

MARK GILMORE
SCOUT OF THE AIR

PERCY KEESE FITZHUGH

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Title: Mark Gilmore—Scout of the Air

Date of first publication: 1930

Author: Percy Keese Fitzhugh (1876-1950)

Date first posted: Nov. 10, 2019

Date last updated: Nov. 10, 2019

Faded Page eBook #20191117

This eBook was produced by: Roger Frank and Sue Clark

MARK GILMORE—SCOUT OF THE AIR



HE WAS REACHING FOR THE BIRD.

MARK GILMORE
SCOUT OF THE AIR

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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GROSSET & DUNLAP
PUBLISHERS NEW YORK

Made in the United States of America

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MARK GILMORE—SCOUT OF THE AIR

CHAPTER I

WAITING

On a certain stormy night two events occurred in the town of Kent's Falls in upper New York State, which were destined to have an important bearing on the life of Lefferts Leighton who participated in neither of these occurrences and was at the time many miles distant from this quiet town which he had never seen.

In the simple living room of a cottage along the main thoroughfare, a lady, highly nervous and trying to control her agitation, sat rocking in a chair by the marble-topped center table while her husband paced the floor, silent and preoccupied. The atmosphere in that rather homely room seemed tense.

For some minutes neither of these two had spoken. They were both clearly worried and anxious, but the man's demeanor was one of anger, while that of the lady bespoke only suspense. They were the parents of Markle Gilmore.

"There's one thing I will ask you," said the boy's mother, "and that is not to have a scene. There's no use making matters worse by losing your temper; you'd simply make him stubborn and we'll never get at the truth that way."

Mr. Gilmore paced the floor, back and forth, and for a few moments said not a word. Clearly, he was not in the least influenced. "I think you may leave that to me," he finally observed, tersely. "The best you can do is to withdraw altogether and leave the matter to me. I'm not going to brook any interference." He looked at his watch, impatiently. "You don't suppose he suspects anything, do you? It's after ten o'clock."

Mrs. Gilmore spoke as if her patience had already been subject to some strain. "I think, as I said before, that he stayed for supper at the Halburton's. When he does that he never gets home before ten o'clock." She uttered a long sigh, showing the effect of argument and suspense. "Here he comes now, I think."

But he did not come, and the father continued pacing the floor back and forth, back and forth. The mother made no further effort to read her book, but inverted it in her lap and sat waiting, sighing occasionally. At every sound of footfalls in the street, she started anxiously. Her husband's silence and steady pacing were portentous.

A tall boy of about nineteen lounged into the room, a cigarette dangling from his mouth. He wore a studied air of sophistication; he looked bored and

cynical. It was not often that he graced the household with his presence in the evening.

“Edgar, why don’t you go to bed instead of wandering around?” his mother asked, in nervous annoyance. “Or else take a book and read.”

“I’m sticking around to see the circus,” said the boy, sprawling in a chair. “Didn’t he show up yet?”

Mr. Gilmore, still pacing the floor, darted a quick look of angry disapproval at his son, but said nothing.

“I thought you were going to take Grace Arnold to the movies, dear,” said the boy’s mother.

The son rubbed his thumb and finger tips together with that motion which is intended to convey the need of money, and by this pantomime informed his mother that the lack of it had been fatal to his gallant enterprise.

“Well then, why didn’t you just make a little call on her?” the simple lady asked, under the impression that this good old custom still survived.

“They got no use for you if you haven’t a car,” answered Edgar, sneeringly. “You can bet I’m going to have one by next year. Look at Collie Walters, she’s out with him every night.” There was a pause. “What’s the matter with the kid, anyway?” he asked. “Where’d he go—up to Halburton’s? I bet the little rascal knows he’s in Dutch. What are you going to do—chase him to Military School?”

His father wheeled about, angrily. “If you haven’t got anything to do with yourself, go to bed!” he snapped. “I should have sent *you* to Military School when you were Mark’s age. Perhaps you would have been capable of doing something worth while now. I want you to get out of the room when Mark comes in.”

The boy smiled, a singularly sneering smile, eloquent of disrespect and cheap sophistication, and slowly rousing himself, ambled out of the room. His mother rocked on silently in her chair, alert to every sound without. Her husband paced the floor with a kind of grim patience—back and forth, back and forth . . .

CHAPTER II

A DECISION

Back and forth, back and forth. The minutes dragged away; eleven o'clock arrived—half past eleven. The old-fashioned blinds began to rattle; it was blowing up outdoors. Then a patter of rain. A window shade flapped noisily. "I think the rain must be coming into the dining room," said Mrs. Gilmore. It afforded some relief to her taut nerves to bestir herself to close the window where the rain was indeed blowing in.

At last a familiar footfall was heard on the pavement, and the still more familiar sound of hurrying feet on the steps and porch. Then a boy of about fifteen burst into the room, scaling his cap into a chair. "*Oh, boy*, but it's starting to pour," he said. "A big limb of a tree blew down up the street. The tin sign in front of Tony's blew across the way and all the way down to the corner—I went chasing after it. If I hadn't dragged it back to him, I'd have been here before the worst of it. *Did I run!*"

These were his specialties, doing favors and running. Whatever his shortcomings he was a cheery, good-hearted boy. He did not act as if he thought a serious charge was awaiting him. Be that as it might, there could be no question of his ability at running. He could make a home run where another boy would not get past second base. He had a medal for winning a running match. People said he was a little devil; whether they meant in his running or in his conduct, these pages must show. And he had that rare combination of brown eyes and blond hair.

"My dear, you shouldn't throw your wet cap in the chair," said his mother, picking it up. "Why, it's simply saturated."

"I'll say it is."

"Are your feet wet?"

The boy's father put a sudden end to these considerations by a brisk onslaught. Thrusting his hands deep into his trousers pockets as if to encourage frankness and to issue a warning that he would stand no nonsense, he paused, then wheeled about, confronting the boy.

"Markle," said he (usually he called the boy Mark, and his use of the full name was ominous), "Markle, where have you been these last five days?"

"*Five*—why, what's the matter?" asked the boy. He had certainly been taken unawares and was obviously perturbed.

"Now Markle," said his father tersely, "let's get right down to facts. I want the plain truth and if you don't tell it you'll take the consequences. You

haven't been to school all this week. Yesterday afternoon, your mother came home and couldn't get in the house; she never told me this until tonight. She 'phoned to the school to ask them to send you home with your key, and they told her you hadn't been there all week—thought you were sick."

"Your teacher said that Larry Vreeland told her you were ill, dear," said Mrs. Gilmore. "I do think you might have . . ."

"Well," Mr. Gilmore snapped, "a boy who stays away from school a week wouldn't scruple to ask another boy to lie for him. Now what I want to know is, where were you and what were you doing?"

"I—can't—I——," the boy began.

His father cut him short. "I didn't say much when you played truant one afternoon," he stormed, "and I'm not going to go into the past. But I want to know . . ."

"You don't give him the chance to tell you," Mrs. Gilmore interposed, gently.

"Well, now he has his chance. *One—whole—week*—you've been away from school, deceiving your parents, misleading the school authorities, loafing around, I suppose. Now what have you got to say for yourself?" Mr. Gilmore snapped, angrily.

"We just don't understand it, dear," said Mrs. Gilmore. "Tell us frankly, what have you been doing?"

"Going off with your books every morning," said Mr. Gilmore, contemptuously; "and I understand you haven't been coming in until pretty near supper time every night. Doesn't it mean anything to you that you've been living a *lie*? Well, I'm not going to have you utter any lies now. Where have you been, and what have you been doing?"

This was a crucial moment in the boy's life. The momentary diversion afforded by his elder brother's sauntering into the room gave him time to think. There was that in the elder boy's cynical smile which bespoke pleasant anticipations; he was going to enjoy the rumpus. Not that he was glad that Mark's delinquency had been discovered; his smile seemed to express contempt of the boy's inability to "get away with it." If he could be said to have any sympathy at all, it was for his younger brother rather than for his parents. But he had little sympathy. This was a sporting event and he was going to enjoy it. He lounged into a chair, lighted a cigarette, and appeared not to be listening. He looked bored.

