away to hear me. I didn’t realize it would take me so long and I had to act quickly. You can never tell who’s on the job.”

Wig saw that he was thoroughly exhausted and thought his talk was the irresponsible babble of a mind distraught and worried. He followed his friend into the shack pityingly.

“Tell you what,” he said with enforced cheerfulness. “I’ll run over and make you some good strong coffee—black as ink. I’ll fry you some bacon too. It’ll make you feel fit as anything.”

Delmar sank into his bunk and sighed. “You’re the best ever, Wigwag,” he said. “But it had to be done. I just can’t run right into the trap.”

Wig was inclined to wave aside Delmar’s talk. But he would have none of it. He reached out and grasped the scout’s right leg, determined to make him listen.

“I won’t have you entertaining any suspicion of me after you’re gone,” he said firmly. “You’re so willing to take me as I am that you’re entitled to some explanation. You believe that I still live up to the scout laws, don’t you?”

“Betcha I do!” Wig answered. “I’ll always believe it, no matter what.”

“That’s the stuff, Wigwag,” he applauded. “I do live up to them. That is, I try as much as it’s possible. But this thing

happening and an affair that sent me hiding into these mountains makes it difficult. In spirit I can do it, but actually I can't."

Wig stared at him, puzzled.

"Oh, it's easy to explain," Delmar went on. "I did a good turn for a pal and two very old people. But technically I'm out. That is, there's a small price on my red head and consequently I'm not keen about appearing at inquests or testifying at grand juries. The arm of the law is long and incidentally my capture would undo a perfectly good, good turn.

"I'd like to go into detail, Wigwag, but that would take the edge off my good turn. And to quell any rising doubts of yours, I have never stolen so much as a marble and my declaration so recently made to poor Andrews still holds good."

Wig smiled happily. "Gee, you're a puzzle, all right, Del, but honest I believe every word you say. I know there must be some good reason for everything you do," he said breathlessly.

Delmar leaned out and slapped him on the knee. "There is a reason. Enough for you to know that it's an honest one, don't you think so?"

"Hope to tell you," Wig agreed.

"All right then. Now you'll understand why I suddenly decided to make it appear that Andrews fell off that cliff over east. I carried him all the way down the mountain and laid him just above a big rock."

"How can you make it appear that he fell off the cliff when he was shot?" Wig asked. "They'll find the bullet hole."

“I hardly think so.” Delmar answered. “That’s what prompted me to act so quickly. He was shot through the mouth and it won’t be discovered unless someone looks closely. He was just going to speak to me when that sneaking cur aimed at him.”

“Gee, it’s awful,” Wig said in hushed tones. “It’s all awful—I mean that you have to hide and live like an escaped criminal, sort of. If we could only testify they would find that murderer, I bet!”

“Yes, there’s a chance,” Delmar said thoughtfully. “You could testify though, Wigwag. But you’d have to leave me out of it. You’d have to lie that you were talking with Andrews yourself when the shot occurred.” Wig looked away in the distance for a moment. Then: “But that’d be perjury, wouldn’t it, Del? I’d have to swear on the Bible before I testified that I would tell the whole truth and nothing but the truth, huh?”

“Of course.”

“Well, I couldn’t tell the whole truth without bringing you into it,” the scout said as if to himself. “And I’d be committing perjury if I said I was alone with Andrews.”

“Oh, I’m sorry, Wigwag.”

“And you say it would hurt those two old people you did a good turn for, if I bring you into it?” he persisted.

“More than you can realize,” Delmar answered. “My arrest would mean nothing to me. I have no one in the world, Wigwag. Not a relative. So there’s my side exposed. But these two old people—didn’t I tell you when I first met you that it was the other fellow’s life that counted?”

Wig nodded and a mist rose in his tired eyes. Mentally, he reached out and grasped a pair of scales, true scoutish ones

and weighed his questions carefully. They seemed to balance in favor of Delmar's two old people.

With that he turned and extended his firm, browned hand to his friend. "It's a go, Del," he said as their hands gripped tightly. "I'll never tell what you've told me. Never, as long as I live!"

"When I go from here, it'll be as if I never knew you—I mean I'll keep still about ever being near this shack. If I don't talk then I won't have to lie—even white ones."

Delmar sat up as if he couldn't believe his ears. "You mean you aren't going to testify—*at all*?" he asked.

"Nope!" Wig answered. "Never!"

CHAPTER IX

VOICES OF THE STORM

Wig went back to his shelter and made a fire. In half an hour the piney air mingled with the aroma of freshly made coffee and the savory odor of frying bacon. It dispelled for a time memories of a tragic night.

Delmar joined him and they ate in a protracted silence. The sun came out and soon went scurrying back under a gathering cloud. Wig looked at his friend. "Man, I'm sleepy, Del," he said. "I'd like to pack up here and take a short nap in your shack before I start back to camp. I'd like to do that to sort of remember it by."

Delmar nodded. "I don't know what's to prevent you. For that matter I'd like to sleep before I go on myself."

"Go on!" Wig repeated. "Where?"

"I wish I knew. How do I know what Andrews has told about me. If someone came looking for him here it would be tragic."

"I don't think anyone would come before noontime. You could be miles away by then. We'll sleep for three hours, huh?"

"You bet. Then me for the high road and the by road."

"Gee, I think that's awful!" Wig expostulated. "Can't you settle down somewhere?"

"I can't tell now," Delmar sighed. "But don't worry, Wigwag. It'll be over some day and I might even be able to call on you down in Bridgeboro."

“Gee, I’d be glad to see you!” Wig exclaimed. “I’d like the fellers in my troop to see you too.”

Wig removed all traces of his camp after that and packed up. Then they walked over to the shack Delmar insisting upon the scout sleeping in his bunk. “Like fun I will,” Wig said, “I’ve got my blanket to sleep on and I’ll soon be saying good-bye to you so don’t say no, Del.”

“All right, have it your own way,” Delmar said. “You have a long way back to your camp, that’s all.”

“I’ll feel as fine as anything in a couple of hours—you’ll see.”

They left it at that and Delmar was too weary to insist further. In ten minutes he was snoring softly in his bunk and Wig was sleeping the sleep of exhaustion stretched out on his blanket over the rotting floor boards.

The hours passed swiftly by. Noonday came and went and a great horde of leaden colored clouds slowly veiled the sun. An ominous rumble shook the mountain top out of its afternoon lethargy and grew in alarming volume as it rolled down the pine covered slopes and into the green valleys below. In quick precision the lightning zigzagged imperiously across the heavens. The storm was on.

It was not the moaning of the elements that slowly awakened Wig nor was it rain swishing through the broken windowpane. It was something intangible, a distant alien note, small and indistinct in the path of the deep-throated storm.

Its tiny echo beat like a child’s hammer upon the scout’s semi-conscious mind. Gradually his senses grasped the sound and bade him waken. It was like struggling out of a nightmare.

He sat up, bewildered. It took some seconds for him to realize where he was and why. Then it suddenly occurred to him that the alien note was tangible, distinct, filling him with a strange foreboding. Some sixth sense brought him to his feet quickly and drove him outside to listen.

There in the pelting rain he strained his whole attention to the steadily growing sound. After a minute or two he decided it was coming from the east—down in the valley. He pushed aside the rain soaked ferns and hopped across the brook. Then he cautiously approached the ledge.

He couldn't make out Black Lake at all. The valley seemed all mist and water. But below him, about half a mile, were figures moving upward. He grasped the rock with both hands and leaned far over.

Two of the figures looked to be running ahead of the others—sometimes almost leaping. A flash of something dark would be revealed against the wet, green foliage and the two figures would hurry forward in pursuit. Then the dismal note struck him forcibly and made his arms and legs feel limp and weak.

It was the baying of bloodhounds!

CHAPTER X

ESCAPE

He did not stop to listen or look further but rushed back breathlessly into the shack. Delmar was still sleeping, snoring complacently while his life was being hunted.

Wig shook him roughly and startled him into wide-eyed wakefulness. "You shouldn't o' touched Andrews' body, Del," he said. "You should have left him where he fell 'cause now they've got your scent good and proper."

"What? Who?" Delmar asked, jumping to his feet.

"Bloodhounds!" answered Wig.

"*Bloodhounds?* Oh—" Delmar whitened perceptibly. Then: "Where?"

"Up the mountain they're coming, Del. Straight for here," Wig said in hurried tones. "I couldn't tell how many men, but anyway it's awful. They must have discovered——"

Delmar leaned over and brought out his suitcase. He jammed his books inside and snapped it shut. "I've got to take it," he said. "It wouldn't do to leave anything behind. Anyhow, you beat it, Wigwag! I'll go on up further where it's thicker. Maybe they won't find me so easily but you head for the west and turn back when you think it's safe. Then you won't have to talk to them at all."

They were outside and Wig clutched Delmar's arm. "*Listen!*" he said, fearfully.

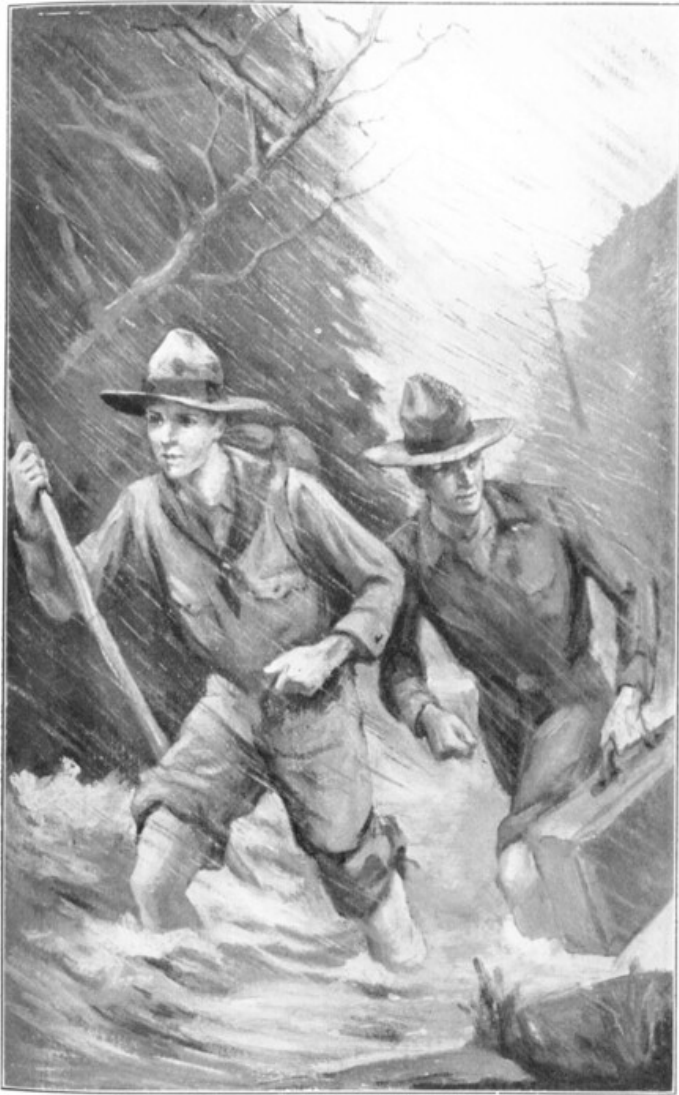
They listened, tense with fear. The baying had increased and reached their ears with amazing clarity. Delmar extended his brown hand. "Good-bye, Wigwag, young scout," he said.

Wig looked at him and said, “Good-bye nothing, Del. Think I’m going to leave you when you’re in danger, huh? I’m not a quitter. Anyway, they’d get my scent as soon as they come here. Mine and yours both. C’mon, I think I have an idea!”

Delmar protested but Wig ignored it entirely. He pulled him by the arm into the thicket and took a circuitous route to the brook. “It’ll give them a longer way around,” he explained. “Another thing, the rain might make it harder.”

Delmar made no answer. He could only look at Wig in amazement, and wonder at his courage. At the brook they removed their shoes and socks and put them in the suitcase for safe keeping.

Wig led the way upstream and they waded in silence, intent only on putting distance between the dismal baying and themselves. The scout had thoughts that kept him occupied; so also had Delmar. And always in those thoughts mingled the fear of capture—the fear of, they knew not what.



WIG LED THE WAY UPSTREAM AND THEY
WADED IN SILENCE.

It was strenuous wading against that torrential little stream and after two hours of continuous plodding they suddenly realized that the ominous baying had been stilled. At least it did not reach their ears and Wig sighed thankfully.

They allowed themselves a short respite, climbing up on the bank, rain soaked and weary. Wig glanced at Delmar's serious face and grinned. "Say, Del," he said. "I just thought how we must have looked awful funny, you and me. You with your suitcase and me with my knapsack, wading a brook."

Wig's appreciation of a humorous side of the tragic situation brought a faint smile to Delmar's lips. "Your funny-bone is pretty well developed, young scout, to get a kick out of this. I guess we do look rather queer eluding our pursuers and carrying baggage. Still we might as well have stayed behind as to leave it. I would feel better if I'd left you."

"Well, I wouldn't," said Wig. "Those hounds would have followed me right to camp. Then what would happen? Jiminies, it's bad enough as it is but to come after me—man, I'd *have* to tell. I don't want to see you get in any more trouble if I can help it."

"What about yourself, Wigwag?" Delmar asked.

"I'll wait till I'm sure they're not hunting you any more," Wig answered.

"And then?"

"Then I'll stroll back and tell them I liked my solitary hike so much I wanted to stay longer."

Delmar shook his head. "I'm afraid your scoutmaster wouldn't take to that. They're likely to be worried at your not showing up today."

"Maybe, but they'll know I'm not lost."

"How?"

"Oh, I don't know. Anyhow, we better be moving on, Del." And Wig slid feet first back into the stream.

“I’ll never forgive myself if you get into trouble over this,” Delmar said. “I’m not worth it, Wigwag.”

“You leave it to me, Del,” Wig said with a conviction that he determined to feel. He started on; then: “You said yourself it’s the other fellow’s life that counts, didn’t you?”

“Yes, but when I happen to be the other fellow that alters the situation. I told you I haven’t anyone worrying. . . .”

“That’s it,” Wig interposed. “That’s why I want to see you out of this. I may not amount to much as a scout—you know what I mean. I’m not an Eagle Scout. Anyhow, I’m somebody that’s worrying about you so it doesn’t matter what kind of a scout I am.”

“You’ll learn some day what kind of a scout you are,” Delmar said feelingly. “But I’m going to leave that honor to your troop and your scoutmaster.”

“Oh, boy!” Wig laughed ironically. “There’s not a chance in the world of that happening. Not a chance!”

CHAPTER XI

WILDERNESS

Hours passed by—hours in which they stumbled rather than waded along the rock-covered bed of the stream. Their clothes were dripping with water and clung to their shivering bodies. And the storm swept relentlessly about them.

After a time the stream narrowed and it wasn't long before they could sight its source—a little lake snuggling under the frowning peak of the mountain. They stopped and looked around.

Delmar trudged listlessly toward the bank and climbed up. "Here's where we stop, young scout," he said. "I'm ready to drop."

"Same here," Wig said following him. "My stomach tells me we should have eaten five hours ago."

"I'm too hungry to be hungry any more," Delmar smiled sadly. "You can get into that state, you know."

"I wonder what time it is?" Wig asked.

"Nearer evening than anything," Delmar said scrutinizing the slate-colored heavens. "There ought to be sufficient distance between ourselves and that terrible noise."

"There must be," Wig said. "They've probably followed our tracks to the brook but I don't think they'd bother any further because they wouldn't know whether we went upstream or down. They'll want to wait until the rain stops anyway."

"Well, they'll be out in full force in the morning, you can bank on that," said Delmar. "They'll enlist the aid of your

camp, I'd like to bet."

"Gosh!" Wig exclaimed. "I never thought of that. Anyway, it would take time and we're almost on the summit. We can sleep a few hours and see if we can't get out of here some different way."

Delmar looked at him thoughtfully. "In any case you're to go back to camp tomorrow," he said firmly. "I won't be the cause of you getting in wrong. *You're* not being pursued—it's me."

"Aw, I know," protested Wig. "Everything'll be all right."

"I'm not so sure about that," Delmar returned. "That's why I'm determined to see you start back as soon as we have a little rest." With that decided they pushed their way west of the brook and into the bordering woods. They did not beat down the thicket in their path for fear of leaving behind any telltale signs on the morrow. Instead they crawled through and over much of the little jungle growths and at last found a spot dry enough to give them shelter.

A premature darkness had settled over their hiding place but the bit of sky they could see through the tall trees was still in the throes of a stormy twilight.

They ate a hurried meal before spreading their ponchos under the broad protecting limbs of the closely grown trees.

It was pitch dark when they rolled themselves up in the one blanket, wet clothes and all. Perhaps they had never felt so uncomfortable in their lives. At any rate Wig thought so but the hope that he had saved his friend from discovery helped him to endure it. He realized then that there was a supreme satisfaction in counting the other fellow first.

They snuggled close together and soon the warmth of their bodies drove out the moisture in their clothes. Sleep

stole upon them and though the storm swept on and the hounds might bay miles below they heard it not.