"I didn't tell you any lies and I'm not going to," Mark said, finally. "I told Larry Vreeland that I couldn't come to school until . . ."

"You *couldn't!*" stormed his father. "Well, why couldn't you? Ball playing——fishing?"

“There wouldn’t be anybody to play with in school hours,” Edgar suggested.

“Well, what was it then?” Mr. Gilmore fairly roared. “*One—whole—week*, lost at school! Now what have you got to say for yourself?”

“I admit I haven’t been to school and I’m not going to tell why,” the boy answered, nervously, but with a certain fine resolve.

His father seemed staggered.

“You *admit*! Well, well! And you’re not going to tell! Now see here, young man, I want no nonsense. I want to know what you’ve been doing this last week. Come now, out with it!”

“I don’t want to tell and I’m not going to,” said the boy, firmly.

“You had better tell your father the truth, dear,” Mrs. Gilmore encouraged.

“I didn’t say I wouldn’t tell the truth; I said I’m not going to tell at all.” He probably thought that by this nice distinction he was saving his self esteem.

But his father was in no mood for quibbling. For just a moment he paused, perplexed how to handle this situation. Then he clapped his hands suddenly and vigorously, with an ominous air of finality. “All right, sir, that ends it. Off you go to Military School. If you won’t tell what you do, you’ll go where they can see what you do. So I guess that’s about all and you can march upstairs to bed. I’ll have news for you by tomorrow night. *Don’t want to and are not going to, eh?* Well, we’ll see about that. Now you march upstairs to bed.”

The boy stepped forward and kissed his mother goodnight; his eyes were brimming. “Dearie,” she said, as she drew him toward her, “please tell your father why you stayed away from school so long. Please do, before you make matters worse.”

“Sure, spill it,” said Edgar. “I bet it had something to do with exams. So long as you’re caught with the goods, kid, you might as well tell why.”

Mark turned to his brother and gave him a look that was at once wistful and pleading. He then hurried from the room and as he plodded up the stairs, they heard him gulp once or twice.

CHAPTER III

MARK AND EDGAR

The wind was blowing a hurricane and driving the rain through the opened window of Mark's room as he entered. It caught the door which he had opened and blew it shut with such a resounding clamor that the brother downstairs thought that Mark had slammed it in angry defiance.

"Little devil," he laughed. Then he drew himself together and lounged out of the room and upstairs to his own apartment, whose walls were gaily decorated with photographs of girls.

He was almost ready for bed, indeed he had but one thing to lay aside, and that was his cigarette, when he was astonished to see the door softly open and his younger brother enter, closing it as silently behind him.

Mark was still fully dressed, his eyes tear stained, his blond hair disheveled and tumbling down over his forehead. A more sympathetic observer than the gallant Edgar might have discerned that he had tossed upon the bed in the silence of his room and indulged in his little bit of tearful shame. Edgar was observant of only one thing and that was that Mark very softly turned the key in the door.

"What's the big idea, kid?" asked Edgar, speaking softly. "*A week!* Holy Smoke, I used to go on the hook for an afternoon once in a while when there was a ball game. But a week! You might have known you'd get nailed. Where were you all the time; down at the carnival? I'll tell you one thing, kiddo, the old man means business. He's going to chase you up to Military School; you'll be marching in line and saluting a lot of tin soldiers and turning out for a bugle. That's what you'll be doing, you stubborn little dumbbell. You must have been goofy to think you could get by with that."

"And how do you think you're going to get by with what you did and what you've been doing," Mark said, with a kind of hopelessness in his voice. "Do you think you'll always have me to cover you up—lying for you—yes, and *working* for you so's Father and Mother won't know what kind of a guy you really are!" Edgar's face grew livid and he tiptoed over to his brother. "You mean you're going to tell about . . ."

"Did I ever tell *anything*, Ed?" Mark asked. "It's a week since you took that money out of Sis' drawer—the money Father gave her toward her vacation money. Maybe you didn't hear Mother say it but Sis phoned this morning *before school time* and said that she'd be back home tomorrow. Alice Leslie's mother will get back from Pennsylvania tonight and they

won't have need of Sis' company. It's a good thing I thought about Carlin's truck farm—they pay pretty good money for just pulling weeds. Twenty dollars for a week's work isn't bad for a kid my age."

Edgar's face remained a pasty white except for two tiny points of color at his cheekbones. "And is that what you've been doing all week—at Carlin's pulling weeds!" he exclaimed in utter amazement.

"Where else did you think the money would come from, huh?" Mark asked, curiously without so much as a hint of anger or disgust at this weak brother of his. "I knew when I caught you taking that out of Sis' drawer that you'd never be able to replace it—never in the world. Someone had to get the money, so it might as well have been me." A sardonic chuckle broke the stillness in the room.

"Sh!" warned Edgar as he tiptoed cautiously over to the door, opened it and listened. There was not a sound downstairs; evidently their parents had retired to their ground-floor room. All of the lights were out, and there was no sound but the incessant lashing of the storm, as it rattled the loose windows and streamed down the panes, tumbling like a waterfall off the porch roof. Satisfied, he came back close to his brother. "You went to a lot of trouble it seems to me—how would Sis have known who took it—how would anyone have known for that matter! There could be ways of making it look as if someone came in from outside, couldn't there? Rumble up the dresser drawers and things like that? Seems to me . . ."

"Never mind, Ed—never mind," said Mark, as if his brother's growing weaknesses caused him intolerable pain. "There's only one way for a feller to act when he's got a brother like you, and that's to act decent so's to make up for him, sort of. It's bad enough to steal other people's money but when it comes to your own sister——"

"Not so loud," the cringing Edgar pleaded. "Anyway, how do you know what I needed that money for? It might have been something important, how do you know?"

Mark smiled wistfully. "Don't *I* know what you mean by important!" he said, indifferently. "It's that pool room, that's what, and I'd like to know what takes so much money in a dump of a looking place like that is."

"They're my friends," said Edgar, trying to be at least manly in the role of loyalty to his friends, but making a pathetic failure of it. "They like me and treat me swell."

"Yes?" said Mark, going over and sitting down on the edge of his brother's bed. "Tell me all about it—for instance: if they think so much of you, why they can't trust you for twenty dollars or whatever amount it was that you owed them?"

“They’re business people and you can’t owe them money,” Edgar protested. “They make their living that way.” He stopped short as if he was aware that he had said a little bit more than he had originally intended.

Mark shrugged his shoulders as if he were tired of the whole affair. He dug his hands deep down into his trousers pocket and brought out the twenty dollars—a crackling, shiny new bill.

“Well, here you are, Ed,” he said, handing it to his brother. “Here it is. I even got it changed at the bank into a brand new bill—just the way that Father gave it to Sis.” He rose and stretched his arms way above his head, then suddenly stopped. “Maybe it won’t do any good for me to say so, but it wouldn’t hurt you to remember that Sis is a business person and so is Father. They both have to make a living the same as those rotten people . . .”

“Aw, all right,” Edgar interposed, and hiding his great relief under a cloak of boredom.

He yawned audibly and walked over to his bed. “You don’t need to rub it in. I know I’m not much good and that you’re a little brick for doing what you did.”

“You don’t need to thank me, Ed,” said Mark, wearily. “I honestly don’t know why I do these things for you and get myself in Dutch when you ought _____”

Edgar wheeled around, cowardice showing in his every move. He came over to Mark and grabbed him by the shoulder, entreatingly. “You’re going to go and tell now, I can see it,” the wretched boy said. “Gee, you wouldn’t do that now, would you, Mark? Gosh, that isn’t being a good sport.”

Mark let the trembling hand remain on his shoulder. “It’s because you’re a punk sport that you think it of me, Ed,” he said, patiently. “You needn’t think I’ll ever tell. Not for anything.”

“How about Military School? You’ve always said you’d do anything rather than go away to one of those places. Suppose Father keeps his word and sends you—what then?”