CHAPTER XII

THE INVADERS

It was dawn in the grim, gray skies but in the forest no light had penetrated. An owl hooted its eerie farewell to the last lingering shadows of night and awakened Wig with a start.

He lay and listened but the nocturnal disturber did not hoot again. Slowly a pinkish glow crept over the topmost limbs of the trees and he knew that morning had come. He nudged Delmar.

They were a sorry looking pair to look upon. Their clothes were in a thousand wrinkles and mud plastered them from head to foot. But their spirits were good despite the fact that Wig had no more to offer than a few saltine crackers for breakfast. He hadn't counted on staying away from camp over forty-eight hours; neither had he counted on having a guest to feed for that length of time.

They pushed on through mile after mile of trackless forest and at noon struck a trail going downhill. Gradually the thicket gave way to miles of weeds and then they sighted a house. "It's a pretty good walk from here," Delmar commented as they stopped to view it. "But it's comforting to look at."

Wig glanced at him hastily. "Do you suppose Andrews told anyone what you looked like?" he asked hesitantly.

Delmar smiled. "Why, do you think I'm being broadcasted—khaki, red hair and all, eh?"

“Gee, you can’t tell,” said Wig fearfully. “I was just wondering.”

“Don’t worry, Wigwag. I’m prepared for any such contingency. I have civilian’s clothes in my suitcase—a suit I bought before I struck this doggone wilderness. And I have a cap to hide the flames on my head.”

Wig laughed. “Gosh, I’m glad of that. Anyhow, they wouldn’t recognize you so quickly, that’s sure.”

Delmar looked at him sharply. “You haven’t the least doubt in your mind about me, Wigwag, have you?”

Wig seemed puzzled. “You mean—you mean about Andrews?”

Delmar nodded.

“Not for a minute,” Wig declared. “Do you think if I thought such a thing that I’d be helping you to get away? Gee, Del, I’m too much of a scout for that!”

“I hoped so, but I wanted to make sure,” Delmar said. “I wanted to know that you did it because you believed in me. And you do?”

“Bet your life!”

That settled it. If there had been doubt in Wig’s mind ever, it was swept away with Delmar’s question. He had never felt such genuine trust and friendship for anyone before.

About mid-afternoon they reached a clump of woods and a half mile beyond that spread a little village. Delmar announced that he was going to change his clothes. Wig kept watch for him and felt not a little awed and disturbed by the sight of the civilization from which he had helped his friend escape.

He did not know why but the thought annoyed him and he was glad when Delmar appeared from behind the trees. Wig

hardly knew his friend in the conventional attire of the city.

“Sort of surprised, eh, Wigwag?” he asked.

“Man, you look different!”

“I don’t feel different. I . . .”

“What’s that?” Wig whispered fearfully.

“What’s what?” laughed Delmar.

Before Wig had time to answer the unmistakable sound of human voices fell upon their ears. There seemed to be several of them and the sounds came from the region they had just traveled.

Wig grabbed Delmar’s arm and looked frantically about. There were some tall weeds away to the left and beyond them a few broad trees. They ran for them with all the speed they could muster.

Delmar looked at him wonderingly. “I didn’t hear any baying,” he whispered. “Do you think it’s *them*?”

Wig shook his head. “We’d hear it if the hounds were with them, all right. But I don’t think they are. I think I know the voices—they’re fellers in my troop. I’m sure of it!” The voices came nearer and they hugged the protecting trunk of the tree. The familiar, arguing tones of Pee-wee Harris, whom Wig had laughed at and often teased, now made him shudder with fear.

For a few minutes the voices seemed not to be drawing nearer and Wig thought the boys had stopped in the little clump of woods that Delmar had just left. He suddenly felt cold as the arguing tones boomed forth again. A light bantering voice answered. “Sure, they look like fresh tracks!”

Wig shuddered.

The voices and footsteps sounded perilously near. Wig feared to breathe until he was sure they had passed by without pausing. Then he grasped Delmar's coat sleeve with genuine relief and together they peered out from behind the tree.

Four scouts had passed; three tall ones and one short one. One of the tallest was Roy Blakeley, Wig's own patrol leader, and the other two were fellow members.

The short scout was none other than Pee-wee Harris, leader of the Chipmunk Patrol, also of Bridgeboro's First Troop. Wig had accompanied them all on just such hikes—hikes too numerous to mention. Now he watched them fearfully, eagerly waiting for them to pass out of his sight—out of Delmar's sight.

Suddenly Pee-wee lifted a good sized stick up to his full height and thrust it eloquently over his shoulder. On the end of it, he had draped two khaki garments which dangled ridiculously against his diminutive body as he hiked along.

In his booming tones he shouted, "That's what comes of being observant because if I didn't observe those spiked footprints and make you fellers stop we wouldn't have found these army clothes."

Delmar pressed his fingers on Wig's arm.

"What are you going to do, keep them for souvenirs?" Roy Blakeley called back.

"That shows how much you know," Pee-wee answered. "They might turn out to be a clue or something, how do I know! Even they might have something to do with that Andrews murder or maybe there were two murders. You can't tell!"

By that time the little party had passed too far away for the listeners to hear more. The sun was shining but the air was humid and stilled the echoes quickly.

When a bend in the trail had hidden the hiking scouts, Wig and Delmar emerged and started on again, silently. A half hour passed before either spoke.

Then Wig stopped and wheeled around, facing his friend. “Del, you shouldn’t have left your clothes in those bushes! You should have buried them because if there’s a safety pin on the summit of this mountain Pee-wee Harris would be sure to find it.”

Delmar smiled. “I didn’t bury them because it would have been like burying myself,” he said. “And I don’t have to do that! It’s just for a few weeks and then I can face the world again. Will you wait for me to explain the whole business then, Wigwag?”

“*Will I!*” Wig exclaimed. “I’d wait if it was years—just like I told you before.”

CHAPTER XIII

CROSSROADS

The road they were on went direct to Catskill. So did the road to their left, but it was longer by a good mile and a half. Delmar announced that he would go that way.

“You get to camp as quickly as you can,” he told Wig. “I can afford to take my time.”

There were many things Wig would have liked to say—questions he wanted to ask, but he could not bring himself to ask them. All he said was, “Be careful when you get to Catskill, Del. And when you can face the world come up to camp and just ask for me. Don’t forget!”

Delmar smiled. “Something tells me we’ll meet again, kiddo. I’ll see to it that we do! What do you say?”

“Betcha life!” Wig answered.

Delmar held out his hand and the scout gripped it. Then they parted.

Wig trudged on without looking back. He didn’t have the heart to look. And strangely enough he felt utterly weary now that he was alone. His hunger suddenly became unbearable. Odd that he didn’t feel it or think of those things before, he thought. But Delmar had a way of making a fellow put up with things.

He remembered that Delmar had not complained of his plight nor had he made any mention of how he was going to get along during the weeks that he would have to stay in hiding. Wig wondered if he had any money to buy food and

instantly felt ashamed of himself and determined to bear his hunger and weariness with grace and goodwill.

Consequently he marched down the main street of Catskill with a jaunty air. And although he felt every bit of the bedraggled, weary scout that he looked, his spirit was equal to any occasion.

He stopped in a lunch room and ate heartily even to the extent of sacrificing the price of his bus fare back to camp. He could not even resist dessert. When he left he was not sorry to have foregone the ride back. He told himself that the miles ahead would be nothing.

Twilight set in misty and humid and when he had gone about a mile he heard the sound of a bus coming along behind him, its heavy cord tires gripping the smooth road. He drew over to one side and into a shadowy ditch until it passed.

He was sure he had heard the laughter of scouts as the big machine passed, and felt quite lonely. It was one thing to be hiking with his patrol and another thing to be hiking alone. He resented the fact that they were riding after having been hunting Delmar—his friend.

He had not admitted it to himself before nor so much as suggested it to Delmar but he knew that Roy and Pee-wee and the others had been out after his friend that very afternoon. It seemed incredible that his own comrades could be hostile to one whom he held in high esteem and he felt a slight bitterness toward them for it. Secrecy was having its effect upon him.

He hurried along with the thought that he must get into camp and get his clothes changed before anyone saw him. Nothing but an iron would take the wrinkles out. He was

silently thankful that it would be dark when he got there. Everyone ought to be at campfire, he told himself.

It was pitch dark and starless when he reached “the stepping off place of Temple Camp.” Someone had dubbed it that because it was there that the bus and mail wagon stopped. An old bench covered with carved initials had rested many a weary scout coming back from a long hike. And the outgoing, homeward-bound scout often sat down on it merely as an outward expression of regret. It was symbolical of summer, of camp and of scouting.

And so Wig sat down, weary and not a little troubled. He had never disregarded a camp rule before, had never told a lie to his scoutmaster. He realized that it wasn't as easy to think of now as it had been when he was with Delmar.

After all, he argued with himself, Delmar's life was worth more than disregarding a mere camp rule or telling a lie. They couldn't know that his friend's trouble came of doing a good turn and that he wasn't responsible for Andrews' death. Someone in the woods did it, possibly an enemy. At any rate, Wig felt a righteous indignation growing in his soul at the thought of the questioning he was soon to get.

His hand gripped the back of the bench and he felt some of the larger initials that had been carved by some past hero of Temple Camp. Then his fingers traced out the initials T. S. and he smiled.

T. S. meant Tom Slade, now camp assistant, but formerly a hoodlum of Bridgeboro's slums. Tom had risen, there was no doubt of that. He had made a fine war record for himself and his claim to heroism was the pride of camp.

A flame of hope leaped up in Wig. Perhaps he too would some day be in Tom's exalted place and render the same

heroic good turns. But no, he whispered to himself, he could not even qualify for a life saving badge, much less an Eagle Scout badge. He decided that his aspirations were all in vain.

Impulsively, he pulled his scout knife out of his pocket and felt along the knotty log until he found a smooth place. Then swiftly and dexterously he carved into the hard wood his initials, W. W. W. Alongside of them he put P. S. and said aloud that they stood for punk scout.

After that he started down Jeb's trail, as the Temple Campers call it. This is a beaten path which cuts through the sparse woods to the lakeside. When he came out into the open he could see the glow of campfire lighting up the faces and figures of the scouts sprawling in various attitudes around it. And the voices rang joyously, echoing and reechoing across the lake.

He walked cautiously, watching the shadowy figures as he cut across to his patrol cabin which he reached unobserved and opened the door into the dark interior, groping his way to his bunk.

With a heavy thump his knapsack found its way to the floor. Sighing wearily, he threw himself down upon the soft, clean sheets meaning to take off his telltale clothes and shoes in a few minutes. The voices from the campfire sounded reassuring and his bunk had never felt so comfortable before. In three minutes he was asleep.

An hour later, several members of his patrol were using every method known in scouting to awaken him. After they had removed his mud-caked shoes and tickled his feet for a given period without getting more than a perfunctory grunt for their pains, they decided he must be unconscious or worse. Therefore, Mr. Ellsworth was called, then a doctor.

In his dreams, Wig heard his scoutmaster telling someone that he must have been lost for twenty-four hours or more and that the terrible condition of his clothes proved it. Then the someone answered that he'd soon fix him up—it was just a case of exhaustion and his clothes would have to come off.

Wig awakened.

CHAPTER XIV

SHADOWS

He sat up, sleepy-eyed and wondering at the spectators surrounding his bunk. He saw them all through a haze—a strange man, Roy Blakeley without his smile, Westy Martin and Doc Carson; all of them looking quite funereal. And Mr. Ellsworth stared down upon him, anxiously.

“What’s the matter?” he finally blurted out, rubbing his burning eyes.

“Are you quite yourself?” asked Mr. Ellsworth.

“Sure!” Wig answered. “Why not? What’s matter?”

“Nothing with us,” the scoutmaster told him. “We were anxious about you. When and where did you come from?”

“Same as I went,” Wig answered, not very convincingly. “Hiked it just the same both ways.”

“Naturally,” Mr. Ellsworth said. “Also we can see you’ve hiked considerably. You were expected back yesterday, Wigley. We thought you were lost when you didn’t show up last night.”

Wig was fully awake but some sixth sense made him feign sleepiness still. “*Me lost?*” he mumbled. “Nah, not me. I just wanted to stay longer. That’s all.”

Everyone was watching him and the scoutmaster stared straight into his eyes. It made him feel decidedly uncomfortable. “If you weren’t lost,” Mr. Ellsworth said, slowly, “how did you get your clothes and shoes in that disreputable condition?”

“Got caught in the rain,” Wig yawned audibly. “Tired out. Didn’t sleep so well last night.”

“Hmp!” said the strange man. “Well, I’m not needed here, after all.”

“I guess not, Doctor,” said Mr. Ellsworth. “I’ll see you in my cabin in a few minutes.” The doctor nodded and went out. Then the scoutmaster turned to Wig. “Of course you must have known that the camp would be alarmed over your absence. There were over a hundred scouts combing the woods and mountains for you today, including your own patrol. Do you think it was very commendable of you to stay away so long knowing that your absence must cause alarm?”

Wig felt he was being pushed to the wall and resented it. He decided to say nothing and lay back on his pillow, indifferently.

Mr. Ellsworth waited a few seconds. Then he started toward the door. “Your behavior is strange, to say the least, Wigley,” he called back over his shoulder. “I think you had better come in and see me right after breakfast tomorrow.”

The door shut and Wig turned over on his side, facing the wall. He did not want to talk to his companions. Indeed, he felt strangely alienated from them. He imagined that somehow they would guess his secret, and silence was the path of least resistance for him.

In spite of his fatigue, he did not sleep until the wee hours of morning. His mind was in a state of chaos as to what Mr. Ellsworth would say to him and what answer he would be able to make. He determined not to lie if he could help it—he’d just not answer the questions at all.

It seems incredible that secrecy can turn the tide of one’s life. But it did that very thing to Wig. He rose the next

morning, sullen and resentful, and spoke not a word to any of his companions. He knew that they expected some sort of explanation and he determined not to give them any.

He walked to the “eats shack” alone and ate his breakfast in stubborn silence. The eyes of all the scouts that had hunted for him and worried about him the day before were seeking him with kindly scrutiny.

Inwardly he squirmed under those glances and told himself that he disliked them for it. No one had the nerve to ask him right out and out where he had been, he mumbled under his breath.

In that frame of mind, he strolled toward his scoutmaster’s cabin.

CHAPTER XV

PENALTY

Wig kept his eyes averted as he entered the room. Mr. Ellsworth sat at his desk and watched him. "Well?" he said.

Wig said nothing and stared into space. The scoutmaster drummed on his desk with a stubby pencil. "You have only to say where you were yesterday, Wigley."

"I did say," said Wig. "I said it last night."

"What?"

"That I liked it so much I stayed longer."

Mr. Ellsworth looked straight at him. "Boys like yourself aren't that fond of being alone, especially in the rain. And I don't think you've suddenly proved yourself an exception to the rule. Not overnight."

Wig scuffed his left foot over the floor. He couldn't find anything to say. He hadn't a thought. Then his scoutmaster's voice pierced the vacant sphere about which his mind was revolving.

"A peculiar coincidence has resolved itself out of all this, Wigley," he was saying. "During your absence a game-warden was found murdered just west of here. It's a mystery who the murderer is but the first searching party followed a scent up to a shack in just about the same direction that you took."

Wig hated the flush that stole into his cheeks. Confusedly he said, "Well, that doesn't make me the murderer, does it?"

Again Mr. Ellsworth fixed his eyes upon him. "No," he said, patiently. "It just happens that a scout's footprints were

discovered in many places between that shack and a place across the brook where evidences of a recent camp site were found.”

The flush in Wig’s cheeks deepened. But he couldn’t speak. Evidently, Mr. Ellsworth did not expect him to. “Those tracks were followed carefully,” he went on. “Some of your own patrol were in that search, Wigley, and they took an impression of the footprints. Strange to say those made by spiked shoes correspond with yours exactly.”

“Gee, there’s lots of spiked shoes my size!” Wig exclaimed in shaking tones. He felt that things were suddenly rushing in upon him.

Mr. Ellsworth nodded. “But not found under the same circumstances. The first party traced them as far as the brook. Another party led by Roy Blakeley found them again on the west side of the mountain. And as they passed the old bench at the head of Jeb’s Trail they found your initials freshly carved into the wood.”

“Gosh, is that so awful if I went down the west side of the mountain?” Wig asked in a shaking voice. Something cried within him, “I won’t tell! They can’t make me!” But aloud he said, “It isn’t a crime to carve my initials.”

“No, it isn’t,” said Mr. Ellsworth. “But it is a serious matter when one’s footprints accompany those of a hunted murderer.”

Instinctively, Wig stepped back. But in the midst of his confusion, Delmar’s frank smile flashed across his mind. What did they know? He asked himself swiftly. He held his head up defiantly and determined that his only course must be to lie out of it. *He’d have to!* For Delmar’s sake!

“Sure, I met a feller,” he said hoarsely. “I just took a hike with him across and down the mountain. I left him near Catskill and if he was a murderer I didn’t know it. Gee whiz, I didn’t know anything about him hardly except that he treated me fine.”

Mr. Ellsworth stood up. “If that is true, Wigley, why did you lie in the first place?”

“Aw, because,” he stammered. “Aw, I don’t know.”

“Because you lied at the start,” said Mr. Ellsworth severely, “do you know that the police may charge you with aiding and abetting a criminal’s escape?”

“I didn’t aid a criminal to escape,” Wig protested, feeling he had at least told the truth about that.

“I said the police may think it, Wigley,” the scoutmaster returned. “I’m sure you wouldn’t do it, not wilfully. But you were evidently mixed up in it somehow and how I do not know. At any rate, it is past and it probably wouldn’t do much good to have the police question you. I believe you’ve told me the truth about the man as far as you know. But what you haven’t explained is why you didn’t tell me the truth at first and the real reason for staying away from camp.”

“Aw, gee whiz,” said Wig, wishing the interview over. “I told you all I knew and I’m back here, so what’s the difference?”

Mr. Ellsworth walked over to him. “The difference is this, Wigley—it’s a flagrant violation of camp rules to do what you have done. The administrative body of Temple Camp has given ample warning to the scouts that the rule must be obeyed and you were not ignorant of the penalty when you violated it.

“The worst part of it is that you will not speak and absolve yourself. I am not administrator here. I could not help you if I wanted to. But I’m afraid your scouting record will not help you any now.”

Wig clasped his hands nervously. “Do you mean . . .” he began.

Mr. Ellsworth nodded. “I’m sorry, Wigley,” he said. “Favoritism cannot be shown and you’ll have to take your punishment like a man. You’re slated for dismissal over at Administration Shack this morning.”

Wig gasped. “You don’t mean I’ll have to go home, do you?”

“I’m afraid so,” answered the scoutmaster. “You’ll be given your expenses home.”

“Man, that doesn’t seem fair!” he exclaimed brokenly.

“Would you say it was fair to break camp rules?” Mr. Ellsworth asked him. Then: “Your money will be given to you over there, Wigley. When you get home, tell your parents the truth. Perhaps then some way can be found of reinstating you. Any of your superiors here will be happy to listen to any logical reason you have to offer for your singular behavior.”

Wig did not stay to say good-bye to his scoutmaster. Tears burned his eyes. He turned blindly and rushed outside.

CHAPTER XVI

THE YEAR?

Wig's departure from camp was little known except by the members of his patrol. They would have liked to speak some reassuring word to him but he would have none of their sympathy. As he swept angrily out of his cabin, even Pee-wee Harris stood aside in awe.

Wig sought out Tom Slade and asked him to take care of his clothes until he sent for them later. Tom knew the whole story and in his own way tried to reach Wig, but to no avail. He was in no mood to be reached and hurried away from the camp's assistant manager feeling that he too was in some way responsible.

Wig adjusted his knapsack and walked up Jeb's Trail with a heavy and bitter heart. When he reached the old bench he glared at his own handiwork of the night before and called himself a fool. "The only sensible thing about it is the P. S. I added," he said aloud. "Now there's no doubt but what I'm a punk scout, Del ought to know it, only he'd blame himself so I'm glad he doesn't. And it isn't his fault. It's theirs and mine! I'm not a good liar or else I could have gotten out of it without this trouble. Anyway, I'm glad I'm out!"

But he wasn't glad and deep down in his heart he knew he wasn't. He felt humiliated and sat down on the bench to await the bus with the air of an exile. Over and over in his mind he turned the perplexing problem of what he was to say at home. He knew he couldn't convince his parents that his disgrace had been brought about simply because of his faith

in Delmar—a stranger. His mother might reason it out a little, but his father—never!

Wig knew his father too well. He was kind and generous to a fault but he demanded truth and honesty in all things. And the boy knew that he could not make his story sound any more truthful to his father than it had sounded to his scoutmaster. The only thing that would square him was to make a clean breast of his acquaintance with Delmar. And he couldn't do that after the promise he had made. Fear stole over him. He did not have the courage to go home.

Yet, in the face of all that, his belief in Delmar had not been awakened. If anything, it was strengthened. He thought that if his friend had suffered disgrace and suspicion in the performance of a good turn, so would he. The weak point was that he had parents to consider and Delmar had not.

He dreaded to see the bus come along and wished prayerfully that it would be too late for the train. But the rumbling of a vehicle swiftly shattered all his hopes and he stood up.

Around the bend in the road it came and proved to be the mail truck. Wig watched it with relief. It gave him only a momentary respite from the ordeal that awaited him but a few seconds helped him to gain in hope what he lost in courage.

The rattling engine stopped just short of the bench. The driver jumped down and ran around the truck to the back, soon emerging again with a bulging mail bag. He threw it to the ground and looked at Wig quizzically. "You here for the mail?" he asked.

Wig shook his head. "I'm waiting for the bus. Someone will probably be along for the mail though."

The driver nodded, jumped up into his seat and was gone. Wig wished he had stayed a little longer. Then his attention was attracted to a letter lying on the ground near the mail bag. “Probably fell out,” he said aloud. He walked over and picked it up.

It was addressed to himself.

He felt hot and cold in turns as he turned it over and glanced at the return address. It was from his father. He stood staring at it but could not bring himself to open it.

The familiar *honk honk* of the bus sounded around the bend and he thrust the letter into his pocket. Ten minutes later, he was seated by one of the open windows and speeding into Catskill.

The letter was still unopened when he walked over to the station. The ticket agent’s window was open and bending down he glanced at the clock. It lacked just three minutes of train time.

There were only a few people about and he walked up the platform until he spied a bench. It stood to one side of the baggage room door and he sat where he could watch the colored porter at his labors, whistling a plaintive melody. The echo of it made Wig feel miserably lonely and instinctively he got out the letter in his pocket.

He read it once, stared at the writing, then read again.

Bridgeboro, N. J.

Dear Son:

This is to tell you that your mother and I are leaving for England, Saturday morning.

It is unexpected of course—business. Won’t be away long. Probably Labor Day will see us back.

Am sending Mr. Ellsworth check for your spending money. You may draw from him weekly.

Much love from your mother and myself. Don't worry and have a good time!

Your mother will write more at length.

Your loving,
FATHER.

P. S. How about that Eagle Scout badge? Is this year going to be *the year*?

Tears smarted in Wig's eyes as he jammed the letter back into his pocket. The train was coming into the station. People were hurrying, porters and taxicab men made a raucous din all about him, but he seemed not to hear. He could only think of his father and mother sailing for England that very morning.

Cries of "All aboard" found him bewildered, dazed. His limbs felt paralyzed when the engine, like some huge monster, slid out over the silvery rails. Doors and platforms banged shut. Everything and everyone seemed capable of motion except himself. The train was out of the station.

Each word in his father's letter was burned indelibly in his brain. "How about that Eagle Scout badge?" he repeated aloud. Then: "Is this year going to be *the year*?"

He laughed ironically. "No," he answered himself. "Not this year nor any other year. I'm finished. That's what!" A sob broke in his throat and he caught his lips tightly between his teeth.

To clear the mist in his eyes he stared hard after the departing train. It looked narrow and suddenly became a mere brown line on the horizon, then nothing at all.

CHAPTER XVII

WIG-WIGLEY

The strange hush that settles upon a station after the train has gone only emphasized the colored porter's whistling. To Wig's sensitive ears there was not another sound in the world but the throbbing notes emanating from that tuneful throat. He could not stand it and walked quickly out of its range.

A small factory's siren shrieked the noon hour and reminded him that he was hungry. He started up the main street but the sight of a group of scouts coming his way drove him hurriedly back to the station. He stopped at a candy stand and selected two five cent almond bars. After pocketing them he stepped down onto the tracks.

There was no particular reason why he went westward. He didn't go east because he couldn't go home. A sinking sensation in the pit of his stomach accompanied that thought. Where *could* he go?

After an hour's hike the distance between houses was longer and for a long stretch he didn't see any house at all. To break the monotony he skipped two ties at a time alternating with one when it tired him. A little later he sat down on a small embankment.

He divested one of the almond bars of its tinselled trappings and crammed it whole into his mouth. It was then that he wondered about his financial standing and emptying his pockets carefully counted out just eleven dollars and sixty-five cents. Hardly enough to keep him fed until Labor Day, eight weeks off.

Also there was the question of sleeping. The sky was a pleasing enough canopy over one's head in pleasant weather but rainy nights presented another problem. He had had one night of storm in the open with Del.

One thing he was sure of—he would not go back to camp for the money his father had sent there. Not in any case. He was through with them, his scoutmaster included. He'd starve and sleep in the rain first.

To celebrate that decision, he finished the other almond bar and told himself that he'd have to eat. But where? Meadowland and fertile fields stretched in all directions and the miles of railroad ties looked desolate and uninviting. He struck across the fields keeping to his original plan of going west.

About mid-afternoon he came out onto a country road. It looked peaceful, despite the deep ruts, and he indulged in a good deal of self pity. He thought of Delmar too, probably like himself, without any destination and hungry.

The sun was beginning to drop a little when Wig came face to face with a sign post reading

HILLSVILLE
WELCOMES
YOU

He looked around and smiled in spite of himself. "All right, Hillsville," he said aloud. "Where are you?"

A cow's plaintive mooing sounded in the distance. Wig laughed outright. "Man!" he exclaimed. "If Roy was here he'd say that was Hillsville welcoming me."

He walked a little farther, earnestly hunting for Hillsville, and came to a large field. Tacked up on the fence were

glaring circus posters announcing the arrival of Flingling's Three Ringed Circus in Hillsville that coming week. A little beyond were houses and soon he came to the center of the bustling little community.

He hunted for a place where he could eat and presently discovered a modest sign advertising a lunch room. Mr. Ted Ricker, as the proprietor introduced himself, was one of those three-in-one individuals (owner, waiter and chef) one so often finds in rural towns.

He seemed to take a friendly interest in the scout and as it was a quiet time of day in his business he took the opportunity to sit down with his customer. Wig ate heartily and finished up with a good sized piece of juicy blackberry pie.

"Tastes good, eh, scout?" he asked pleasantly.

"Uh, huh," Wig answered with his mouth full.

"Whatcha doin', scout—hikin' the country?"

"Nah. Besides, I'm not a scout. Not now. Used to be one," he answered wistfully.

"Wa'al," Mr. Ricker commented. "S'pose ye *are* kind o' old fer that. Still they come bigger 'n you sometimes. I say a feller sixteen or more should be workin' summertimes instead o' lally-gaggin' aroun' in them camps and takin' fool hikes. When I wuz a young feller, you bet we couldn't do it. No sir! We knew what work wuz in them days."

Wig smiled reminiscently at the many fool hikes he had taken and treasured the thought of them. Ted Ricker felt encouraged at the sight of the boy's smile and went on.

"Why, ever since June, Farmer Timkins (he lives out o' Hillsville a bit) has been advertisin' fer a chore boy. *You* know, jest light work aroun' the farm. But d'ye think he kin

git a boy fer that? No sir, he can't. Nary a boy is there nowadays what wants ter do chores even." He coughed meaningly.

"In my time, I'd o' thought that a cinch," he continued, wiping off the top of the table with the palm of his hand. "To git yer room 'n' board (and good board at that with the Timkines) 'n' five dollars a week ter boot—that ain't ter be laughed at fer a boy. We had ter do heavy farm work fer that in my time. Yes sir!"

Wig was suddenly inspired. An idea, bright and glorious, broke through the dusk of his brooding young mind. Room and board and five dollars a week! It would bridge the awful gap that threatened to engulf his existence. Just until Labor Day.

"Does a feller have to have experience to do chores, mister?" he asked timidly.

The proprietor took refuge in a lengthy guffaw. When it subsided he said, "Easy tellin' yer a city chap. If ye've been a scout yer kin do chores, I guess. D'ye want to try Farmer Timkins?"

Wig nodded. "If you think I'd do," he said.

"Sure ye'll do," said Mr. Ricker heartily. "He's a nice man, Farmer Timkins, but a bit finicky over some things. He'll be thankful ter git yer, don't be afraid o' that."

Wig smiled.

Mr. Ricker got up and went to his desk at the front of the store. "Jest a minute feller," he said patronizingly. "I'll give ye a note o' introduction 'n' set ye on yer way. Who'll I write I'm introdoocin'?"

Suddenly Wig felt panicky. Mr. Ricker turned around and looked at him, his pencil poised in mid-air.

Wig coughed and his face flushed. “Wig—Wig—Wigley. . . .”

“Wig Wigley?” the man asked.

Wig nodded awkwardly.

Mr. Ricker turned to the note. “A right funny name,” he commented. “But ye hear funny names these days. Not like when I wuz a young feller.”

“Maybe not,” Wig said abstractedly.

CHAPTER XVIII

MIDGE

Mr. Ricker suddenly changed his mind and as a special favor to Farmer Timkins (as he explained to Wig), he closed up the lunch room and drove the scout out to the farm in his flivver. It was a little less than a mile from Hillsville village and they arrived there in a few minutes.

It was milking time when they drove into the spick looking yard and Wig sniffed the sweet air with satisfaction. Perhaps it wouldn't be so bad after all, he thought as he took note of the gleaming white farmhouse and barn. Mr. Ricker honked the flivver's klaxon imperiously, impatiently waiting for some answer to his summons.

The squat figure of a man in white overalls appeared from around the side of the barn. Behind him was a bright looking girl of Wig's age followed by a sweet faced lady.

"Wa'al, by golly, if here ain't the whole Timkins family!" exclaimed the restaurant man jovially.

All three nodded and Mr. Ricker presented Wig graciously. Farmer Timkins grunted in acknowledgment, but the mother and daughter smiled sweetly. The scout grinned in return.

Wig couldn't tell whether he liked Farmer Timkins or not. Obviously, he was a man of few words, and he accepted his new chore boy indifferently. But on the other hand he gave him a special introduction to his daughter. "This is Midge," he said in a softer tone. "You 'n' her kin find somethin' ter

talk o' evenin's I guess. She ain't got no one her age roun' here."

Midge smiled up at her father happily and then turned to Wig. "What can you do?" she asked in deep, full tones.

Wig liked her at once. "Oh, lots!" he boasted.

"That's good," she laughed. "So can I."

Mr. Ricker discouraged further conversation just then with a noisy good-bye and nosed his flivver out of the yard. His dust hadn't fairly settled when Farmer Timkins turned to Wig. "Mrs. Timkins and Midge'll show you your room 'n' tell you when we eat and sleep. 'N' tomorrer mornin' yer kin come to the barn after breakfast 'n' I'll tell yer what we do on Sunday mornin's. Think yer kin scrub milk pails and keep the place picked up?"

"Sure," Wig answered. "I can do that all right."

"Wa'al, that's all fer naow," said the farmer decisively. He turned on his heel and disappeared behind the barn.

"How 'bout supper?" asked Mrs. Timkins solicitously.

Wig grinned hesitantly.

"Think yer could tackle some crullers and preserves and cheese and milk?" she smiled.

"Sure, he can," Midge answered for him.

Wig laughed. "I guess I can. It sounds good."

They went to the house and as Midge swung open the screen door into the kitchen, the delicious smell of dried apples and wood fires buoyed up the scout's lagging spirits. The Timkins' kitchen smelled like home.

Midge showed him to his room and he liked the frank, boyish way in which she said, "If you don't feel to home it won't be no fault of Ma's or mine. Pop ain't always so pleasant, I'm goin' to warn you. He expects everybody to be

perfect and if he finds out a person isn't, why he hasn't a heap o' patience."

Wig spotted a cretonne-cushioned rocking chair near the window and laid his knapsack in it. Midge's statement struck a little discord in him somewhere. He looked at the girl. "Well, your father wouldn't exactly expect me to be an expert around here right away, would he?"

Midge tossed her short light hair with a shake of her head. "Aw, you don't know what I mean, Wig—Wig-l. . . ."

"Wig's good enough." He flushed, then laughed.

"All right, Wig," she said, joining him in the laughter. "Anyway, what I mean is—Pop's kind of fussy, especially about boys being good. He won't stand being lied to and all that. And he expects that they shouldn't make mistakes in their lives, ever. He says there isn't any excuse for that. But Ma and I don't agree with him. We know there's hardly any boy (or girl, for that matter), that doesn't make some kind of a mistake. Ma always says, mistakes make the person."

Wig agreed with Mrs. Timkins' philosophy and he liked Midge the better for adopting it too. He glanced around the spotlessly kept room and realized that Fate had been quite kind to him after all. The one false note was Farmer Timkins. So, he hadn't any patience with boys that lied!

Midge chattered on about the time for breakfast, dinner and supper and Wig was deep in a reflection over his short sojourn into the realm of white lies. He wondered what kind of a disciplinarian the farmer would have made had he been in Mr. Ellsworth's place. Perhaps not quite so lenient. Mr. Timkins gave one the impression of being able to mete out justice as he saw fit.

"Where 'bouts do you live, Wig?" Midge asked suddenly.

The question almost bowled him over. But quickly he recovered his composure. “Down in Jersey. Ever been there, Midge?”

“Nope,” she smiled. “I’d like to, though. Must be nice.”

“Yep, it is,” he agreed.

Mrs. Timkins called them for supper. “Better go,” said Midge. “Ma likes supper prompt after milking time.”

“That suits me,” Wig laughed and followed her down the stairs. He grasped the bannister tightly as if to crush out the thought of the questions that most certainly would be asked of him.