“It won’t make a bit of difference,” answered Mark, loyally.

“How about Carlin’s—up at the farm?” Edgar asked with fear and trembling.

“Father doesn’t know—you ought to know that by now,” said Mark. “Goodnight, I’m going to bed now.”

But still the miserable brother detained him. He had at least the decency to reach for his brother’s hand and clasp it, gratefully. “All right, Mark,” he said, almost incoherently, “you’re all to the good, you are, but if you ever tell now, I’d . . .”

Mark paused and looked at his brother, thoughtfully. “You’d what?” he asked.

“I’d go throw myself in Lake George,” answered Edgar, with lowered eyes.

“Hmph,” said Mark, a pitying look in his eyes. “I didn’t think you were quite as bad as that, Ed. For one thing, I won’t tell and another thing is, that you’ve got the chance to quit that gang at the pool room and travel around with decent fellers. Wouldn’t Mother and Father be tickled to death if you said you’d get a job!”

“Maybe I will,” said Ed, not very convincingly. “I’ll pay you back for all this, Mark. Honest. Yes, I’ll pay you back.”

“Say, listen,” said Mark, pausing once more, “I don’t ask you to do anything but to work and be decent and quit doing things that I’ve got to cover up for you. Now, Father’ll send me away—away to one of those places, and you won’t have me to fall back on. You *got* to quit your monkey business then, Ed, or be found out yourself. I’m going to bed.”

The guilty Edgar was loath to let him go. Having no strength of character himself he could not comprehend his brother’s power to resist under pressure. “I’ll quit, Mark,” he said, “but how can I be sure you won’t squeal when it comes time to leave for the school?”

“You’re sure I won’t flunk now—at this minute, aren’t you?” Mark asked.

Edgar was sure.

“Well, you can be just as sure when it comes time for me to go,” said Mark, thoughtfully. Then: “I can promise you I won’t go if I can get out of it, so no matter where I go you can be sure I won’t flunk.” He released himself from his brother, unlocked the door and tiptoed softly into the hall and thence to his own room.

He did not go to bed. All unknown to him the gods had prepared an adventure that was worthy of him. The storm and lightning and thunder were ready to take him to their arms and bear him to his destiny. And that very night, amid the drenching and roaring tempest, he was to hear a voice—the voice of Fate.

Perhaps the gods had heard him say these words, “*You can be sure I won’t flunk.*” At all events they took him at his word.

CHAPTER IV IN THE STORM

As Mark passed to his room he looked down the stairs and saw through the front door that the porch light, which had been turned on before his arrival, was still burning, and he descended the stairs very quietly to turn it out. But before his finger touched the switch in the lower hall, the light was extinguished, and he was aware of a sudden darkness outside where the street lights had also gone out. The storm must be worse than before, he thought.

He opened the front door and looked out into the pitch darkness. How strangely black the street seemed without those lights. Mutterings of thunder could be heard, and now and then a sudden flash of lightning illuminated the tall, gaunt electric poles standing at intervals along the deserted block. The rain was overflowing the roof gutters and pouring down with incessant splashing.

Mark stepped to the end of the porch where he could look up and see his own window; the light there was also extinguished. This abysmal darkness, relieved by not so much as one familiar light, intensified his feeling of loneliness. He had been somewhat buoyed up by his defiance of his father, and by the difficult scene with his brother. But these matters were past now and his fate was sealed—he was going to some Military School, some institution noted for its discipline, and he pictured it in its very worst light.

The more he thought of it the more he realized how unjust to be sent away from home, from everything. This was to be his reward for his week of labor performed to save his brother from certain exposure! But how could his father know that? His mother?

A streak of lightning flashed across the lawn and the flower beds. The thought came to him that he would defy this unjust sequel to his efforts and run away. But in this storm and without any funds? It was absurd, he told himself. How could he manage it; where would he go?

There was something about the storm and utter darkness that favored his mood, and he lingered in a recess of the porch, assailed by the driving rain. Suddenly amid the tumult of the elements he heard, or thought he heard, a sound which was not one of the voices of the storm. A whirring sound intermingled with the roaring of the wind and thunder.

Sometimes Mark could not hear it at all and when he did it sounded strangely inharmonious with the voices of the storm. Suddenly a dazzling

streak of lightning lighted the sky, and there above him, thrown into a kind of ghastly relief, was an airplane. He saw it for only a few seconds, then the night closed about it, and a peal of thunder drowned its steady whirring. Soon he heard it again, but he saw it no more.

Mark was an extremely sensitive boy, and the momentary glimpse he got of that lone plane, struggling in the darkness, chilled him and set his nerves on edge. Such utter loneliness! Such an unequal struggle, it seemed to him! Just that momentary picture, revealed to him in the wild night, aroused in him somewhat the same feeling that he had had for Edgar when he saw him taking the twenty dollars out of their sister's drawer. It was that very human instinct of the strong character desirous of carrying the weaker one's burden upon his own shoulders.

He was too young, of course, to analyze his feelings in the matter of the plane. He was too young to realize that the airplane was a weak thing at best when buffeted about by the tremendous force of the elements, and that human nature can often outwit even those handicaps when there is strength of character behind the task. He only knew that he had an overpowering impulse to be of some service to that lonely airman up there in the black, tempestuous night and help him outwit the storm and wind so that he might make a safe landing.

Did that aviator know that Kent's Falls boasted of a fair-sized landing field? Mark hoped that he did for the community had constituted itself a hospitable refuge for those who braved the perils of the air. It held its welcoming arms open, and those arms were two floodlights flanking the runway in a vast and level meadow.



HE SAW IT FOR ONLY A FEW SECONDS.

Seldom it was that any aviator made use of Kent's Falls' generous hospitality and yet the field was always kept mowed and ready, its two beacon lights shining ever aloft to tell the baffled wanderer who chanced in

that region, that here between these glowing spots he might set his wheels down in safety.

And now Mark realized with a shudder of foreboding that these lights must also have gone out when the current failed throughout the little town. His own feeling of strangeness in the unfamiliar dark enabled him to form a picture of that baffled airman in a vain quest which meant safety or disaster for him. If it seemed strange and ghostly in the pitch dark of the porch, how must it seem up there in the pitch darkness of the angry night?

Mark had only to open the screen door and grope his way up to his room. But what of the struggling, bewildered airman? Now, in a lull of the storm he heard the whirring again. His nerves were on edge. In a minute, any second, those spreading wings might crash in a crumpled mass before him. What should he do?

Another zigzag streak of lightning brightened the sky, and there was the lonely, forlorn thing, thrown in bold relief for just a second. Then darkness. One of the blinds of a porch window blew loose and began to flap violently. He fastened it open, pushing it into place with difficulty. It relieved him a trifle to feel that he was doing something.

Well, at all events, he could not go upstairs to bed with impending tragedy above him. He forgot all about his own troubles now.

CHAPTER V

A FIERY INSPIRATION

His inspiration to save his brother, and all the events following it, were forgotten. He had another inspiration now. It carried him on its wings and he obeyed it with a reckless frenzy. Oh, if that airman up there in the black storm would only linger for just a few minutes—maybe only ten minutes! But an airplane, even in a storm, may go a long distance in ten minutes. How Mark wished he could call and ask that ghostly visitant to wait!

Rushing into the house he ran pell mell through to the back shed and lifted the five gallon kerosene can that stood there on a box. It was empty. Baffled, he paused. Then suddenly his big inspiration came to him. Running with all his might and main down the street he came, soaked and panting, to the back yard of the corner grocery. He had not the slightest scruple about what he intended to do, any more than he had harbored the slightest scruple about playing hookey from school for a week when it meant safety for his brother. It was this heroic theory of his that a noble end justified a dubious means, that was always getting him into trouble.

A strange figure of a very little demon he must have seemed as he climbed into the old delivery car, wiping his streaming hair and face with his soaked sleeve. His clothes were dripping from the driven rain, his shoes were saturated. But he was quite unconscious of these effects of his exposure. "If I can only get the blamed thing started," he said.

More than once had the companionable Herman Schmitter, son of the proprietor, allowed Mark to drive this ramshackle car (despite the law) in byways unfrequented by the authorities. The boy knew that if he could only get it started he could drive it now. Fortunately, no one lived in the building behind which this antiquated Ford was housed under a protecting shed.

It started! Mark did not turn on the lights until he was well along the street, and only then because he was forced to by reason of the utter darkness. For a few moments he was apprehensive, but once on Edgetown Road he knew he was safe. No one would stop him or see him now.

The old flivver rattled along, sputtering and slowing down, then picking up again, for the rain was driving in through the radiator. Mark's only fear was that it would stop. How strange and black the road seemed without the town lights! The lights of the car were reflected in huge puddles in the road through which the old Ford splashed.

Soon he passed the little cemetery and in a flash of lightning saw its gravestones standing white and stark and ghastly. Then, as quickly, they were lost again in the darkness. It seemed almost as if the spectral company housed there had struck a light to glimpse this drenched midnight apparition as he sped by.

Then he was at Kent's Field. There were no sparks of light there. He drove the car lickety-split up over the hubbly border of the road and straight across to the center of the field. Here were the two flood lights atop their short posts, standing like twin ghosts.

He lost not a second. Driving the car close to one of these he threw open the hood and began to flood the carburetor. Soon his hand was wet with gasoline and he could feel it dripping off the frame. For just a few moments he continued this operation, then drove the car over to the other dead light some seventy-five or more feet distant. Then he ran back and threw a lighted match into the puddle of gasoline.

The effect was sensational. An imposing flame arose and spread which must have been quickly visible in the sky. But one blaze means nothing in a matter of this kind; two mean everything. A pair of lights separated by seventy-five or a hundred feet in surrounding darkness are eloquent to an airman. Mark ran back to the car, flooded the carburetor again, and soon had another blaze which, like its companion, defied the rain.

He had succeeded. Standing in the wind and rain, a forlorn and lonely figure in that vast, desolate, field, he contemplated the two flaming areas. What a strange sequel was all this to his secret labors of the week, his encounter with his father, his rescue of his brother from disgrace! And here he was in the tempestuous midnight, gazing anxiously into the sky—watching, listening . . .

And the next day (or very soon at all events) he was to go to a Military School. As he stood there this realization flashed into his mind, and he could not reason the thing out at all. That this should be the reward of a great, good turn! There was no sound in the sky—only the voice of the storm. He had spoken with his two masses of dazzling flame; he had sent his signal up into the night when all the fine equipment of the field had failed.

Still there was no response to his blazing welcome.

He could not stand there in the rain doing nothing. He kept as close as he could to one of the fires, but the rain, which helped to swell and prolong the flames of gasoline, soaked his clothing faster than the fire could dry it. He ran to the car and wrenching a floor board from the rickety affair, pushed up the soft earth into a little mound around each area of flame, for the fires were spreading as gasoline fires are sure to do. Thus confined, the flames mounted higher and brighter.

But spilled gasoline will not burn long and Mark was now well nigh frantic lest the fires die out and all his efforts go for naught. He could not drive the old Ford into the burning area, so he flooded the carburetor into a vegetable basket which he found in the car, having first pushed an old oil cloth side-curtain down into it. It dripped as he carried it and probably lost as much as he was able to add to the flames in all his frantic running back and forth.

Utterly exhausted at last, he took refuge in the old car, panting, drenched, his head swimming. From this shelter, he watched his precious beacons diminish. And now that his strenuous exertions were over he began to wonder what would happen the next morning when it became known that he had commandeered the Schmitter car. Of one thing he felt certain—his father would be in no mood to applaud his futile, if heroic, enterprise. The only thing that could save him now was success.

And there seemed no prospect of that. There was not a sound in the sky. The dying flames illuminated a considerable area above the field, but no sign was there of that lonely airman striving in darkness and storm. Had it been just a spectral airman that he had seen; something like a mirage?

One wistful thought did come to this soaked and lonely boy as he sat in the old car, a mere atom in that vast, storm-swept field. There was no doubt that he would have a cold and be ill in bed. And perhaps by this means could he checkmate his stern parent in the matter of the Military School.

He prayed fervently that he would be ill for at least one week.

CHAPTER VI AND THEN

The dramatic sequel of Mark's heroism occurred suddenly. He had been gazing with a kind of forlorn hope up into the vacant sky and was beginning to realize how impracticable had been his plan to rescue an airman in the storm. The magnitude of such an achievement made the boyish, unscientific means seem silly. Subdued into hopelessness by his sorry plight his thoughts were dwelling on another and surer outcome of his mad endeavor and that was an encounter with his father.

Then, all in a flash, he heard the whirring of the plane. It came as a sort of challenge to the screeching of the wind and even as Mark listened it grew in intensity until it had drowned out the roar of the elements, nearer and nearer, and he saw with widened eyes, a dark bulk crawling along the field. A little short of the flames it swerved a trifle, then stopped.

Mark could not believe his eyes. He was thrilled to the very soul. There it stood, safe and sound, its graceful lines thrown into bold relief by the guiding fires which he, Mark Gilmore, had kindled. And he, *he*, had brought it safely down out of the jaws of the demon storm! The enterprise which had seemed so preposterous had been successful. He was staggered by his own glorious achievement. If he had thrown a stone at the moon and seen that mighty orb break and fall he could hardly have been more amazed.

He ran pell mell from the old Ford to encounter a weird-looking, helmeted figure that climbed out of the plane and limped over to the nearest fire. Mark approached him, breathlessly, and gazed at him in awe. He was well nigh frightened at this tangible result of his inspired efforts. But not for long. The figure soon proved to be a thoroughly modern person and did not speak the language of legendary heroes.

"What the heck is all this?" he demanded. "Is this Kent's Falls? Who the dickens are you, anyway? Some night to be without rubbers, huh? I thought a couple of towns were on fire down here."

"I lighted them—I did it!" exclaimed Mark, excitedly.

"Well, you did it good and plenty. Do you live around here?"

"Yes and the electric beacons went out—all the lights in town are out—and I heard you, even. I saw you once, and I got that car over there and I drove it here and flooded the carburetor and started those fires. They made dandy lights, I guess, huh? Gosh, I didn't think you'd land because I didn't hear you for a while. Now I'm glad I did all that."

For answer, the airman laid both of his hands on Mark's two shoulders, and holding him thus at arm's length stared at him in the dying light. What that scrutiny meant, Mark did not know. But he was presently to learn that this stranger had by no means surrendered to the storm. And he was to learn, too, that the splendid service he had rendered to this visitor out of the night was only an incident in a still greater heroic enterprise. Here, indeed, was a young man who thought so nonchalantly of big things that little things troubled him not at all.

"Where's the end of Lake George, do you know, kiddo?" he asked.

"It's about seven miles straight north from here," said Mark. "I know because I hiked it."

"How far do you live from here?"

Mark hesitated a moment. Some small, inner voice was whispering to him. Why tell this strange aviator how far he lived or where? And in the wake of this small voice came the thought of a certain orphaned boy who had been a neighbor of the Gilmores. After the death of his parents he had been sent to a neighboring orphanage until he was sixteen and was then given work at Carlin's truck farm. He had worked side by side with the truant schoolboy that whole memorable week and after they were paid off, he had announced that he was going to hike on down towards Albany and see something of the world.

Mark thought of it all in a flashing moment—how he had envied him his freedom. Didn't he, *Mark Gilmore*, now have that same chance of freedom as that orphaned boy? Did he not look at least sixteen years of age? He was sure he did and he resolved to obey the warnings of that small, inner voice. He would lie—perhaps this strange airman would then help him on the road to this coveted freedom.

"I—I just—I don't exactly live anywhere now, mister," said Mark, falteringly. "I just got through working at a truck farm—I boarded there." Then quickly: "I was just thinking about beating it down to Albany or somewheres when the storm came on. Then I saw you. I was thinking about getting work somewheres down . . ."

"Hmph—pretty young to be a free lance, aren't you?" asked the aviator.