CHAPTER XIX

QUERIES AND ANSWERS

By Monday evening, Wig felt pretty confident of himself. He hadn't been questioned and he did a good day's work under the gruff old farmer's surveillance. He told himself that he wasn't sorry to be away from camp. He was happy!

Mealtime he did not enjoy particularly. Farmer Timkins seemed always to take the edge off his day's happiness for some reason. He ate in such a gloomy manner. Mrs. Timkins was always affected by it—she rarely spoke, except in reference to the meal. Midge too, was never her usual buoyant self.

Wig was seated at the end of the long table, facing his employer. Suddenly he looked up from his plate and put down his knife and fork. "Ride a horse?" he snapped in his bass tones.

"A little," Wig answered. "Not much, though."

"Better learn more then," the farmer said looking over Wig's head and yet at him. "Midge'll show you. Have a pretty snappy stallion that wants tamin' down 'n' nothin' but exercise'll do it. That's all he needs—exercise!"

Midge looked at her father with protesting eyes. "Wig will need quite a bit more teaching before he rides Rusty."

"Teachin' nothin'!" mocked Farmer Timkins. "He ain't no sissy that needs a ridin' habit before he kin ride a balky horse."

"That's right," smiled Wig. "I'm not as dumb as that. I'll learn quickly. You'll see!"

Farmer Timkins put his fork down once more. "Didn't Ted Ricker say somthin' 'bout you bein' a scout one time but not naow?"

"Y-yes," Wig stammered.

"How come then, yore still wearin' the suit?" he asked bluntly. "I didn't know they 'lowed yer ter go on wearin' them once yer out."

Farmer Timkins' fork drew Wig's wavering gaze like some powerful magnet. "Well, y-you see," he said slowly. "You see I wear it because I like khaki, sort of. To travel 'round in I mean. And there isn't any law against wearing them after a feller's out."

"Hmph!" said the farmer. "Seems ter me I heard there was. Heard it somewheres."

Wig was frantic to change the subject. "You're entitled to wear one as long as a feller's a veteran scout and they'll give you an honorable discharge, too." He sighed thinking he had ended that discussion.

But Farmer Timkins' fork was relentless. It waved in mid-air questioningly. "You get a honorable discharge?" he asked, looking straight at the scout.

Wig saw only a sea of red table cloth between himself and his questioner. His throat felt hot as he forced out the words. "I—I got out before I got mine. You see I was left all alone, like. That's the reason I started to knock around the country."

"Oh, you poor boy!" exclaimed Mrs. Timkins with motherly concern. "And you've been left an orphan!"

Large tears brought on by his anxiety welled up into his eyes and down his cheeks. Midge construed them in quite a different sense. She looked sharply at her mother. "Ma,

don't! Boys shouldn't be pitied. When they have sorrow they don't want to be asked about it like girls do. Huh, Wig?"

Wig nodded. He could have clapped Midge on the shoulder in sheer gratitude, had she been a boy. She had saved him in more ways than one.

Later outside the barn, she was giving him some useful pointers in taming wild horses. Rusty, the frisky stallion, was stamping impatiently for a run. Then Midge brought out a gentle young roan. Wig liked her immediately.

"I'm not a-going to let you tackle Rusty for awhile, Wig," she said. "No matter what Pop says, I won't. I have all I can do to handle him but he'll mind me if I pull his mane good and hard. You'll learn all that's to be learned on the roan."

Wig resented a little the fact that a girl had to teach him horsemanship. But he wanted to learn and he knew that she wanted him to learn—out of mere comradeship. Midge was too wholesome, too unaffected, to be aware that her knowledge of horses was something to be envied by a boy like Wig.

He felt contrite for having any such thoughts and immediately tried to redeem himself. "If you teach me riding, Midge, I ought to teach you something. That's only fair."

Midge laughed heartily. "What can you teach me, Wig? *You* a feller from the city!"

"Even so, I know a lot from scouting," he protested good naturedly. He could not resist speaking the thought that followed: "And something I know that I didn't learn from scouting either!"

"What?"

He thought there wouldn't be any harm in boasting of it a little. "I can hit the bull's eye four times out of five," he said

in almost a whisper.

“*Honest?*”

“Sure.”

“Aw, go on!”

“That’s a fact, Midge. Gee, I learned a lot in one afternoon. Man, it’s fun.”

“I bet. Gosh, I’d love to learn. Maybe I could, huh? Pop’s got as many as three rifles in the house.”

Wig beamed with anticipation. “What do you say tomorrow after supper?”

“That’s peachy! I can’t tell Pop, though. He’d be as mad as a hatter. But other girls have learned, so it won’t hurt me. Do you think so, Wig?”

“Nah. You’re just the kind of a girl that should know. Where’ll we put up the target?”

Midge looked off thoughtfully. Then she smiled. “At the end of the wood there’s a place. We can ride there.”

“Let’s take a look at it now,” Wig proposed. “What do you say?”

Midge nodded and mounted the whinnying Rusty. The boy looked at him. “He isn’t so bad. I don’t see where he’s as snappy as your father says he is.”

Midge smiled. “Don’t say that too loud. He might hear you. You just ought to see him when something frightens him. He jumps at the least thing.”

Wig got on the roan and they cantered off.

“We better hitch him where he won’t hear us tomorrow night, then. He might do some damage.”

Midge laughed. “We’ll tie him good and tight. Anyway, what I’m interested in is, how did you learn to shoot so well

in one afternoon?”

Wig weakened a little. “Gee, the feller that showed me was an expert. He was a peacherino with a rifle, Midge. You ought to see him. He hits it every time.”

“I bet,” she said admiringly. “What’s his name, Wig?”

Wig never expected that. But . . .

Twilight had thrown long, deep shadows about them. They could hardly see each other. It did seem the time and place for little confidences—big ones too. And he was so proud to have known the man for whom he had sacrificed so much. Would it do any harm to reveal that much? Like as not even his name was the inspiration of a fearful moment and as quickly forgotten.

He told himself there would be no harm in telling that little. Midge wasn’t like any of the girls he had known. A feller could treat her—well, she wasn’t the kind that told secrets anyway. Besides, there was little chance of his ever seeing his friend again.

“Have you fallen asleep over there?” Midge laughed. “Or were you trying to remember that feller’s name?”

Wig fixed his eyes upon the shadows in the road. “I don’t have to try and remember it,” he said. “Gee, I couldn’t forget it because he was a prince of a feller, Delmar was.”

“Was that his name—Delmar?” Midge asked out of a sombre gray shadow.

“Yeh, Del—Delmar,” Wig stammered, and wondered if he had been in any way disloyal to his friend.

Midge laughed. “I guess you’re getting sleepy, Wig. You can’t even talk straight. We better get for home, huh?”

Wig sighed thankfully. She had done nothing more than repeat the name. After all, why get excited? Delmar’s name

certainly meant nothing to Midge.

CHAPTER XX

ALONG WITH THE MOON

When Wig reached his room that night a full moon had risen. He went to the window and pushed back the flimsy white draperies, drinking in the magic scene of farmland and hills bathed in the soft, shimmering light.

As he stood there he was aware that his muscles ached a little and his eyelids were quite heavy. It reminded him of the fact that a chore boy's hours were long. He wasn't in camp any longer, where he could rest when he pleased, nor was he to enjoy the frequent pauses that were such a pleasure on hikes with Roy. If they walked eight miles they slept forty minutes. That's what Pee-wee had said. And that diminutive scout had enjoyed the rule and taken advantage of it as well as the rest of them.

Mechanically, Wig pulled the rocking chair nearer the window. He sat down wearily and stared out at the quiet countryside. Could it be that he was just a little bit homesick for camp? He asked himself that question and quickly answered, no. He was just lonely for a little bit of nonsense—for the nights when they had toasted marshmallows at campfire. Yes, it was campfire on these moonlit nights that he missed most of all.

In that frame of mind he fell asleep.

Midnight came and soon after Wig awakened himself by attempting to turn on his side in the rocking chair. The weight of his body had brought the rocker down upon his left foot.

He sat up, yawning and bewildered, but the moonlight soon helped him to remember where he was. He got to his feet and stretched lazily.

Just as he brought his arms down to his sides, the shadow of a man passed in a direct line with his window. He leaned forward and looked and watched the figure moving around the side of the barn.

He gathered his drowsy wits together and thought quickly. All of the farm help excepting himself were quartered in a building a little distance northeast of the farmhouse. And none of them would have any particular reason for sneaking around the barn at that hour.

Suddenly the figure emerged into the full light of the moon. Wig gasped. He could hardly believe his eyes but there was no mistaking that shock of flaming red hair.

He took off his shoes and put them under his arm. Then he tiptoed to his door, opened it and listened. Not a soul stirred. Farmer Timkins' snoring came in loud, shrill blasts from the front of the house.

Quickly and noiselessly he got down the back stairway and into the kitchen. The table was set for the breakfast and the stove lids were propped awkwardly, topping the chunks of firewood all ready for the match in the morning.

He shut the kitchen door without a sound and hurried around the barn. The man was walking, almost running toward the cornfield beyond.

Wig had to run to catch up to him. He swung around, startled.

“*Wigwag!*” he exclaimed breathlessly.

“Yep, it's me, Del! It's me, all right.”

“What are you . . .”

“Sh-sh! Let’s go back of the cornfield.” They crossed the field in silence and once out of sight of the farmhouse, Wig breathed more freely. But Delmar’s haggard, hungry look hurt him.

“What’s ever happened, Del?” Wig asked. “How did *you* get here?”

“Walked,” he answered wearily and smiling with effort. “I guess I look kind of tired, eh, kiddo?”

“*Do you!* You look punk, I’m telling you!” Delmar nodded, then looked around and seeing a small rock lying across the path went over to it and sat down. “All walk and no rest makes me a tired scout,” he laughed.

Wig remained standing. “What happened since I left you, Del? Tell me and then I’ll tell you about myself.”

Delmar sighed. “All right, young scout. But nothing’s happened since I left you—that’s what’s the matter with me and the reason I’m here.” Then: “Remember I told you I’d have an explanation to make to you?”

Wig nodded.

“Well, I didn’t get it yet. I’ve been watching for it in the city papers and it has me up a tree. I’ve even been nervous about showing myself to people at all. Some big bird looked at me in a funny way the other night. It was in a store where I bought a paper and I was afraid there might be some description of me in the local papers. I mean what little I had to do with poor Andrews.”

Wig shook his head. “Gosh, you’re worrying about nothing, Del. I can tell you right now that they don’t know yet who did it. But I’d like to know! For your sake I’d like to find out.”

Delmar clasped and unclasped his hands weakly. Wig could see hunger stalking the very depths of his eyes.

“Maybe you’d feel better with something in your stomach, eh, Del?” he asked, trying to sound as cheerful as possible.

Delmar smiled. “Still the same good kid, Wigwag. To tell the truth I could eat it if it were placed before me. I wouldn’t care what. But I’m glad that I’m not being hunted for that mountain affair. Gosh, I’ve enough to think of without that. At least I won’t be afraid to take a chance on some kind of a job until I get the news I’m waiting for.”

Wig looked at him anxiously. “Between scouts, Del—haven’t you had much to eat since I left you? No money either?”

Delmar shook his head admonishingly. “Between scouts, Wigwag, I never thought that a good turn like mine would lead into such difficulties. Tonight’s a fast but perhaps tomorrow will be the feast.”

Wig turned away decisively. “You wait right here, Del. I’ll be back in a second.”

CHAPTER XXI

ON THE STAIRWAY

He ran across the cornfield and back into the kitchen. Cautiously, he climbed the stairs to his room. There he listened a minute but the silence was reassuring and after getting his money out of his knapsack he tiptoed down the stairs again.

He crept into the pantry like a mouse and opened the cruller jar, talking out three. Then he helped himself to a large slice of cheese, some bread and butter, and poured out a quantity of milk into a tumbler. Last of all he found a tray and placing the food upon it set forth once more.

There was a good deal of protesting on Delmar's side and a good deal of arguing on Wig's. But in the end the scout won out and forced his friend to accept both money and food.

As Delmar ate, Wig gave him a slightly altered version of his dismissal from camp.

"Anyhow, it's just like as if it was Fate," he said in finishing. "If I hadn't been here tonight where would you be. Gee whiz, it was meant that I should share things with you—can you deny that? Another thing, it's between scouts so that's all there is to it."

Delmar's eyes looked a trifle misty in the moonlight. "I won't say anything, kiddo," he said resignedly. "There isn't a word in the dictionary that would describe you. But you bet as soon as I get a job you'll hear from me. Maybe we could

knock around together until it's time for you to show up home. That's if I'm still waiting too."

Wig smiled happily. "Man, that'd be swell! I'll be waiting, Del."

They said good-bye once more and Delmar started toward the woods. After he had gone a few feet he turned back and called. "Wigwag?"

Wig stopped, "Yes."

"Think if I went to your scoutmaster and told him the truth that you'd be taken back?"

"Nah, not a chance," Wig lied bravely. "Leave well enough alone, Del. I don't want to go back anyhow. They're a bunch of crabs, that's what they are."

Delmar hesitated a moment, then went on.

Wig hurried back through the cornfield, feeling that he was responsible for Delmar's predicament. In going around the side of the barn he argued it out with himself. "I betcha if I had explained to Mr. Ellsworth, he'd have understood," he mumbled. "I bet he would have been willing to wait for Del's explanation just like I am because a man like him knows if a feller is guilty or not. He knew I didn't have anything to do with Andrews and if he looked just once at Del, he'd know that he didn't have anything to do with it either."

Scouting had done more for Wig than he realized.

Once at the door he picked his steps carefully. The moon was almost out of sight and the kitchen quite dark. He walked along with his arms outstretched groping for the stairway. Then his hand encountered the newel-post and he stepped upward.

When he had gone about three steps he had the feeling that someone else was on the stairway. He stopped quickly

and the board he stood on creaked eerily in the darkness.

“Who’s it?” came Farmer Timkins’ gruff voice from the head of the stairs.

Wig felt his forehead grow moist. “It’s me, Mr. Timkins,” he answered in a faint voice. “Wigley.”

“Whatcha doin’ out there?”

“Out?” he stammered.

“Yep. *Out!*”

“Oh,” he answered while his brain pounded. “I felt hungry and I thought it wouldn’t be any harm to go down and get something to eat. Then I thought I saw someone out in the yard so I went out to look.”

“Been gone a long time,” snapped Farmer Timkins.

“W-well, I was looking around,” Wig returned. “I didn’t see anyone, though.”

“Took yer long enough ter find that out. Better git ter bed!”

Midge’s door had opened on a crack. Farmer Timkins walked over and shut it. He grunted something about “queer capers” and disappeared within his own room.

Wig shut his door carefully and straightway flung himself upon the bed. “Gosh, what luck!” he exclaimed. “It’ll be funny if something doesn’t come of this.”

CHAPTER XXII

A QUESTION OF LIFE

The next day was rather a trying one for Wig. To be sure, Farmer Timkins made no mention of the night's incident, but at odd times the boy caught him staring rather curiously. Mrs. Timkins overdid herself in trying to be kind to him and Midge was more than cheerful.

At suppertime the tension had increased. Troubled though he was, Wig was trying to act naturally. Once or twice he caught Midge looking rather anxiously toward him and he wondered just what Farmer Timkins had said—what he knew to tell them.

They were about ready to leave the table when the farmer looked at his daughter. "Better take Rusty out for a bit. He'll kick all night if yer don't. Been restless all day agin."

Midge nodded. "Wig rides fine," she said. "You ought to see him."

The farmer glanced at Wig but said nothing. He got up from the table, lighted his pipe and walked out. Midge shrugged her shoulders. "Don't mind Pop," she said. "He gets queer like that at times."

"It makes us feel queer too," interposed Mrs. Timkins. "Specially in front of strangers."

"That's all right," Wig said, but he felt embarrassed.

When Midge finished her household duties they went to the barn and brought out the horses. Wig bridled them while Midge peeked cautiously around the barn.

She nodded to Wig. “It’s all right. Pop isn’t in sight. I’ll be back in a minute and we’ll scoot.”

She hurried into the house and was out again in a few minutes with a rifle under her arm. “You haven’t forgotten your promise to teach me tonight, have you?” she asked, noting a look of surprise in Wig’s eyes.

In point of fact, he had forgotten but he gallantly denied it. “Things have been kind of upset today,” he admitted. “I didn’t know whether you’d care to learn tonight or not.”

“Sure, I do,” she said, mounting Rusty. “You take the rifle, Wig. It’s loaded. I wouldn’t trust myself with it if this here feller gets to cutting up.”

Wig looked at her admiringly. Most girls would be scared to death to handle a rifle. There wasn’t any doubt but that Midge was an unusual girl. It was worth a lot to know her, he admitted.

They cantered off toward the woods, Rusty soon picking up speed and bearing Midge a distance ahead. “He’s full o’ ginger tonight, Wig,” she called clearly. “Clip your roan a bit and catch up to me.”



“HE’S FULL OF GINGER TONIGHT, WIG,” SHE CALLED CLEARLY.

Wig made it and felt highly elated that he was riding so well. “Think I’ll soon be able to tackle Rusty?” he asked.