"A—a what?" asked Mark.

"Free lance. Beating it around on your own hook, that's what it means."

"I—I'm sixteen, mister. Don't I look it?"

"Yeh, I guess so. You're pretty big. Anyway, this isn't any time to be wasting words. And I can't go hunting around this burg when time's so precious. I need help and you seem to be the answer to the problem whether you were going to Albany or China. I'm on my way from Mercy Hospital in

Duluth with a supply of rattlesnake serum for a kid that got too close to a rattler. He's in a camp northwest of Harkness. Know where Harkness is?"

"Yep," Mark answered. "I went there once with a feller in his delivery car—that car over there," he added, nodding toward the Ford.

"Good," said the young man, briskly. "I don't know much about that country 'round there. Pretty mountainous, I hear. The hospital people told me that the doctor who has charge of the case phoned that I could make a landing right back of the camp—Leatherstocking's the name. I'm not taking any chances though—not on a night like this. They're to have a couple beacons, but from what I could understand this landing field is surrounded by mountains and forests and a lake. Phew! Suppose I don't see those beacons with all this mist and rain, huh? I'm not anxious to land on a precipice or in a tree or in any lake. I made one forced landing just before I got here and I sprained my ankle good and proper and that means I can't navigate very well on it. So if I can't find those beacons and have to land a mile or two from the camp I'd like to have someone to chase the rest of the way to that camp with the serum—see?"

Mark nodded. "And what do you want, mister?" he asked, anxiously.

"I want someone to come along with me—*right now*," answered the airman, briskly. "Maybe I won't land anywheres near that place—how do I know on a night like this? It's better to be safe than sorry and that doc told the hospital people that the stuff's got to be delivered to him by three o'clock or the kid'll die. They could just get enough of that stuff in Harkness to keep him going until three—that's the time limit. If I start on right now I can allow two hours for trouble."

"You mean if you don't see those beacons?" queried Mark, eagerly.

"Right," answered the aviator, smilingly. "Maybe you can help me find them, huh? Two heads are better than one so if you're a free lance I guess it doesn't make much difference whether you go north or south or east or west, huh?"

Mark's heart palpitated furiously. His chance had come after all! "I should worry where I go," he said, excitedly. "Not only that, I'd like to help you find those beacons, mister, I really would! And I'd like to help that poor feller too. Gee, it must be awful to have those things bite you, huh?"

"No pink tea, I guess," the airman answered, and turned his attention to the plane. Then: "You sure did a stunt with that carburetor, kid. Heaven must have sent you—now I'll hang on to you until this job is finished. What do you say?"

"I say yes," Mark laughed, nervously.

"That's settled. *Keep your hand away from that fan!*"

"Is it idling?"

“Yep, for about five seconds more. Climb up, and if you put your foot on that wing, I’ll bust you in the eye,” the young man laughed. “Don’t step on the fabric—step on the brass there. Wait a second—will anyone worry about you at the farm?”

“Nope,” Mark answered in a small voice, “there’s no one there to worry about me—nobody.”

“Hmph. And what about your clothes—want me to drop you back here so you can get ’em!”

“Er—er, I can send for them sometime,” Mark answered. “Don’t bother about them. There’s not many anyhow.”

The aviator shook his helmeted head rather pityingly and murmured something about “an orphan of the storm.” Mark turned his head away. The deception he had practiced upon the unsuspecting aviator had worked! The thought of the lies just uttered was distasteful to him but anything was better than Military School—*anything!* His father’s stern face flashed vividly before his mind’s eye and those grim, tight lips seemed to be warning him. “*Well, we’ll see about that!*” Would he be such a fool as to want to come back and face the inevitable punishment? No, never.

With a decisive air he stepped in and sat down in the little enclosure. But he was trembling—trembling with the knowledge of his recklessness and as his brusque companion strapped him in he recalled a ride far less ambitious in a gaudy, circling car at an amusement park. His mind was like a whirlpool now.

“Maybe we won’t get back here until morning,” the aviator was saying. “It’s not safe to say.”

Mark sat up straight. “*Morning?*” he repeated, mechanically. “No, I don’t want to come back here—you don’t have to bring me back at all. I’ll—I’ll stay up there—up there in the mountains if it’s just the same to you.”

“Hmph! I thought you wanted to go to Albany?”

“Er—er—I changed my mind. I should worry about Albany. Since you’ve been talking I thought how maybe I’d have a better chance up Harkness way. Don’t you think so?”

“Suit yourself, kid. You’re your own boss. Where’s the Delaware and Hudson tracks around here?”

“They’re at Fort Edward—that’s east,” answered Mark.

“And you say Lake George is straight north?”

“Yep, and Fort Edward is only about three miles east.”

“All right, we’ll keep our eagle eyes on the rails—that’s surest a night like this. Now we’ll forget about the earth for a little while, eh?” Mark agreed with a nervous shake of his head and sat tense as he watched the aviator climb into the cockpit and busy himself at the controls. Now indeed

the whirring of the propeller proved that it had been only idling before and in a flash they sped across the field and up into the drenching night. It was like a fairy tale to Mark. Yet venturesome and reckless as he was he could not help asking himself just once whether the dread uncertainty of the future was not going to be worse than the dead certainty of his future at Military School had he remained at Kent's Falls.

In the next second, however, he was laughing away the troublesome thought. He even dared laughing aloud for his voice sounded no more than a mere whisper in the roaring of the elements and the beating of the plane through the vast, black heavens. The aviator's head and shoulders swayed with the motion of it and Mark suddenly recalled those carelessly spoken words of his, "*Now, we'll forget about the earth for a little while, eh?*"

He looked down in the black, abysmal pit that was the earth and wondered how one could ever forget about it. It was where homes were and parents lived—parents that threatened one with the punishment of Military School as a reward for one's great, good turn—a week at Carlin's truck farm pulling weeds. No, he could not forget about the earth—ever.

And also down on that same earth was the boy that was dying of rattlesnake poison. Could one forget about that?

CHAPTER VII

A MATTER OF MILES

From that moment on, Mark completely forgot about himself and thought only of that unknown boy to whom they were racing with the life-giving serum. After they had left Fort Edward they flew low, carefully following the gleaming rails of the Delaware and Hudson. There was a fascination in watching those miles of radium-like rails shining up at them through the darkness and storm.

Thunder boomed around them and the lightning zigzagged threateningly first at the nose of the plane and then at the tail. It seemed to be playing a sort of game with them and after each onslaught of this kind the driving rain pelted them fiercely. Mark huddled himself up inside the enclosure and shivered.

Soon afterward lights appeared below and twinkled very faintly through the mist that seemed to cover the earth. Mark craned his neck and guessed that they must be passing over Ausable Chasm for it seemed as if there was no more than just that gleam before they had plunged into utter darkness again.

It seemed an interminable time before more lights twinkled faintly up through the mists. It must be Harkness. Mark relaxed his cramped muscles and watched the dim outline of the airman's helmeted head and shoulders swaying with the motion of the plane. They swerved slightly and the twinkling lights began to fade away.

Darkness—wind, rain and darkness. There was not a light except an occasional vivid flash of forked lightning, if one could call that light. But still the plane bounded on with a sure purpose and suddenly they soared upward, then circled over the shadowy rim of a mountain.

Several times they circled about in that same area until Mark guessed that the aviator was looking for the promised beacons. But they could see nothing but an impenetrable mist that hid the valley completely. If there was a camp down there they could not find it except by flying low and to do that was dangerous for the mountain wall jutted out here and there in the most unexpected places.

The aviator was plainly puzzled, Mark readily understood, for they flew back and forth, back and forth. Evidently they were in the neighborhood of the camp for the bewildered pilot would strain his neck each time they

skimmed the mountain rim for some little twinkle of light, then shake his head hopelessly to the watching boy.

Mark wondered if anyone down there could hear the roar of the plane as he had done back at Kent's Falls. It seemed to him that they *must* hear for the noise of the motors sounded equally as loud as the wind and rain through which they were passing.