“Sure enough. You do fine,” she smiled.

They came out of the woods and Midge pointed to the spot she had selected for their practice. Beyond, at a distance

of about two city blocks, was a concrete retaining wall in the course of construction.

“That’s for washouts,” she explained to Wig. “Spring and summer we get them something awful.”

Wig nodded politely. He had never seen much of washouts or floods. He felt that farm life was indeed teaching him much.

Midge turned Rusty around with a view to halting. Wig proceeded to follow her action when she uttered a tiny scream. Her horse shied backward almost stepping on the roan’s front feet. Then he bolted.

As he carried her swiftly off, Wig heard her scream something about a snake. He grasped the roan’s bridle and saw with a sinking heart that Rusty was making straight for the retaining wall.

Before Wig got a good start the stallion was half way there. He goaded the roan on and shouted to Midge to hold tight and rein him in. But Rusty was not to be stopped. He was heading blindly for death and Midge along with him.

Wig was frantic and struck the roan but realized that the gentle young horse could not hope to make it. With each leap the stallion was nearer . . .

Wig shouted and furiously drove the roan to the left, grasping the rifle with his right hand. He was more than twenty-five feet away from the stallion but he prayed that his aim would be steady and sure. It was the only way.

He leveled it as best he could. His head whirled but his arm and fingers clasped the rifle without a quiver. At Rusty’s hind legs he aimed and shot, once, twice . . .

The horse whinnied pitifully and sank to the ground. Wig shut his eyes as he jumped but opened them at the sound of

Midge's voice.

She was standing on her two feet, unhurt.

CHAPTER XXIII

THE LAST SHOT

Wig walked up to her and together they looked at the suffering animal. He was lying on his side, one brown eye returning their gaze. Midge's eyes filled with tears.

It made Wig feel like a criminal. "Was there something else I should have done?" he asked in tones of self-condemnation.

Midge shook her head. "I'm not crying about that so much. It's because I think you were so fine. I'd o' been killed in another second," she sobbed. Then: "Rusty's sure been an imp but I'll miss him just awful!" She gave way to a flood of tears.

Wig was overcome by her emotion. Yet he did not know what to do or say. Another feeble whinny from Rusty made them realize that a still more difficult task lay before them.

The last rays of the dying sun cast shadows over the concrete wall. Wig looked from where they stood and gauged the distance. Three feet—no more. He sighed. It certainly *was* the only way.

Midge guessed his thought and turned away. He gulped and raised his arm, trembling a little this time. Another shot rang out over the hushed meadows. A long, deep sigh escaped the horse, then all was still.

Wig felt weak and sick. He closed his eyes wishing he might find it all a dream when next he opened them. But Midge grasped his arm with startling reality.

“It’s over, Wig,” she said softly and vainly trying to dry her eyes. “Please don’t feel you’ve done anything you shouldn’t. It was Rusty’s life or mine—maybe both, wasn’t it? And Pop’s fault for asking us to take him out.”

Wig realized the truth of that. Yet it was hard to see the beautiful young animal lying so still in death and feel oneself the cause of it. Midge renewed her hold on his arm and firmly pulled him away.

“C’mon, Wig, we’ll go back,” she said. “You leave it to me to tell Pop how you saved my life.”

“Yes, but we had no business with the rifle!” Wig protested. “That’s the part I’m shaky about.”

“Aw, pshaw! Didn’t I beg you to teach me and wasn’t I the one to fetch it out tonight when you had most forgotten about it?”

Wig shook his head. “I had no business to brag about knowing how to use a rifle.”

He helped her mount the roan. “Sh!” she said with maternal authority. “You got something to brag about, all right. Any boy that’s got your aim ought to be proud. It’s only too bad that it had to be Rusty. That’s all.”

Wig led the roan back in silence. When they were entering the yard he glanced up at her. “I’ll do the explaining, Midge. Do you hear? I’m as much to blame and you can’t deny it.”

Midge hadn’t time to try and deny it for her mother was coming out of the kitchen door just as they reached the barn. Farmer Timkins soon followed, seeming to sense the trouble before they spoke.

Wig had a time of it trying to convince him that the danger had been great enough to necessitate the taking of Rusty’s life. Through it all he eyed the boy sharply and

gruffly silenced Midge's frequent efforts to corroborate every detail of the unhappy affair.

Mrs. Timkins, in true motherly fashion, kissed Wig. Tears of gratitude streamed down her worn cheeks. Farmer Timkins stood unmoved and evidently thinking. Suddenly he turned to Midge. "Ain't I always told you not to touch a-one o' them rifles, eh?"

Midge nodded. "I know. It's my fault. I was anxious to learn when I knew that Wig could do it."

Mrs. Timkins, with her arm still around Wig, turned to her husband indignantly. "This is a fine time ter talk about yore old rifles. Ain't yer mighty glad she did disobey yer and take it or would yer rather o' had Rusty break her neck against the wall? Seems ter me we can't thank this pore boy enough that he did offer ter teach Midge. That rifle was a blessin' from heaven—so there naow!"

Farmer Timkins reddened perceptibly but said nothing. Midge smiled encouragingly to Wig. "Gee, for a beginner you did fine, Wig!" she applauded.

"It's a mighty good thing," said Mrs. Timkins.

Farmer Timkins smiled coldly. "Whar 'bout's did yer learn ter shoot so well?" he asked tersely.

"He learned from a nice young man named Delmar," Midge answered for him. "It doesn't make any difference who he learned from though because he'd do it well without any lessons. I'd like to bet he would."

Farmer Timkins smiled at him once more, coldly, significantly. Then he went into the house. Wig wandered what it meant and regretted ever having mentioned Delmar's name at all. Midge had said it to help him, he knew. But at the same time he wished that she hadn't.

A few hours later he was pondering over the farmer's terse question. He pushed his head down into the soft pillow and tried to puzzle it out. But always the memory of the man's cold smile seemed to be the answer to it all.

"I guess he just doesn't like me," Wig mumbled drowsily. "Either that or he has a hunch that I lied to him the other night."

CHAPTER XXIV

A CALL TO FRIENDSHIP

Friday evening when they were at supper, Mr. Ted Ricker paid them a visit. "Had ter come out here on business," he explained. "Thought I might as well drop in afore I went back and tell yer all the news."

"Wa'al!" said Farmer Timkins, a little brighter than usual.

Mrs. Timkins smiled at Wig. "Mr. Ricker is our newspaper, Wigley. We don't need any when he comes around."

Mr. Ricker laughed good-naturedly. "Wa'al, this is one time I brought a newspaper. Thar's been so much doin' with the circus comin' ter town and all that I was afraid I couldn't remember it all."

"Must be something special," said Midge.

Mr. Ricker smiled. "Sure is," he said. "That's why I brought the paper. This here Daredevil Delmar what has Hillsville so het up only came inter my place three days ago fer breakfast. 'N' how that feller could eat!"

Wig swallowed his food whole. Midge looked at him questioningly and he knew without raising his eyes that Farmer Timkins was staring his way. He attempted to go on eating.

"What about this feller Delmar?" asked the farmer. Then he offered his guest a chair.

Ricker smacked his lips soundly and sat down. "Wa'al, I didn't know who he was when he came inter my place. But when I went ter the circus yesterday afternoon if I didn't

recognize him right away as the same feller! 'N' when I looked on the program I found out his name.

“He was ridin' all aroun' on one o' them wild horses 'n' he was dressed up like the pictures ye see o' them wild west cowboys. He looked like a daredevil a'right and he wouldn't let that horse throw him off. No siree! It said on the program that he could ride any horse what was goin'.”

Mr. Ricker shifted his chair and continued. “Anyways, when the show was over 'n' I was comin' out the grounds I saw a big sign with his name on again. It said that he was ter ride another horse on Saturday afternoon fer a five thousand dollar purse. The horse was never rode before—see?”

Farmer Timkins coughed.

“Anyway, this mornin' I was thinkin' how I wouldn' mind droppin' in there tomorrer afternoon 'n' see him do a stunt like that. Just then I picked up the paper and saw his name right on the front page.” Ricker stopped to light his pipe.

Wig sat breathless, fearful. He wanted to hear the rest and yet he dreaded it. His muscles were taut, waiting.

Ricker cleared his throat. “In the paper it said how Daredevil Delmar was ridin' aroun' as usual yesterday afternoon when a boy scout in the audience stood up and was shakin' a newspaper in his hand 'n' hollerin' that Delmar was wanted fer grand larceny or somethin' like that in San Francisco. When Delmar heard him he wanted ter stop the horse quick so he could listen ter what the kid was sayin' about him 'n' the horse caught him off his guard 'n' threw him plunk inter the sawdust.”

Wig's jaw fell and he gasped audibly. Ricker, delighted to have created such consternation in his audience, smiled pleasantly. “Yes, sir!” he exclaimed. “He wa'n't much hurt, I

reckon—got a fracture of his leg or somethin' like that 'n' he's in the hospital in Catskill. The authorities are kind o' keepin' an eye on him till they can find out the partiklers. They think he used ter be an army man because o' different things they found in his baggage. Anyway he carries a rifle.”

Wig could not dissemble. He was snowed under and showed it. Midge glanced at him sympathetically. “I’m so sorry, Wig,” she said. “It’s the same Delmar, huh?”

Wig simply couldn’t speak. The blood was rushing to his cheeks as his indignation increased. What did *they* know about Delmar—his friend, he was crying inwardly. He looked up with blazing eyes to find Farmer Timkins smiling coldly.

Wig was fired. “It’s a pack of lies!” he shouted. “Don’t I know the truth of the whole business! He’s not a thief! He’s not anything they say about him, I know that!”

Ricker started in surprise and Mrs. Timkins said, “There, there, Wigley. Don’t get so fussed. It’ll be all right, I’m sure.”

Farmer Timkins pushed back his chair ominously and rose. “How d’ye know he ain’t a thief?” he asked harshly.

“Because I was with him!” Wig answered unafraid. “I guess I ought to know a good feller when I see one.”

“And he’s the feller what taught you such fancy shootin’, eh?” Farmer Timkins smiled.

“He gave me a lesson—yes. What of it?” Wig returned recklessly, “and he’s an expert, that’s what he is.”

Farmer Timkins chuckled. “I’ve come ter think so. Yes, yes. Them fellers are always experts with shootin’ ’n’ the like. Maybe that’s why he tried to teach you, eh?”

“Oh, Pop!” Midge pleaded.

“No one can say that to me and get away with it!” Wig cried in a trembling voice. “He’s an Eagle Scout and an Honor Medal Scout and *my friend!*”

Farmer Timkins stared coldly. “I’ll tell you, young feller, that I don’t want nobody ’round my house that’s been traipsin’ with rifle experts ’n’ accused thieves!”

Mrs. Timkins looked at her husband pleadingly. “The pore boy ain’t done nothing,” she said. “Besides, yer forgettin’ that yer own daughter would be dead if it weren’t for him.”

Farmer Timkins took a five dollar bill out of his pocket and handed it to Wig. “That don’t cut no ice with me,” he snapped. “There’s no excuse fer havin’ thieves fer friends.”

Midge’s eyes blazed. “He’ll stay here no matter what you say, Pop!” she cried. “I know he’s a good boy just the same as he knows his friend is innocent!”

Wig shook his head at her. “I’d rather not stay, Midge. Not now. Delmar’s all alone, sort of, and I’m his only real friend so he must need me now. Now of all times.”

Midge protested, implored. Mrs. Timkins urged tearfully while Mr. Ricker sat back in his chair almost forgotten. And Wig escaped to his room and repacked his knapsack.

Five minutes later, at Mr. Ricker’s request, he was speeding back toward Hillsville in the rickety flivver.

CHAPTER XXV

UNDER THE HEADLINES

Wig bought a copy of the *Hillsville Bugle* after he left Mr. Ricker and, tucking it in his pocket, hastily left the village. Twilight was full upon him and he hurried along the road that would take him out of town and thence to Catskill.

After a few minutes' walk he saw the circus grounds looming ahead and the lights were going on one by one in readiness for the evening's performance. A long line of cars were parked along the road, their occupants already contributing to the buzz of humanity that moved about the barren fields.

Wig turned and ambled up the little embankment. He leaned against the broad cow fence and watched the moving throng for a minute. Some workmen were passing in and out of the big tent and in the smaller ones he could see the shadows of the performers upon the canvas.

The raucous cries of the barkers echoed dismally upon the evening breeze and Wig wondered if that was what had first beckoned Delmar to the sawdust. A feeling of profound loneliness filled him and he wished that he could be with his friend right then and hear the true story of it all from his own lips.

He moved on along the embankment resolving to get as near Catskill that night as he could. He'd sleep somewhere off the road, he decided, and go to Delmar the first thing in the morning.

At the lower gate, a rather flamboyant poster attracted his attention and walking closer he saw it to be the one that Mr. Ricker had told them of. It flapped against the gate and even in the waning light the large print stood out against its white background.

DAREDEVIL DELMAR
THE MYSTERY MAN FROM THE WEST
WILL RIDE "HURRICANE"
THE WILD AUSTRALIAN HORSE!
SATURDAY MATINEE
A \$5,000 PURSE IF DARE-DEVIL
DELMAR ISN'T THROWN!
\$5,000.
COME AND SEE THIS DARING COWBOY
WIN A \$5,000 PURSE!

Wig scratched his head. "He's a mystery, all right," he said aloud. "That's something else I didn't know about him. Gee whiz, he can do most everything, Del can. Even ride wild horses. Gee whiz! Anyway, he's not a thief, I know that."

Suddenly he remembered the *Hillsville Bugle* reposing in his pocket. He pulled it out and spread it so that he could see every line. The whole article was in large type and spread across the front of the page. Hillsville, evidently, hadn't had any news as absorbing as that in years.

BOY SCOUT INSTRUMENTAL IN APPREHENSION
OF SAN FRANCISCO EMBEZZLER!

The usual observance of Walter Harris, First Class scout of Temple Camp, has been the means of apprehending a very nifty and clever crook from San

Francisco, parading under the alias of Daredevil Delmar. His real name is Daniel Drake Delmar and he is wanted for embezzlement by the firm of Sims Brothers, San Francisco brokers. It is alleged that he absconded with five thousand dollars in cash, taken from the payroll with which he and another clerk were entrusted.

Young Harris, an observant young scout, found a discarded army outfit in a clump of bushes just west of Catskill, in the foothills. After a search of the pockets he discovered a newspaper clipping with a photograph of Delmar at the top. It was an account of the embezzler's disappearance and the scout pocketed it for future reference.

At a matinee of Flingling's circus the other day, young Harris was immediately aroused by the appearance of Daredevil Delmar in the ring. Like the observant scout that he is, Harris got out the clipping and found Delmar to correspond identically with the photograph. Immediately he stood up in the audience and exposed the clever imposter who claimed to the circus people that he was an experienced cowboy and could ride any horse. He was to have been the recipient of a five thousand dollar purse on Saturday if he could ride the much advertised wild horse, Hurricane. But, as things stand now, Delmar is in the hospital with a fractured leg, obviously the result of trying to get away as the scout denounced him.

Up to date, investigation reveals that Delmar is a former army man having been honorably discharged. He is without relatives and little is known of him other than that he was quite prominent in the Hawaiian

Islands as a sharpshooter when in the government's service. Evidently he picked San Francisco as the most likely place to start civil life and ended as an embezzler.

Wig threw the paper to the ground, violently. "Gee, that's the time when Pee-wee's 'observance' gets on my nerves. Why did he have to come to Hillsville and make all that trouble for Del? *Why?*" he fairly shouted. "I'm more disgusted than ever with camp! That's what I am!"

He walked on muttering to himself. Darkness stalked the skies and soon he was all alone, rebellious against almost everything. Particularly did he hold his patrol comrades responsible for the general upheaval in his own and Delmar's life. And Pee-wee Harris came in for the greater share of Wig's condemnation.

When he rolled himself up in his blanket for the night he promised Pee-wee a befitting vengeance. It was to be wreaked upon that diminutive individual in such a manner as to discourage "observance" in him for all time.

As to what it would be, Wig was too tired to contemplate. Consequently, he decided to leave that matter to Delmar when he should see him in the morning.

CHAPTER XXVI

A PEACH OF A SCOUT

Wig had always a dislike of hospitals—a vague fear of their immaculate corridors and rather terrible silence. He had too long been associated with noisy, healthy scouts to feel otherwise. But his entrance into the hospital where Delmar was lying had quite a different effect upon him than he had at first anticipated.

He felt that he was in a refuge. Perhaps it was because it sheltered within its four walls the one person to whom he could go in that time of friendlessness and need. And in turn he knew that his visit would be a prop to Delmar when everyone was so ready to believe the worst of him.

He was shown along a corridor and into a room with several cots. Delmar was the only occupant and at his bedside sat a hearty-looking, roundfaced man. Wig shuddered at the thought of who he must be.

Delmar was propped up a little and his face lighted up at sight of his young friend. “I knew you’d come, young scout,” he said in his old rollicking way. “I knew you wouldn’t fail me.”

“I guess,” Wig tried to smile.

The roundfaced man got up and offered the scout a chair. Delmar interrupted long enough to introduce him as “Cap.” They shook hands and Wig was impressed. There was something about Cap that bespoke sincerity.