After a good deal of circling the aviator shrugged his shoulders and turned the plane due east leaving the mountain frowning behind them. They began to fly lower and lower until the mist was about them and soon a little speck of light appeared out of the darkness.

Mark watched it happily, and hoped that the airman would now be able to land. But that person was not taking any chances at any time, it seemed, for he circled cautiously above the light, bringing the plane nearer to earth with each turn.

Suddenly the light grew brighter. Or perhaps it was another light. Mark watched intently and saw that his surmise was correct. It *was* another light—bigger and brighter than the first and it seemed to be moving to and fro, to and fro. A lantern! The other light came from a low, rambling farmhouse, for presently they swooped clear of its roof and in an instant the boy felt the wheels of the plane grip the ground, wobble along violently for a little stretch, then gradually come to a stop.

"Well, we're here because we're here," the airman's voice called in the wake of a gust of wind. "I don't know where we are, kiddo, but we've landed safe and sound, eh?"

"You've landed on Seth Tomkins' farm, young feller," said a man's squeaky voice. Its owner, clad in oilskins, appeared out of the shadow, bearing the lantern, whose gleaming rays seemed to swing wide with each vigorous step that the man took. "I heerd you up in that storm'n I reckoned you wuz lookin' fer a place to land without breakin' yer bones so I lighted up the house an' the lantern an' here you are like you says—'safe and sound'!"

"Yep," said the airman, climbing out of the cockpit with much difficulty in order to favor his lame ankle, "I'm much obliged to you, Mr. Tomkins—but, where are we?"

"Wa'al, yer jest five miles from Harkness, young feller," the farmer answered. "What place are ye aimin' ter be?"

"At Leatherstocking Camp," the aviator answered. "I couldn't see their beacons because of the heavy mist in the valley and I'm not taking any chances in busting up this outfit of mine on any mountain ledge. This was the first place I spied that's fairly clear of the mist."

“We seem ter ’scape it every time, thank goodness,” the farmer returned. “But, bye the bye, young feller, you ain’t happenin’ ter be the aviator what they’re expectin’ frum the hospital in Duluth, are ye?”

“I’m he, all right,” answered the aviator, “and I’ve got the stuff.” He pulled a square package from out his jacket pocket and held it up to the light. Then he scrutinized his wrist watch. “How near are we to the Camp?”

“Six miles as the crow flies, young feller,” the farmer answered, pursing his lips, thoughtfully. “I take it yore in a predicament to git there an’ it just happens that my son’s gone ter Keeseville on business fer me ’till tomorrer. He’s got th’ car an’ the telephone’s out o’ commission frum this here pesky storm. Otherwise we could call th’ camp an’ git one o’ them ter come an’ fetch it. An’ the next farm ter me is five miles east o’ here. Yer cud be all the way ter the camp by that time if yuh can hike it.”

“That’s just what we’re prepared for,” said the aviator. “That’s why I brought this kid along—in case something went wrong. He can run six miles in a jiffy, eh, kiddo?”

Mark smiled and nodded. “Just show me the way and I’ll do the rest,” he said.

“Thet’s easy,” said the farmer. “The trail to th’camp runs right west o’ my land, but it’s mostly woods all th’ way. Thar’s a small bridge what takes yer over the creek—it’s an inlet of Weir Lake. Then yuh’ll come ter a fork in th’ trail thar an’ take th’ one to th’ right. It’s only a few minutes after that fer yer to strike into th’camp. Come ’long, son, ’n I’ll set yer straight on the’way.”

The aviator stuffed the package into Mark’s coat pocket, then thrust a searchlight into his hand. “You’ll need it, kiddo,” he said. “Run as if the devil was after you, too, because the sooner you get there, the better.”

“Sure,” said Mark, proudly. “That’s the way I always run.”

“Good,” the aviator laughed. “You have just an hour and a half so don’t waste another minute. I’ll park here tonight and I’ll see you in the morning. S’long!”

Mark hurried away and followed the farmer. The cheery light from the farmhouse suddenly became a mere speck for they had turned away from the field and into a lane that ran through an apple orchard. They made not a sound for the ground was soft with rain and only a tiny creak from the lantern was audible as it swung to and fro in the farmer’s hand.

Mark felt all a-tingle for some unknown reason. There was so much he wanted to say to the farmer and yet he said nothing but silently followed him out of the orchard and onto a wide, dirt road. Just beyond, in the lantern’s light, the tall gaunt trees of the forest loomed up before him, grim and forbidding looking.

“Wa’al now, here ye are,” said Farmer Tomkins, holding his lantern high. It revealed the narrow trail starting almost at their feet and gaping out of the darkness like the entrance to some gigantic tunnel. “This’ll take yer plunk in ter th’ camp ’ceptin’ fer that fork what I told yer about. Remember?”

“I remember everything,” said Mark.

“That’s a good thing. And now I reckon yer better git along fer I guess th’ folks at th’ camp an’ the doctor too will be gittin’ anxious for that there serum. Good luck to ye, good luck!” The farmer nodded, swung around and was soon swallowed up in the gloom of the apple orchard. Only the swinging yellow rays from the lantern lingered a short moment there on the wide dirt road.

But Mark had not waited to see this. He had immediately plunged into the trail and the clear white rays from his searchlight penetrated the eerie darkness around him and spurred him onward. He smiled at the thought of the farmer’s wishes of good luck. As if he needed them! Why it was a simple matter of six miles along this trail. He had only to be careful in watching out for that fork . . .

CHAPTER VIII IN THE FOREST

Mark soon settled down into a steady pace and told himself that he could make it in no time. His hopes ran high and he minded not his wet clothes nor soggy shoes—he had escaped, for a time at least, a dreaded punishment. And in this self-congratulatory mood he suddenly became aware that it was really because of this unknown, dying boy that escape had been made possible.

Mark had not given much thought to the suffering boy before. He had been moved, of course, when the airman first told him that “a kid got too close to a rattler.” That kid had seemed rather vague to the running boy; he had not seemed a definite sort of person until now.

He patted his coat pocket and felt the bulge of the serum package. There was something of a miracle in it, he thought. To think that it contained the power to sustain life and drive out of one’s body a poisonous death! And it was he, *he* who was bringing that power to the boy’s bedside.

The thought gave him impetus and his long slim legs rose and fell over the soft trail with deer-like precision. When he would slow down, the silence of the dark forest outside the area of the flashlight’s rays overwhelmed him. The tall, gaunt trees looked like spectral sentinels back there in the gloom and when a slight breeze stirred the new, green leaves Mark fancied that they sounded very much like human beings sighing plaintively. For this reason he did not once come to a full stop.

After a time the trees seemed to be thinning out, and here and there he would see a great patch of bare, brown earth where some tree had recently been felled. He felt that it was a good sign and that he must be not so very far from the camp now.

“I bet I’ve gone four miles at least,” he thought. “My legs feel that way, anyhow.”

In point of fact, he had not gone quite three miles. Ordinarily he would not have felt fatigued at that distance but his long, hard week of weed-pulling at Carlin’s truck farm was beginning to have its effect upon him. Also the hour was late and that last day at the farm had been the most strenuous of all; he had not had time to rest since a hastily eaten lunch.

He hurried on nevertheless, keeping his mind occupied with various thoughts so that he would not think too much of the weariness that was beginning to creep into his limbs. He dwelt on the scene that he had had

with his father and the thought of his escape from a like scene on the morrow gave him an exaggerated sense of exhilaration, for a little while spurring him on like wildfire.

A reaction set in, however, when a thought crossed his mind as to what the Schmitters would have to say about their abandoned delivery truck. He doubted whether they would ever be able to see the heroic intention that had fathered his deed. It made his stomach feel queer and his limbs felt weighted down as if by lead.

A fresh downpour of rain retarded his progress still more, slashing right and left through the wide spaces where the trees had been thinned out and making a bubbling rivulet of the narrow trail. There were times when he sank in rain-filled holes and had to fairly pull his feet out of the sucking mud.