“Well, how’s the chore boy coming along?” Delmar asked him as soon as he was seated.

“I guess I wasn’t so good as a chore boy,” Wig answered evasively. “Anyway, I got my week’s wages so now I’ll have to look for something else.”

“You poor kid,” Delmar sympathized. He tapped his fingers on the counterpane. “Don’t you care, Wigwag. There’ll be something else along.”

Cap got up and walked toward the window. Wig saw that he did it purposely and leaned forward. “I know that’s all lies what I saw in the paper, Del,” he whispered. “And just on account of that pest, Pee-wee Harris, you’ve got to be disgraced and all. Make out I won’t go up to camp and give them a piece of my mind.”

“No, you won’t, kiddo,” Delmar smiled. “He did what he thought was right. How could he know any more than you do that I am innocent? Anyway, I want you to stay out of it. I want to see you a veteran scout, do you hear? You’re going back to camp and tell the whole truth—you’ve got to for my sake!”

“But . . .” Wig began.

“I think they’re quite ready to believe me,” Delmar interposed. “Anyway, Cap is.”

Wig shook his head pessimistically. “Even then I don’t see how that can help you. Gee whiz, they might even bring the Andrews affair against you now. They do those things when a feller gets in trouble. You always see that.”

“Then it’s your turn to speak up,” Delmar said complacently. “As long as this affair of mine has been dragged out into the daylight there is no reason why we can’t speak out about Andrews now. You don’t have to shield me and I don’t have to shield you. We are both conscience free. My good turn was all wrong—I can see that now. But at the

time I thought I was making a sacrifice of my own good name for the happiness of the two old people. I could not foresee what was going to happen. But before I tell you about that, Wigwag, I want to set you right about the affair at the shack. My bullets are only a thirty-two and the one they extracted from Andrews was a forty-two. I learned that from Cap.”

Wig beamed. “Gee, I knew that would come right for you, Del. I knew it!”

Delmar smiled. “I’m glad you’re glad, young scout. And now I must tell you what happened out in San Francisco. Remember the friend I had that I told you of?”

Wig nodded.

“Well, I won’t tell you his name but we’ll call him—say, Frank. My firm have wired that they won’t publish the story on account of his father and mother—they were the two old people.”

Wig leaned closer to catch every word.

“Frank and I worked together for Sims. That was after I came out of the army. I didn’t get any further than San Francisco because what family I had was wiped out in the Florida hurricane. I was all alone so one place was as good as another.

“I took an interest in Frank because his people are quite aged and they were my only friends really. So one day Frank came to me and told me that his father (who had been ill some time), needed five thousand dollars immediately. They had had reverses through some series of misfortunes and it was imperative that they have the money.

“We (Frank and I) had charge of the payroll and Frank proposed that he would take five thousand out and borrow

that amount to replace it before the end of the week. Pay-day was the very next day and I knew it would be impossible for him to do that without being discovered. And I knew if he didn't take the money home that night that the disappointment would kill his father."

Delmar raised himself up on his elbow. "I decided to do them a good turn for their kindness to me and offered to make the guilt appear mine by disappearing. In turn he promised to replace the money within a week so that I could return and declare the whole thing a mistake."

"And you are waiting to hear from him that he had replaced the money, huh?" Wig asked anxiously.

"Exactly," Delmar answered. "But I did not hear as I told you the other day. I kept traveling further and further east as I knew that my disappearance was being broadcast and finally I drifted into the Catskills quite discouraged. You know the rest of the story."

"Well, what about that feller, Frank?" Wig demanded.

"As soon as I landed the job with the circus I wired my firm," he answered. "And in answer they told me that Frank had been killed the day after I left by an automobile."

"My gosh!" Wig exclaimed. "What about the money then?"

Delmar shrugged his shoulders. "As I told you before, Wigwag, they're ready to believe my story. They wired that they thought it all quite possible but in view of the fact that the money hadn't been replaced by Frank it was up to me. And I told them that under no circumstances were they to reveal anything to the old people. They've had shock enough in losing Frank."

"Man, that's hard luck!" Wig agreed.

“Well, I’ll have to go back and make it good,” Delmar said cheerfully.

Wig shook his head. “Gee whiz, it doesn’t seem fair. Honestly, it doesn’t. I wish you could stay and be a sort of scout again—something like Tom Slade is.”

“I wish so too, Wigwag,” he smiled. “I’ve taken quite a liking to your camp through you. And I admire your little Pee-wee Harris in spite of his obnoxious ‘observance.’ He’s a sketch!”

Wig smiled, then remembering his bitterness, scowled. “Well, I don’t admire him, I can tell you that. He’s the worst trouble-maker of all. If it wasn’t for him I wouldn’t be out either. Man, what a pest he is!”

Delmar laughed outright. “I don’t know about that, young scout. He may be a pest but I think he’s generous to a fault. In point of fact, he appears like an up and doing kid to me. I don’t hold it against him that he exposed me. I’d do the same if I thought a man guilty. We’re scouts, remember, Wigwag. You’ve not forgotten that, have you?”

“I’ll say I haven’t,” Wig said. “But I knew you weren’t guilty—that’s the difference between Pee-wee and me.”

“And he didn’t know it,” laughed Delmar. “That’s the difference between you and Pee-wee.”

Wig couldn’t keep from smiling. “You win, Del. You always win. Anyway, I’ll be in here most every day to see you.”

“You should have been down to the circus to see me,” he returned. “It’s too bad all this happened. I was going to ride Hurricane this afternoon just to get that money to send back. I’m sure I would have made it, as wild as that horse is.”

Wig watched him admiringly. “Gee, Del, how do you do it? I never knew you could ride wild horses.”

Delmar laughed. “Neither did I, Wigwag. But I had to earn a living, didn’t I? And I had to take the first job that came my way or starve. I had to tell them something so I told them I was a cowboy and right away the ringmaster got an inspiration to capitalize me on account of my red hair. He made me a fine offer to give the audience a five minute thrill each day on unbroken horses. And today was to have been *the day!*”

Wig stared. “Man, do you mean to tell me you never rode wild horses before?”

Delmar shook his head. “I’ve never done anything more than canter along a bridle path, young scout. So there you are.”

Wig pushed his hair back from his forehead in amazement. “Say, did I hear you right? How do you stay on, Del—*tell me that?*”

Cap smiled from the window and Delmar shook his head in unrestrained laughter. “I just hold onto their manes with all the strength I have in my hands. When I see them bucking one way I hold myself the other way and tell myself that I won’t let them throw me off. It’s just a case of being quicker than they are, Wig, and it’s mighty good training if you don’t get your neck broken in the trying.”

Cap walked out to the corridor with Wig and once out of range of Delmar’s door he said, “It’s too bad that guy can’t get a-hold of that money. That’s all he needs to clear him.”

“And what if he can’t?” Wig asked anxiously.

Cap shook his head. “Law is law, kid. And that Frank he was telling you about is dead and dead men tell no tales. It’s

live people he has to deal with and sometimes they're hard to convince, especially when they're the losers."

"You mean that his firm may not believe him, after all?"

"Right the first time, kid," said Cap kindly. "Anyone that's been in the game as long as I have knows he's on the level and a darn nice guy. He can't believe that anyone's going to doubt his story but he don't know what he's up against in law. Even the kids don't believe in Santy Claus any more so what do you expect of lawyers and judges and juries?"

Wig nodded fearfully. "Maybe I can telegraph to my father or something—maybe—oh, I don't know! Anyway, there's got to be some way when a feller like Del needs help. Don't you think so, mister?"

"I'll say," Cap applauded. "He's deservin' o' help, believe me. He's what I call foolish fer offerin' himself in that Frisco business but no one kin deny but what he's a real scout at heart."

Wig smiled. "He's a peach of a scout, mister!" he exclaimed. "That's what I think about him!"

CHAPTER XXVII

FAMILIAR FACES

Wig got to the street in a daze. Cap's words were ringing in his ears. He was Delmar's only friend and something had to be done to help him. Something! What could he do?

He stood by a telephone pole and watched a big bus come lumbering down the street. As it neared him he could see that it was marked Hillsville. Circus posters covered it and a small sign hanging from the roof read:

WE PASS THE CIRCUS GROUNDS

Wig watched it eagerly as it came to a stop directly by him. A typical circus crowd filled the seats and the faces at the windows were wreathed in smiles, while gales of carefree laughter buzzed in his ears. In his anxiety and loneliness he felt drawn to them and hungered for a small share of all that irresponsible gayety.

Impulsively, he jumped up on the step and the bus started. He paid his dime and turned eagerly looking over that sea of faces for a seat. He had walked both ways on that road but he didn't like the thought of standing in the bus. Suddenly he heard a familiar voice call from the rear.

"If it isn't our Wig! Who'd a thunk it! And all the time we thought he was in Bridgeboro!" Wig knew that voice without looking up. Roy Blakeley. His first impulse was to get off the bus as quickly as he could. But his saner one told him it would look cowardly, unmanly. They'd surely think he was trying to hide something, he told himself.

While he stood thinking it over, Pee-wee's voice boomed. "Hey, Wig! Come on back here. There's room for you. Geeee whizzz!"

"*Yeh, sure!*" a unanimous chorus of familiar voices echoed.

Wig's face darkened. Pee-wee again! He was everywhere, it seemed. What was he going to the circus for a second time? To make more trouble? Hadn't he made enough disturbance with his pesky "observance?" While those questions were being thrashed out in his mind Wig was scowling back at that small redoubtable-looking scout who was attired in his full scouting regalia and complacently seated with all the members of the Silver Fox Patrol.

It made Wig feel almost sick at heart to see them there. His own patrol—inviting him to sit with them! Be one of them! He wished he could turn his back upon them. The old bitterness crept back—the voice that told him that they alone were responsible for his dismissal.

He stood there in the bus aisle, swaying back and forth with every movement of the ponderous vehicle. He couldn't make up his mind. He felt he hated their smiling faces—every one of them. Yet when he glanced sideways he had to admit to himself that they *did* seem to diffuse good will. Especially Doc Carson. Doc had always been his best friend and he was sure Doc hadn't been in on the searching party. Ever since the Silver Fox Patrol had been organized he and Doc had paired together.

Wig turned decisively and made his way toward his friend who was already moving up and making a place for him on the rear seat. The others he ignored, but Pee-wee, who refused to be insulted by a mere ominous glance, stretched

his diminutive body across the row of scouts and placed two sticky squares of butterscotch upon Wig's knee.

Doc smiled. "There you are, Wig. It's a peace offering from Chief Little Chipmunk Harris."

"Yeh," Pee-wee roared. "And on account of it being butterscotch and sticky besides it means we should stick together. Butterscotch and scouts! You can't say that isn't logic, can you?"

Wig frowned. "Huh! You ought to have practiced that before—not wait till you got me out to think of it!"

Pee-wee was known always to argue but never to quarrel. Consequently he was quite content at that juncture to wage a battle with the butterscotch stuck between his teeth and threatening to render his jaws immovable.

Doc made a valiant move for peace. "Say, Wig," he said pleasantly. "They say this circus is a pip."

"Yeh," grunted Wig.

Doc felt encouraged. "This is the second time the kid's been to see it. It must be good, huh?"

"Yeh," said Wig sarcastically. "I'm the one that ought to know it. Everybody knows it. It's in the papers in big type so everyone can see it!" He turned away sullenly.

Doc studied Wig thoughtfully. "Oh, about that feller, Delmar, you mean?"

Wig nodded frowningly. "He's my friend! Anybody that hurts him, hurts me, I can tell you that! Besides he's not a thief. I can prove it!"

Doc looked at him earnestly. Pee-wee sat still, his eyes wide with wonder. The butterscotch had reverted to type and was trickling out of the corners of his mouth and down his

chin in a thick, golden syrup. The rest of Wig's patrol regarded him in contemplative silence.

"Gee whizz, b-b-but he's in the hospital under arrest," Pee-wee stammered in spite of the syrup.

"Yeh, and even the cop that's there on guard believes he's innocent," Wig said firmly. "So that shows you, doesn't it?"

Doc nodded. "I thought they were going to pin Andrews' murder on him too."

"Fat chance," Wig hissed. "I've got something to say about that now. Anyhow, Pee-wee ought to keep on hunting for clues, he's so observant!"

Pee-wee turned to Wig. "Gee whiz, I didn't think he looked like a thief myself, honest I didn't. So I wouldn't think he looked like a murderer either, would I? He smiled at me too and said I was a good little scout and that I was living up to the scout laws the way I saw them. So that doesn't look like he was mad at me even if I did sort of have him arrested."

"*Sort of!*" laughed Wig mockingly.

Pee-wee misconstrued that laugh and shook his head vehemently. "Honest, cross my heart! Roy can tell you if he didn't say that to me. Even he said the more scouts he met from Temple Camp the better he liked it."

Wig looked out of the window a while. He knew Pee-wee was telling the truth—he had heard those same words from Delmar's own lips. But he was angry at the little scout—thoroughly angry and would not budge an inch.

He turned back and gave him a withering look. "Doesn't that prove he's innocent when he didn't even get mad at you?" he demanded. Then: "If he was guilty he'd have been mad."

“Gee, that’s right,” Pee-wee admitted.

He raged that Pee-wee should agree with him. “If you want to be observant go back up on the mountain and see what tracks you can find to the west. That’s where the shot came from—wasn’t I there!” he said breathlessly. “That’s where I’m going when I leave the circus—back to that shack!”

Wig knew he had immediately gained the respect of his comrades. He had been an actual witness to that mystery! He knew they were gazing at him in wonder and he flushed with all the pride of his sixteen years. “Tell that to Mr. Ellsworth!” he said feeling the fullness of power. “Tell them all at Administration Shack too—I don’t care!”

“They wouldn’t mind knowing you’ve helped an innocent feller,” Doc said kindly. “It was only because you lied, Wig. None of us, not even Mr. Ellsworth, believed you would have anything to do with a criminal. Gee, you must remember when Pee-wee recognized Delmar by his picture he didn’t know it was the same feller that you were with! How could he know?”

Wig could find nothing to say. All the resentment that he had piled up against his comrades was being weakened little by little. To be sure, he could not excuse them for exposing him at Administration Shack but he felt a little less bitter than before when he knew that they too were ready to take his word for Delmar’s innocence. But as for Pee-wee, he simply refused to give him any quarter.

Roy Blakeley leaned over. “Hey, you know what?” he said.

“What?” asked Wig.

“That feller Delmar must be a daredevil all right, just like the posters say. A feller down in Catskill said he heard from the hospital doctor that Delmar never tamed a wild horse in his life before. He said he was just going to ride that Hurricane horse to take the chance on winning that five thousand dollars so he could send it to San Francisco.”

“Geee whizzz!” Pee-wee said.

“Circus grounds!” cried the bus driver as the big car came to an abrupt stop. “All off!”

The scouts marched off in true Silver Fox style— hilariously. But Wig was thinking of Roy’s remarks and marveled that the news should have traveled so fast. It gave him something to think of.

CHAPTER XXVIII

A CHALLENGE

Wig followed the crowd past the gate. He took the money out of his pocket and bought his ticket, then passed on in. So occupied was he with his own thoughts that he had forgotten about Doc and the others.

It was only when he stopped before the freaks' tent that he saw that they were still with him. "Next to scouting I like the circus," Doc said confidentially. "Don't you, Wig?"

"Uh, huh," he answered, evincing a little more friendliness. "I didn't come because I liked it though. Not this time."

"No?" Doc looked puzzled.

"No," said Wig. "I came . . . well, I came sort of out of respect to Del. I want to see who's got as much nerve as he has. Maybe it's even a fake, you can't tell."

"Yeh," Doc agreed. "They do these things in circuses. Ten chances to one that purse is a fake too. Gee whiz, maybe they haven't five thousand dollars between the whole bunch of them."

"Somebody ought to call their bluff if it is," said Roy as they entered the big tent. "I think it's a law that they have to do what they advertise or to use Pee-wee's language it's a teckinality."

Pee-wee, being engrossed with many varieties of confections, was non-committal. His digestive tract was being taxed to its limits and he had no intention of shifting the burden to his brain. He was content just to listen.

They were early and fortunate enough to get seats at the ringside. Wig sat last on the aisle. He glanced hastily at Doc sitting beside him. "Mr. Ellsworth say anything about me?" he asked.

"Nah," Doc answered. "Gee, he was sorry to see you go though, Wig. Honest! He's said it a dozen times since you've been gone. Your father sent him a check for an allowance so he sent it right back because he said there was something in the letter about your folks leaving on a business trip."

"Yeh." Wig grunted disconsolately. He wanted to tell Doc but he didn't know how.

Doc watched him sympathetically. "Maybe it's not exactly my business, but I was wondering why you didn't go home, Wig. We were all wondering that."

Wig felt the hand of scouting stretched out to him through Doc. Good old Doc, he thought. The best friend a fellow ever had. He was lonely. No longer was he a part of the Timkins household and with Del in the hospital, things looked pretty bleak. The four dollars in his khaki pockets lowered his spirits considerably.

The calliope started and drowned out Pee-wee's best vocal effort. That is saying a good deal. Roy Blakeley screamed across to Wig that the huge musical instrument was the kid's only rival.