It was after such a task and in the wake of a particularly loud crash of thunder that the brush to his left moved suddenly. Presently, there was a flash of fur and bushy tail across the trail and it moved with such lightning-like rapidity that the startled boy could not discern whether it was a skunk or a squirrel.

Hardly had he recovered from this surprise when he heard a sound like the splitting of twigs or the falling of a young limb from a tree. He stopped a moment, looked around and saw the leaves on the lower limb of a drooping willow moving slightly as if someone were behind it.

He felt strangely cold and fearful for a moment. All was so still in that grim, silent place and his flashlight now seemed to add to the ghostliness. But he stilled his fears by flashing the light all around, then caused it to gleam steadily upon the limb where the leaves were moving and waked two robins and their young ones who had a nest in the crotch of the tree.

The tiny, slumber-blinking eyes and the sharp beaks poking up out of the nest made him laugh aloud. In the midst of his mirth, a loud swish sounded and suddenly a young deer leaped out from behind the tree and into the trail, blinked her beautiful, big brown eyes in the glare of the light, then trotted a few steps and leaped away into the luxuriant growth of the forest.

Mark was intensely relieved, felt of his pocket, patted the bulging package, then ran on. Those few seconds had rested his legs a little and he was certain that he could run the rest of the way in a few short moments. It seemed to him that he must certainly have covered more than three-quarters of the distance.

It was just about that time when an elfin breeze brought to his nostrils the pungent odor of burning wood.

CHAPTER IX

SO NEAR

“That sure must be the camp,” he said happily, and visualized the relief he would have when he ran swiftly into its midst. It seemed that there could not be any greater joy than just being able to sit down anywhere.

Mark could not rid himself of that thought and he realized that it was an admission of utter physical fatigue. His feet dragged now and then, he even stumbled, but still he went doggedly on. The rain pelted him furiously and thunder and lightning dogged his every footfall but he seemed not to be aware of it at all for there was fear in his mind—a fear that he would not be able to make his leaden legs carry him on.

“It can’t be much farther,” he would say as each breeze brought the odor of wood smoke nearer. But still the trail loomed ahead, interminably.

Again and again he thought of Farmer Tomkins’ directions—the small bridge over the creek and then that fork in the trail. It had sounded so simple and yet he seemed not to have gained very much headway after all. He was certain that hours had passed since he had said goodnight to the airman and yet an hour and a half was the time limit that he had been given.

He became cold with fear. That boy *must not die*—not while he could run! And once again he was spurred on, once again he was certain that his goal was merely a matter of minutes. He dashed away the rain that was dripping down his face and gritted his teeth resolutely. He would think of nothing except reaching that bridge!

He brought his foot down with firm resolve—brought it down so hard that it sank deeper in the soft, wet earth than he had intended. There was no stepping out of it; he had to pull at his foot with all his strength and with a terrific jerk of his body he managed to release it.

In anger, he jumped clear of the treacherous spot only to stumble headlong over a fallen limb that had stretched itself across the trail. His flashlight fell out of his hand with a thud, rolled a few feet and after striking against a sharp rock, went out. Mark cried out in dismay and lay where he fell.

After a few seconds his eyes became used to the darkness and he managed to crawl over the log and get up on his feet. But the trail he could not see more than a few feet ahead and that indistinctly. He might have been groping his way through so much pitch as to try and find the elusive light in all that darkness.

He felt around with his hands but the only solid object he came in contact with was a rock, perhaps the one that the light had struck. Finally he gave it up. Time was precious. He had that bridge to find and he would have to find it in the dark.

It was almost impossible to run after that. He had to go ever so much more slowly for the trail seemed suddenly to have become impervious with the shadowy shapes of trees and bushes stretching their great leafy arms across it and sweeping his face in stinging blows. He had not encountered such obstacles before, he told himself. But then perhaps it was because he had had the light and could dodge them.

After he had gone a little way the fearful thought occurred to him that perhaps he would lose the trail. It was so easy to lose one's sense of direction in the dark. And yet he had seen no other trail so far—Farmer Tomkins had mentioned none except after he came to the fork. Only then would he have to be careful.

He stumbled on, ankle deep in water. A sharp twig on a low-hanging branch struck him in the face and presently he felt a warm pricking sensation on his cheek and knew that he had been cut. But then he got the whiff of wood smoke full in the face and he forgot all else save the fact that he *must* be not far from the camp.

Suddenly he realized that the ground was not so soft and that he stood on a slight elevation. And just ahead the shadows seemed devoid of trees and brush. Something else loomed up bulkily—a post was it? He stepped up cautiously and felt of it.

A little murmur of joy escaped his lips—he was on the bridge! “I’m in luck,” he breathed. “I should worry about the old flashlight anyway.”

With a bound he stepped onward, his hand gratefully clasping the cool, iron rail. A loose board rattled welcomingly underfoot and echoed above the hissing rain. Another board rattled and still another. “Some rickety old bridge, I bet,” Mark observed, and into his step came something of a spring. He was almost at the camp!

He felt of his bulging pocket with his left hand and patted it proudly. Fatigue seemed to have left his body entirely—he fairly leaped over another shaking board and before his right foot could be brought up with the left one he had the fearful, sickening sensation of having stepped into space.

Instinctively, his right hand struck out and he caught hold of the rail, but his body had slipped down—his legs were dangling in space. He dared not move—hardly dared even put up his left hand to insure more support for the rail was vibrating even then under the strain.

He rubbed his forefinger along the cold metal and found it to be rough. His frightened eyes gradually made out the awful situation—the lower rail

which he was holding had partly broken away and was merely hanging out over the space in which he was dangling. The rest of the rail above seemed twisted and bent, but of the bridge floor, he could see nothing.

Where had it gone to? Into the creek below? Had it just collapsed during the storm? Before the unfortunate boy had time to solve these difficult questions the answer came in the form of a breeze heavily laden with wood smoke.

Part of the bridge had burned.

He clasped the bit of rail with strong fingers and put all his strength into it. Though his heart did not cease palpitating, he could think more clearly. The rain had almost ceased and he could hear the steady lapping of the creek below him. How great a drop it was he did not know—did not dare to guess. The knowledge that he was a poor swimmer was bad enough.

He thought of the package of serum. What if he should not be able to hold on there for very long and should drop into the creek—would the serum become affected by water? The thought of such a possibility gave him a chill. So near the camp and yet so far.

The rain ceased and up in the black heavens appeared a small streak of light. It was a cloud moving swiftly and behind it, Mark was sure, hid the moon. He was inspired with hope and sent a call resounding through the woodland.

“H-e-l-p!”

If the camp was near enough they ought to hear it. He roared his appeal twice more to make sure. Then he waited and listened, while the muscles in his hand began to rebel. His fingers had a queer, tingling sensation that soon developed into an unbearable ache.

A company of bullfrogs broke the silence with a steady chant. Mark was grateful for it though. It took his mind off of his own troubles for a fleeting second. But then the thought of his mission came racing back just as the moon came bursting through the black clouds.

It shone and glittered with a radiance that Mark had never beheld before, lighting up the broken bridge and bent, twisted railings, vividly. He let his eyes wander below, then over his shoulder and gave vent to a loud, mocking laugh.

“Well, if this isn’t April fool!” he cried in self-derision. “It’s a joke and a pretty mean one.”

He had been a victim of that joker, Night. Just when time was so precious, when a life was at stake, the forces of darkness had been laughing at him and working against him, and had kept him ignorant of the fact that the creek was but a seven foot jump with no more than six inches of water rippling over its white, sandy bed. And although he had not been deceived

about the bridge being burned (for bits of timber still lay smoking against the bank below), there had been no more than three feet of that quaint little rustic structure destroyed.

It was obvious that lightning had played one of her freakish pranks on the bridge that night.

It had twisted the stout railings, had torn away that bit of flooring and had probably gone on her way rejoicing, setting a trap for poor, hapless Mark. But the moon, praise be to her, had befriended him.

Mark never forgot that moon.