Wig forgot himself and laughed. He was one of them again. He wished heartily that he was going back to camp with them but on the other hand he decided that the powers that be in Administration Shack would have to come to him before he'd give in.

The great parade started and after the band passed by an enormous clown joggled along ridiculously with a little

dancing bear. Pee-wee stood up and shouted some unintelligible greeting and Roy added zest to the hilarity with one of his familiar remarks. Wig realized at that moment how much he had missed them.

“Gee,” he mumbled to himself. “I *did* belong to a dandy patrol. No use talking—they’re a swell bunch of fellers. All laughter and no tears, just like Roy used to say.”

Doc leaned over and asked him what he had said. Wig smiled. “I was saying to myself what a nut Roy is,” he answered.

“You said it,” Doc laughed. Out of the gladness of his heart he gave Wig a resounding slap on the knee.

The circus performance was then in full swing. All three rings were filled with a motley crowd of artists and animals. Wig felt the need of his comrades more than ever. It would be so much lonelier after he had left them.

Unconsciously he grasped Doc’s arm.

“What’s matter?” asked Doc.

“Gee, do you know what?” Wig asked.

“No, what?”

“I didn’t go home—I didn’t go home Doc, because my father and mother sailed for England the day I was supposed to go home.”

“My gosh!” exclaimed Doc sympathetically.

The band suddenly ceased playing and the ringmaster stepped jauntily into the center ring. The buzzing of the audience ceased as the man raised his hand.

“La-dees and chentle-mun!” he began. “The management wishes to announce that they are sorry they have no one to ride that mar-vel-lous horse,

Hurricane. Daredevil Delmar as you know, has met with an ac-ci-dent and no one has stepped for-ward to take his place.

“The man-age-ment will be only too glad to have some chentle-mun in the audience step forward and try the mar-vel-lous feat of stay-ing on Hurricane for five min-utes. If the chentle-mun is not thrown he will receive the five thousand dollar purse as the man-age-ment ad-ver-tised.”

Roy Blakeley stood up and yelled, “It’s a fake! I bet it’s a fake!”

“Sure!” Pee-wee joined in. “Sure it’s a fake! Where’s the money, huh? Where’s the horse, huh?”

A burst of applause filled the big canvas top. The ringmaster bowed low, smiled and raised his hands once more. But the audience seemed to have gone wild. The cry of “fake” was taken up again throughout the vast place.

The ringmaster did not stir. Composed and smiling, he shook his head in denial. Then quickly he stepped forward facing the row of scouts, bent down and removed one of the big white circular blocks that formed the huge ring. That done he turned to the howling audience and shrugged his shoulders as if to say, “You see! There is no fake. The way is clear for the aspirant.” He smiled and bowed again.

Suddenly Wig was aware of a great commotion on the other side of the ring. It seemed to be centered around the performers’ entrance, for attendants quickly stood to one side. The next minute the much talked of Hurricane was loosed into the ring like a streak of lightning.

He tore around once like an infuriated bull. Then the ringmaster snapped his fingers. The animal came to a standstill, wild-eyed and panting. Certainly *he* wasn't any fake, Wig realized.

Someone cried, "Where's the money, huh? Where's the five thousand dollars? You haven't shown us that!"

The ringmaster turned his back upon the audience and motioned to an attendant. In a few seconds a black bag was handed to him and he opened it, exposing its contents to the shrieking audience.

Wig could see the money. Five thousand dollars worth of bills. It wasn't any fake. It was a real live chance. A voice cried within him, pounding in his head then at his heart.

The ringmaster lifted his shoulders questioningly. Wig could see his lips form the words, "Who will it be?"

The band was getting ready for its next number. Some irresistible force seemed to lift Wig bodily. He stood to his full height, strong and determined. The cries died down as swiftly as the flight of an arrow.

He vaulted the narrow brass rail and jumped lightly into the sawdust.

CHAPTER XXIX

HURRICANE

He heard Doc calling after him, “Don’t, Wig! Are you crazy?”

Roy called something and Pee-wee’s voice boomed for him to stop but he was deaf to it all. He was determined to go through with it and when the applause of the audience broke out again it inspired him.

The ringmaster waited for him smilingly but when he reached the ring he said, “You’re so young, and it’s dangerous. Don’t you know that?”

Wig nodded. “Sure,” he answered. “Anyone that does it takes a chance but what do I care! If I win all right, if I don’t, then it’s all right too.”

The ringmaster frowned. “All right,” he said in a worried voice. “It’s up to you. Can you ride?”

“Sure,” Wig boasted and thought of the little experience he had had on the roan. But somehow the memory of that encouraged him—Midge too. “I’m ready,” he announced quietly.

The ringmaster shook his head, then signalled across to the band leader. Four attendants came into the ring and held the horse. The people were shouting—it was pandemonium. Then the music started.

The ringmaster nodded and the attendants renewed their hold on Hurricane. Wig was led over and helped up onto his shining back. A wild crash of cymbals from the bandstand and then they were off.

Wig closed his eyes as he felt the beast rear upwards. He grasped the long, silken mane and strained his body forward. Maddened, the horse tore around the ring. The boy clasped harder, harder until the hair seemed to cut through his very flesh.

He was being jolted backward and forward. The audience was just a vast sea of faces shouting above the crashing band. Again the beast was tearing around, rising on his front legs and then on the hind legs. Wig was cold as death but Delmar's words were before his eyes. "You've got to be as quick as they are, that's all," he had said.

The horse stopped suddenly kicking his hind legs. It almost threw Wig over his head but he dug his fingernails deeper until he knew he was piercing the animal's flesh. Someone cried "Bravo!"

Once more the horse started. Wig wondered how many minutes he had been on. It seemed an eternity. He wished the band would stop playing so loud. To him, the world was in a state of utter chaos.

The beast snorted, then whirled him around in a circle. He strained with all his might and caught a glimpse of the ringmaster's shining brass buttons. All else seemed hazy and vague. Was he fainting he wondered? But no, it was dizziness—the horse was doing it. He dug his nails deeper and they shot away in a straight line.

Again the ringmaster passed him—so it seemed to Wig. All the world was passing him. It was more than five minutes he was sure. But the animal was slowing down a little. It was too good to last, he told himself. But the snorting had ceased.

He withdrew his fingernails and grasped the mane tighter. They were nearer the bandstand, then the ringmaster—he had

a watch in his hand. Someone was calling above the shrill music. Uniformed men were coming into the ring, nearer and nearer to him.

Suddenly he felt himself being lifted off bodily. The band ceased playing and the ringmaster's voice was calling the audience to attention. Someone thrust his hand onto something. He knew it was the little black bag. The white glare of the place suddenly grew dim, dark . . .

Wig had fainted.

CHAPTER XXX

THE OTHER FELLOW

Wig came to in the male performers' dressing room. A galaxy of clowns and acrobats attended his awakening and the first thing he did was to smile. Then he got to his feet.

"That was a crazy thing for me to do," he said awkwardly, and trying to conceal his embarrassment.

"Faint or ride?" asked one of the clowns.

"Faint," smiled Wig. "That's worse than a girl would do."

"I'll say it *isn't*," said the clown. "I wouldn't do what you did for ten thousand bucks, take it from me! They say the management is coming in here in a few minutes to offer you a steady job."

"Riding wild horses?" asked Wig.

"Yeh," said the clown. "They're going to give you some offer."

"Well, they can keep it," said Wig, gaining his strength each minute. "One ride's enough for me. I want to be gone before the management comes. I've got an important errand."

"Go on then, kid," said the clown kindly. "I wouldn't hold you here for a job like that. Management or no management. Life's too swift as it is."

Wig opened the bag they handed to him and took out the bills. The whole five thousand he crammed into his pockets. "Think anybody'll hold me up?" he asked smilingly.

"No," said the clown. "Not anyone who saw how hard you worked to get it. Goodnight, didn't you realize you could

have passed out riding that nag?”

Wig smiled. “Sure I knew it. But there’s a nice feller I know who’ll sort of pass out if he doesn’t get the money so that kind of evens things up.”

Wig never forgot the send-off that he was given. There were shouts and cheers and when he started away the clown that he had talked with accompanied him down to the lower gate.

The sun was going down slowly and all the people had gone. The fields seemed more barren than ever, without the tramping throngs and after the terrific noise, Wig could not seem to grasp the meaning of it all. Where had Doc gone? Roy? Pee-wee and the rest? Why had they left him without even saying good-bye?

“Gee,” said Wig, looking around like one who had awakened from a trance. “I didn’t know it was so late. I guess nobody waited for me, huh?”

The clown smiled. “You were out quite a while kid, but the doctor said that was from the shock and all. There were a lot of people clamoring to get their peepers on such a hero as you but we had the attendant chase them all out. He told them you had gone, because the doc said you shouldn’t have any more excitement when you came to. Everything else all right?”

“All right,” Wig smiled wistfully.

A bus for Catskill stopped before the gate and Wig shook hands with the clown and hopped in. He was the only passenger and he sat up near the driver. There was never a time in his life when he had felt so lonely as then. It wasn’t the plaudits of his comrades that he wanted, it was their company and friendship. He told himself that over and over.

From time to time he felt of the fortune in his pockets. It all seemed like a dream and he was wondering what Delmar would say. That thought made him happy. Glory had been his but it was short-lived. He wanted most of all one glimpse of camp.

He got the driver to stop at the hospital and in a few minutes he was face to face with Cap outside of Del's own door. "He's sleeping, youngster," Cap told him. "The nurse said he's not to be disturbed."

Wig felt crestfallen and looked it. That had been his greatest wish—to hand the money to Del himself. He shook his head in keen disappointment. "When can I see him?" he asked.

"Not until day after tomorrow," Cap said kindly. "Doctor said he's had too much excitement and it's given him a little fever. Don't worry though, kid—I'll take good care of him. I'll see to that."

Wig smiled. "It isn't that," he said. "Oh, anyway, what's the use! You can send it to San Francisco yourself maybe."

Wig took the money out of his pockets and piled it into Cap's outstretched hands, telling him the while how he had taken Delmar's place by riding the horse. The man stood listening, amazed.

"I've heard o' crazy antics," he said when Wig had finished. "But that's got them all skinned a mile. Like as not if you were home yer father would be givin' ye a lickin' right now."

Wig smiled. "Not exactly," he said. "But he would give me a lecture I wouldn't forget. One's as had as the other and neither one's much good. That's what a feller in my patrol

always says. Anyhow I did it for Del and I'd do it over again."

Cap shook his head thoughtfully. "You're a corker, kid," he said. "Still, I'm beginning ter think there's a whole lot more good in this scouting business than what most folks think. First Delmar and now you. They turn out pretty fine fellers, I guess."

"You have to be one to know it," Wig said proudly.

CHAPTER XXXI

A CLUE

Wig got his supper in Catskill and then bought a few supplies. To kill time he went to the movies and when he came out it was after ten o'clock and raining.

Before the bus came in it had turned into a torrential downpour and he had to scurry under the shelter of a grocery store awning. Two men were standing there talking, seemingly oblivious of his presence.

"I've heard it's a fact," said the one. "They say they've been killing deer up there right along and getting away with it. The shots seem to come from the west. Whoever they are they ought to be hauled in."

"*Hauled in!*" the other man repeated. "I'd like to catch 'em—just catch 'em. They're even clippin' young does. The game-warden said he's found two carcasses a'ready. That's a downright shame, you got to admit that!"

The bus pulled up to the curb and Wig scampered across the sidewalk and got in. The two men followed but got off before they had gone two miles. After that the scout dozed off and awakened with a start when the driver called out "Temple Camp!"

Out into the darkness and pelting rain he stepped and hurried over to the bench. How different from the night when he had carved his initials there. Much had changed and much had happened since then. Wig felt he had lived years in between.

After a minute he ran down Jeb's Trail trying to keep under the trees as much as possible. The wind howled around him and the rain was increasing. It wasn't a fit night for a dog to be out, he told himself, and yet he, Wigwag Weigand, hadn't the shelter of a roof—not even in his own camp.

He brushed away some smarting tears that blurred his vision and ran out into the open skirting the camp. He dared not look toward his patrol cabin but he knew that every one of them was sleeping soundly, peacefully. And hardest of all for him to bear, was the knowledge that they were protected from that storm and rightfully part of the camp while he was an outcast.

He hurried along the path that brought back memories of the day when he had started out upon his solitary hike. It had been clear, sunshiny weather. He had even despaired of the peace and quiet of the countryside—so afraid that adventure would not be his. Many miles had passed between him and that thought—almost too many.

Sheer instinct led him up the path toward Delmar's shack. He knew he could not quite make it that night. He was too weary. But he could strike the thicket, three-quarters of the way there and find a half-way shelter from the storm.

It was long after midnight when he reached the dense growth that marks that particular part of the mountain. He groped his way in through the darkness, soaked to the skin and fighting the briars that cut his hands and face. When he was about to despair of finding the secluded spot he was looking for he heard the welcome swish of the brook. He knew then that he was right near the sheltering woods.

He crawled on his hands and knees feeling his way along and finally spread his fingers over some dry earth. A little

farther on he went until the rain and wind sounded afar off. He was in the thick of the woods and with weary fingers, pulled his poncho and blanket out of his knapsack. In five minutes he was asleep.

The sound of a shot awakened him. It was morning but not yet dawn. The storm was still raging and with sleepy eyes Wig tried to penetrate the darkness but the haunting hoot of an owl sent him under his blanket again.

Sleep would not come to him, as tired as he was. Perhaps it was because the sound of shooting had brought back to him the vivid memory of that night. At any rate he sat up once more, shivering in his still damp clothes.

With the echo of the wind and rain he could not be sure, but he thought he heard the sound of voices. He breathed deeply to combat his shivering and tried to keep still long enough to listen.

Suddenly he saw a mere pin-point of light issuing forth between the trees. He rubbed his eyes vigorously and watched it grow until he realized that it was because it was coming nearer and nearer to him.

As the light grew so did the sound of the voices. Wig could even hear harsh laughter and he huddled closer to the tree, wondering and not a little frightened.

He peeked out through his blanket and saw that the light was almost upon him. The voices rasped out intelligibly then. One said, "We ought to get a fair price fer him, eh, Joe?"

Wig pulled his blanket tighter and gave himself only enough of an opening in which to breathe. But his efforts were futile for the voices seemed to be going away instead of nearing him.

He jumped up quickly and saw the light playing through the trees. In its shadow he could make out the forms of two roughly clothed men. One of them seemed to be dragging something after him and Wig moved closer to see. He grasped the lower limb of the tree in amazement.

The man was dragging a dead deer by its horns.

CHAPTER XXXII

PLAYING GHOST

Wig slept little after that and long before dawn found its way into the forest he was on the up-path, bound for Delmar's shack. The conversation of the two men he had heard in Catskill had started him thinking. There was no doubt but that the two men he had seen were the guilty ones.

The rain was still venting its wrath upon the mountainside and Wig had received a second drenching by the time he reached the shack. Everything was about as they had left it and he looked about with a dismal countenance. Delmar wasn't there, so what good was it? Only to give him shelter until . . .

He set about trying to make the best of things and succeeded in getting himself something to eat. The rest of the day he spent in walking back and forth from the door to the window. By nightfall he was distressed by his loneliness and went to sleep in Delmar's bunk listening to the rain.

Morning brought him less comfort. It was raining harder than the day before. He felt himself imprisoned and spent hour after hour walking and thinking, alternating with sleeping and eating. Not one glimpse of camp had he gotten, not one peep at Black Lake.

He tried to content himself with the thought that the morrow would be clear and late in the afternoon he lay down once more thinking to sleep until morning. But he had been sleeping too much and before midnight he was awake.

He sat up in his bunk in the darkness and listened to the steady downpour of rain. But suddenly he was aware of another sound, like the night when he had listened to Delmar and Andrews. He shuddered.

It was voices again—perhaps the same ones that he had heard the other night, he thought. Curious, he got up and walked stealthily toward the broken window.

There it was again—the light, coming nearer and nearer. Were they hunting up there for a change? Wig wondered and pressed his face against the sash. Presently the light broke through the trees from across the brook and the scout pulled away quickly. He could see the two men distinctly.

As they came up to the shack one of the men stopped. “What you say, Joe, that we stop in here and get dry a little?”

Joe held the flashlight and played it over the rickety little building. “Nah, nah,” he said firmly. “Don’t yah think I got feelin’s? That stuff yah hear about dead men tell no tales don’t go with me. I’ve heard of lots of them that talk afterward and I’m not pinin’ to gaff with ghosts on a night like this.” He slung a large rifle over his shoulder and walked away.

The other man turned to follow him and Wig stepped forward intending to get past the window hastily. Instead he pushed against the lantern a little and to avoid upsetting it, moved backward only to bump himself upon the window ledge. It made a strange rumbling noise.

The man gave one look and seeing Wig’s white form moving in the window, took to his heels screaming like a woman. “It’s a ghost, Joe!” he yelled to his companion who was a distance ahead. “It’s Andrews’ ghost in that shack!”

Wig dashed out in the rain unmindful of everything but what he had just witnessed. The two men were running as if for their very lives and the boy watched the course that their flashlight took.

They kept going west, sometimes seeming to descend and sometimes to ascend again. But finally the light went out. Wig stood a long time studying the location of it and then went back into the shack.

CHAPTER XXXIII

GORDON

In spite of another day's rain, Wig set out early, going directly west. He had been hiking about an hour when he caught sight of a man coming toward him. It was not either of the two men he had come to know so much about; it was the figure of someone entirely unknown to him.

It was slow going as the continuous rains had turned each mountain path into a running stream. After some minutes Wig approached the man, smilingly. He was eager to talk and walk with a human being, he didn't care particularly who.

The man nodded pleasantly. "Kind of a wet day for a scout to be hiking, eh?" he asked, noting the khaki.

"Yes, it is," Wig answered frankly. "I'm hardly a scout any more though. That is, I got in dutch and I'm out. And, worse luck, my folks went away and I couldn't go home."

"That's tough, all right," the man said sympathetically. "My name's Gordon, kid. I'm a new game-warden 'round here. What are you doing then if you're not down in camp?"

Wig told him, but added, "Anyway, I'm hoping to be taken back because after all I didn't do anything so bad. I could have done lots worse, you've got to admit that."

Gordon laughed. "Yes, but mistakes mean that a kid like yourself is going to be lonesome. And I bet you are."

Wig smiled. "I was, but I won't be today because I've got something to do." He watched the game-warden thoughtfully, then: "You're hunting for a couple of violators, aren't you, Mr. Gordon?"

“I’ll say I am,” answered the game-warden. “Why?”

Wig smiled knowingly. “I think I can take you to the place where they sleep daytimes. Do you want me to take you there?”

“You lead,” Gordon answered. “I’ll follow. I’m afraid I’ve got a pretty tough proposition on my hands to get the goods on them though.”

“No, you haven’t,” said Wig. “I saw all the evidence you’ll need and besides I’ve got something else planned out.”

Gordon smiled.

A half hour later Wig was leading him through the woods and soon he picked out two sets of footprints. He showed them to Gordon and they followed them sedulously. Gradually they became more distinct.

Suddenly, Wig whispered to the game-warden, “We’re almost there. I know it. It was right about here where the light went out last night.”

They stepped from tree to tree cautiously and presently came to a sudden decline of the rocky substance. Just underneath, protected from the storms, was a home-made shelter of boughs and twigs. Evidences of camp life were to be seen everywhere.

They stood listening for fully five minutes and then Wig motioned that he was going to crawl down first. Gordon followed him quickly, but when they looked into the opening there wasn’t a sign of any human presence.

“Maybe they’re even hunting daytimes now,” Wig half-whispered.

Gordon said nothing and crawled inside the shelter. When he came out he held a rifle in his hand. Wig looked at it

eagerly. “What calibre is it?” he asked.

Gordon laughed. “Why, you’re not thinking of using it, are you?”

Wig shook his head. “Only to use it against them.”

Gordon examined it and said, “Forty-two, kid. Some power to that, I’m telling you. With a good aim we could almost hit Black Lake.”

Wig scrambled up over the ledge. “Come on, Mr. Gordon, before they come back.”

Gordon seemed puzzled. “Why did you drag me down here then if you don’t want to wait and take them right on the spot?”

“Because I had to find out something first,” Wig answered mysteriously. “You bring the rifle and come on. Come back to the shack with me. They’ll pay us a visit tonight, I bet. And if it isn’t tonight it’ll be tomorrow night. Anyway I’ll wait until they do. You wait and see.”

Gordon clambered up after Wig and they started back. “You’ve got me buffaloed, kid,” he said. “But I don’t mind waiting indoors for my prisoners this kind of weather. In fact, I’d rather be doing that than wading in water up to my knees.”

They were doing just that before they got back to the shack. The mountainside looked as if it had hundreds of tiny waterfalls. Rocks, sand and dead trees were all rolling down with the water.

As they passed the ledge, Wig stopped and crawled out a little way to get one glimpse of the camp. Water and mist obscured everything and he joined Gordon, looking quite disappointed.

“If you think it’s bad up here, you’re mistaken,” the game-warden commented, thinking Wig’s silence was due to the weather. “Only this morning when I passed Black Lake it was full to overflowing. One of the heads down there stopped me to chat awhile and he said that if we had another fresh onslaught from the mountain freshets they’re going to be flooded. It’s something fierce.”

“This summer’s been full of surprises,” said Wig thoughtfully.

CHAPTER XXXIV

REWARD

When they walked into the shack a welcome sight greeted them. There was a basket of food on the table and pinned to it conspicuously was a note in Roy's handwriting. Wig picked it up with something like a catch in his throat. Then he opened it.

Dearest:

Come home. All is forgiven!

MOTHER

Wig opened his mouth and laughed heartily for the first time in two weeks.

Below Roy's handwriting was another's even more familiar and Wig scanned its contents carefully.

Wig:

Don't mind that nut, R. B. He's as usual but he can't help it—he was born that way. What he meant was, everyone is waiting for you down in camp. That means Administration Shack and all.

Mr. Ellsworth thinks your stunt at the circus is simply great and he says the way you've stuck to that Delmar fellow is worthy of comment (whatever he means by that). Anyway he's pleased and we're pleased—and waiting.

We've been waiting here a long while and as we brought this food up the mountain we're not going to carry it down. We thought maybe you had gone down to the hospital and intended coming back here again like you told us. Anyhow we're leaving two flashlights for you if you decide to come down tonight and if you don't, pray that it'll clear in the morning. You're invited to come on a hop-skip-and-jump hike—special request of Roy. That's if it's clear. Otherwise we can't even hop around the lake—it's too wet.

Yours,
Doc.

Wig doubled the note up under his fist and pounded it for joy. "Hot dog!" he exclaimed. "What do I care about rain now!"

Dusk had settled over them before six o'clock, but Wig and Gordon had already feasted on the basket full of food that Chocolate Drop had sent up for the outcast scout. The shack was dim and quiet but its two occupants were resting lazily.

Onslaught after onslaught of rain beat upon the rotting timber and after a good deal of searching, Wig found a couple of tacks in the floor that would hold a few strips of wax paper against the broken window. They got the brunt of the wind and rain in the front and had to push the rickety table up against the door to keep it shut.

Darkness came and Wig removed his shoes and went to the window. An hour passed but he did not give up his vigil. Finally he hurried to the bunk where Gordon was dozing. "Hurry," he said. "I think it's them coming. Keep very quiet

and stand behind me. Maybe it won't work but keep your gun handy anyhow!"

Wig got his poncho and wrapped it around his body. He looked not unlike some tall ghost awaiting its hour of vengeance. Gordon moved across the floor softly and stood behind him.

The scout listened, every nerve and fibre in his body tingling. The sound that he waited for was coming. Footsteps rose and fell, up, up the flooded mountain trail. Wig pushed the table aside and opened the door wide.

A hoarse whispering reached their ears, then the forms of two men crept stealthily along in the darkness. Wig stood taut hardly moving a muscle. Gordon crouched behind him holding onto the poncho as if to keep him reminded that he was there to protect him.

The men were almost at the door. In a soft, low voice Wig spoke. "Is that you, Joe?" he murmured. "It's me—Andrews!"

Both men stood stark still, grasping each other in their horror. The one—Joe—opened his mouth and gasped. The other screamed. Both tried to come a few steps nearer but backed away as the form in the doorway moved a trifle.

Wig repeated. "I'm here, Joe!"

The man, Joe, sank to his knees holding onto his partner. "Honest!" he screamed. "It was only because I thought you had got the goods on us that I killed you! Honest, Andrews! I just caught you right when you were arguin' with that redheaded feller. You'd o' caught us sometime!" His screams were carried away on the wind.

His partner seemed too shaken to move. Joe groveled like a man insane. Wig moved slowly and Gordon's words came

out of the darkness like the measured speech of one dead.
“You’re covered! Both of you. Don’t move or I’ll shoot!”

Wig jumped quickly behind Gordon but that measure of safety was unnecessary. Both men were too powerless with fright to show any resistance. The game-warden had his handcuffs ready and within a few seconds they were started down the mountain.

Gordon followed them but soon called back to Wig.
“There’s a reward for Andrews’ murderer, do you know that, kid? It isn’t much but it’s a nice penny for a kid like you.”

“That won’t make me mad,” Wig answered. “It’ll keep me in spending money until Labor Day.”

CHAPTER XXXV

WIG HIMSELF

Wig was tired, too much so to attempt going back to camp that night. Also he wanted to defer the joy that he had been waiting for since his return to the shack. He wanted one more night alone, some time in which to think of the welcome he would get.

He threw himself wearily into the bunk and told himself that in spite of the weather his cloud did have a silver lining. He was happier for Delmar's sake and knew he would sleep better, now that his friend had been completely vindicated.

He shut his eyes and listened to the turbulent little brook, swollen to an alarming pitch. "Aw, it'll be clear tomorrow," he said drowsily. "It's got to be." He smiled and fell asleep.

He awakened with a rushing, roaring noise in his ears. Sitting up he asked himself what next? But it was no time for pondering, he realized. Something was happening outside. He arose and dressed quickly.

Taking up his flashlights he hurried out of doors. To be sure, the storm was worse than ever but the rushing, roaring noise was not a part of it. He sank in water but lighted his way toward the brook.

He knew he wasn't anywhere near the brook and yet the water was up over his knees. He listened a few minutes, then grasped the meaning of it with alarm. The lake above them, the wind and constant rain! It was simply pouring down the mountain like some huge cataract, and carrying the brook along with it.

Wig knew that if it was roaring down the mountain with such force Black Lake would be the sufferer within a few short hours. Frantically he wondered if he could get down in that time. But the sight of the hundreds of streams discouraged him. He'd be lucky if he could make it in four hours.

Temple Camp was sleeping. Could anyone hear the rush and roar down there? He hoped that someone was wakeful—that someone would be on the lookout for just that catastrophe.

He fought his way across the brook and slipped a half dozen times before he got down to the ledge where he had first looked back on camp that memorable day. He crawled out over the slippery rock and finding some coarse grass growing between, stood up using it as a mat for his feet.

Taking his two lights he held them together and flashed steadily in the direction of camp. After a few minutes he swung them to the left in a dash, then to the right with two dots. Back and forth he worked his arms hoping against hope yet fearing the worst. Twice, three times he spelled out the message

DANGER — MOUNTAIN — LAKE — FLOODED —
HEADED — FOR — BLACK — LAKE —
WASHOUTS — WATCH — OUT
WIGWAG — WEIGAND

He waited patiently, unmindful of the teeming rain. He could not hope to get as clear a message as he sent. If they would only flash something. He leaned forward eagerly. A few seconds passed and then the very pin point of a light appeared out of the pitch dark. It flashed steadily then almost

indistinctly. Wig guessed the signal to mean O. K. It was Mr. Ellsworth—his usual answer. Then he had been on the watch, after all!

The scout crawled back and down, down toward his camp. He had to take many detours and limped the last lap long after morning had appeared on the horizon.

Sandbags lined the shores of Black Lake and the cabins nearby were half covered with water. Wig dragged himself along viewing the wreckage ruefully. Scouts were working busily to keep the water from doing any further damage.

Wig smiled. It was just his luck, he thought, to get back in camp at a time when everyone was busy. No one knew he was there. His own patrol cabin was all but immersed and he looked up at the blue sky and wondered how many days it would take to dry things out.

As he looked something stirred in the oak tree that had so generously shaded their cabin. Suddenly a leg appeared, then another one. A mouth yawned drowsily and when it shut again. Wig saw that it belonged to no less a personage than Roy Blakeley. Their eyes met.

Roy yelled three cheers and instantly a number of faces peered down from the various limbs. Doc, Pee-wee, Westy Martin and the whole crowd of them were perched in the tree. Wig laughed heartily.

“What’s the idea?” he called.



“WHAT’S THE IDEA?” HE CALLED.

“What’s the matter with the idea?” Roy wanted to know. “I think it’s a darn good idea if you ask me. Now I know why the birds stick to the trees. That’s the only way they keep out of hot water—I mean cold water. Anyway, we were shoved up here after Mr. Ellsworth got your message. It’s the only dry spot in camp.”

“Why aren’t you working?” Wig asked them.

“We didn’t have time to get out our rubbers, but thanks to you, you’ve saved our hikes.”

“How?” Wig queried.

“Well, you saved us, didn’t you? And if it wasn’t for us there wouldn’t be any hikes would there? I’ll leave that to Pee-wee, he doesn’t know any more than I do.”

Wig turned back from their nonsense to find Mr. Ellsworth standing behind him. He glanced confusedly this way and that but soon he felt a firm, friendly clasp on his shoulder.

“Well, how’s our Eagle Scout, this morning?” Mr. Ellsworth asked smilingly.

“Do you say he’s not an Honor Scout now, too, after what he did?” Pee-wee shouted from the second limb of the tree.

“I’ll say he is,” said the scoutmaster. “I’ll say he’s two Honor Scouts in one.”

Words failed Wig.

CHAPTER XXXVI

TWO EAGLE SCOUTS

It was the day that scouts look forward to in Temple Camp—the Saturday before Labor Day. Mr. John Temple, its bountiful founder, honored them each year at that time by presenting the various awards and medals to the deserving ones. Wig was among them, or shall we say he led them? At any rate he was most honored and most revered by his comrades and by all who knew of his heroic deeds.

Mr. Temple had paid his respects and then it came Mr. Ellsworth's turn. Wig stood beside him. "Here is a scout who has proven all that scouting teaches," the scoutmaster said. "In an hour of dire need he did not fail us. That is all we ask of any scout!"

"Yeh! Three cheers!" cried familiar voices.

Mr. Ellsworth smiled. "It's good to hear your voices ringing like that," he said. "It makes us realize more that heroic deed of Wigley's. But for him they might have been forever stilled in the waters that threatened to inundate our beloved camp."

A reverent silence followed that. Each scout was carried back to that night of storm and wind—the night when Wig's persistent signalling gave the warning that hurriedly drove them from their beds and out of the flood waters' reach.

Wig fidgeted upon the platform, standing on one foot and then the other. He did not dare look down upon the shining medals on his breast for fear that they would be gone. He had

waited so long for them that it all seemed a pleasant dream from which he must surely awaken.

Mr. Ellsworth's voice roused him once more.

"Also we have a pleasant surprise," he said mysteriously. "One that will bring great happiness to our camp here and to all our members. In point of fact we are all to be honored by his membership."

There was perfect silence—a very unusual thing for Temple Camp. Mr. Ellsworth stood on tiptoe and beckoned toward the back of the hall. A figure, familiarly dear to Wig, strode up quickly to the scoutmaster's side.

Mr. Ellsworth took his arm and turned him around to the breathless audience. "For those of you who are not acquainted with this famous character," he said smilingly, "let me introduce Daniel Drake Delmar. He has consented to confine all his good turns in the future for the benefit of scouting and Temple Camp."

Delmar was cheered as only Temple Campers can cheer. Burst upon burst of applause broke forth only to be taken up again. Wig moved to Delmar's side and smiled up at him proudly.

Mr. Ellsworth raised his hand for order. "Mr. Delmar or Daredevil Delmar, as he is known to most of you, will assist Tom Slade from now on. He has promised to teach you horsemanship (but he bars the wild ones, he says) and marksmanship next summer. And because he is an Eagle Scout and an Honor Scout I think he is pretty capable of helping more scouts toward that goal."

More cheers drowned him out. Once more he rapped for order. "Now that Mr. Delmar is going to be one of us we have decided to relate him to us—to scouting. He has no

other relatives and perhaps it is thrusting too many on him at once but somehow I imagine he can handle us all!”

That assemblage broke up in perfect disorder, but it is the kind of disorder that Temple Camp loves. Wig had been carried out bodily like some conquering hero of old. And Delmar was made to realize for the first time in years why a scout is a brother to all other scouts.

After sheer weariness had forced the revellers to their beds, Delmar hunted out Wig and found him sitting back under the trees and gazing out upon the moonlit waters of Black Lake. He tried to imitate the Silver Fox call but fell quite short of the original.

Wig smiled. “Leave it to you to find me, Del,” he said happily. “You’d find me if I went to India. Honest, you know me better than I know myself.”

Delmar sat down beside him and threw his arm about his shoulder. “You know yourself all right, young scout,” he said. “The trouble is, you won’t admit it—even to yourself.”

“Maybe you’re right, Del,” Wig said and rubbed the palm of his hand over his bemedaled breast. “Man, it’s funny with me though. When I wasn’t an Eagle Scout and an Honor Scout I thought I ought to be them. But now that I am both, I don’t think I’m so worthy after all. Isn’t that funny?”

“You funny kid,” said Delmar, ruffling Wig’s hair. “Don’t you know that that’s the stuff the heroes are made of? It’s good for your system not to think yourself worthy enough. Always think what more you could have done!”

Wig turned to Delmar. “That’s straight talk, Del. You’re right. And nobody but you would have thought of that. Nobody!”

Delmar's laugh rang cheerily across the lake. Wig smiled. Together they rose and walked off arm in arm, Eagle Scouts and Honor Scouts both. But in their hearts they were just plain scouts.

THE END

[The end of *Wigwag Weigand* by Percy Keese Fitzhugh]