CHAPTER X ON TIME

The boy had the feeling of one defeated when he emerged from the trail and into the vast grounds of Leatherstocking Camp, for just ahead a dim light twinkled from a picturesque rubblestone lodge. All the other log-cabins surrounding it stood in utter darkness and he told himself that this somberness could mean only one thing—*death!* If life still flickered in that unknown boy would they not keep the camp bright with light?

His eye lighted upon a small, wide field that lay between the frowning mountain and the murky looking lake. Two beacons were burning there, patiently—the beacons the aviator had missed. And now he had come too late to justify even those lights.

He had now approached the cabin on the outskirts of the camp, but all was still. It was only when he came within five feet of the rubblestone lodge that he could see a fair-sized, khaki-clad young man moving about within.

“Somebody’s got to stay up when there’s someone dead,” Mark whispered, mournfully. “Gosh, I bet they’ll feel like throwing me out when they see me. Two hours ago I’d have been welcome.”

A cool, damp mist blowing from the lake touched his burning cheeks and he stumbled up before the great door, trembling. Before he knocked he steeled himself for the rebuff he was sure they would give him. It was, therefore, something of a shock to him that his timid summons brought an immediate response and that in the form of a pleasant-faced young man who received him with a wide-mouthed grin of ineffable joy.

“Welcome kiddo, *welcome!*” he cried after a second, and pulled the bewildered Mark into the sumptuous lodge. He gave the boy’s wet coat collar a fraternal yank, then called joyfully, almost hysterically, up a rustic stair, “Oh, *Doc! Oh, Doc!*”

Two doors opened immediately and two men stepped out simultaneously onto the balcony, just under the heavy, polished rafters. In a sort of daze, Mark saw their two faces peering at him over the shining, balcony rail. They said something, then looked back at the boy as if he were a ghost. Both men then turned toward the stairs, and the man ahead was saying, “So, he’s here, eh Slade? He’s *here!*”

“He’s here, all right, Doc,” said the young man, and put his arm around Mark’s shoulder.

Mark came suddenly out of his surprised stupor and delved into his pocket for the serum. "I got it!" he said, breathlessly. "But is he really alive—*is he really alive?* Then it isn't four o'clock and I'm not too late, huh?"

"No, you're not too late and it isn't four o'clock and he's not dead, thank goodness!" answered Slade. "It's only half past two and you're just on time and you're also a brick! Isn't he, Doc?"

The doctor agreed that he was and with a preoccupied, professional air, he took the package of serum from Mark's hands, examined it gravely and hurried up the stairs. The other man who had remained up on the balcony during this little scene, waited until the door had closed softly behind the doctor, then came on down the stairs.

Slade introduced him as Mr. Wainwright, a sort of chief administrant at Leatherstocking Camp. He grasped the boy's hand heartily, looking at him meanwhile with a kindly, yet a studied scrutiny, then turned to Slade. "He looks pretty much the worse for wear, eh, Tom?"

Tom leaned over and tousled Mark's straggling blond hair. "You've had quite a night of it, huh kiddo!" he said, jovially. "A night you'll long remember, I bet." He gave the boy a friendly push down into a nearby willow chair.

Mark twisted one foot over the other awkwardly. "My clothes are pretty wet," he said in a small voice. "I even got worse than wet because I stumbled and fell and *zip*—my flashlight went out of my hand. I had to walk in the dark then and when I came to the bridge I got scared because I thought it was half-burned away. But it wasn't—when the moon came out I saw I was April-fooled because I could have jumped over on the bank easy. There I wasted all that time when only a few feet of it had burned," he added nervously.

"But you stuck to your guns and came on and that's what we're grateful to you for," Mr. Wainwright said.

"I knew you'd be here," Tom said, smiling. "I got a phone call from Tomkins' farm just a few minutes before you came—the telephone wires had just been fixed, and the aviator told me the whole story. He said you were about due if nothing else had happened."

"He told me to run like the devil and I did, except when I got stuck that time," said Mark, naively. "Now I'm here and the feller's saved, huh?"

Tom smiled. "You beat the devil at his own game," he said.

"You mean—you mean that the rattlesnake was the devil, huh?" Mark asked, quickly.

"Exactly," said Tom, "and I guess the kid won't forget the chase you made to get here."

“Lefferts is the kind of boy that doesn’t forget a thing like that,” said Mr. Wainwright, glancing up the rustic stairs in the direction of the sick room.

“Is that his name?” asked Mark, interested.

“Yes,” answered Mr. Wainwright. “You see he is just a guest here—a guest of Tom’s and we feel a double responsibility. If this thing had proved fatal we would have felt it keenly for Lefferts was the first scout to be our guest. This is a training camp for scoutmasters and it was founded by Mr. John Temple just the same as Temple Camp in the Catskills. Ever hear of Temple Camp?”

Mark’s brown eyes were full of light despite his weariness. “I know a feller—a scout that goes down there every summer,” he said.

“I bet you do,” Tom smiled. “But how is it that you’re not a scout so you can go down there too?”

Mark’s heart missed a beat. He was cornered into telling the hateful lie. But it had to be done. “I—I—didn’t that aviator tell you about me?” he asked, hesitatingly.

“Oh yes—yes, that’s so,” said Tom. “He said something about you being an orphan that was on the way to Albany to work. He told me all about the big stunt you did for him in Kent’s Falls—that was a stunt worthy of a scout!”

“So you’re an orphan and looking for work, eh?” Mr. Wainwright asked, with that studied air that frightened Mark.

“Yes sir,” answered the boy, timorously.

“You don’t look sixteen, my boy,” Mr. Wainwright said.

“Yes sir—I mean, no sir—I mean, I know I don’t,” Mark stuttered, with his mind in a whirl. “I mean, I’m big for my age. That’s what my—my friends all say. Everybody says it.”

“Hmph,” said Mr. Wainwright still studying him.

Mark was well nigh frantic and began to fear that the interview would have a disastrous result. Tom saved the day for him, however, by announcing that he was thoroughly tired and wanted to go to bed, and suggesting that the weary boy should sleep in his cabin so that he would not hear the disturbing noises of the lodge in the early morning.

Mark did not demur at further plans that were made for his comfort and when Tom talked about getting him a snack of a sandwich and milk from the eats shack, he smiled gratefully but said nothing. He had a fear that Mr. Wainwright would pounce upon him with another question should he utter only one word.

And so he was intensely relieved when he left the lodge and followed Tom across the flower-bordered gravel path to a small cabin. Somewhere a

katydid was humming its insistent little ditty and the moon overhead was slipping under some clouds as they entered the cozy little place.

“That’s a sign you’re welcome,” Tom said, laughingly, referring to the katydid. “I’ll fix up the kid’s bunk for you and you can sleep as long as you like—you wouldn’t be able to do it at the lodge. There’s a contingent of aspiring scoutmasters coming in the morning and you’ll be out of the racket here.”

Mark felt awkward and shy alone with Tom but he had not the same fear of him that he had of Mr. Wainwright. He stood about fidgeting while the young camp assistant made up his bunk. After a few minutes he began to divest himself of his soggy clothes and the silence inside the little cabin continued.

Suddenly Tom turned from his task and looked squarely at him, smilingly. “Say, kiddo,” he said, pleasantly, “do you realize that you haven’t even told me your name?”

“Gosh!” said Mark, awkwardly. “I—I didn’t mean . . .”

“That’s all right,” said Tom, kindly. “I guess you just forgot. What is it?”

“Er—er,” Mark began and felt panicky—he couldn’t think of a single name save his own. In sheer desperation he got out of his trouser pocket his handkerchief—anything to kill time in order that he might think. But it did not do any good—*he could not think*. He was forced to say, “Mark Gilmore.”

“Mark Gilmore, eh?” Tom repeated, blissfully unaware of the turmoil that was seething in his young guest’s mind. “I like the name of Mark, kiddo. That’s a good snappy name for a scout.”

“But I’m not a scout,” Mark said, smiling at Tom’s breezy manner.

“You’d like to be one though, wouldn’t you?” Tom asked, insistently.

Mark nodded. “I’ve always wanted to be one,” he said, simply. In his heart he was thinking that it was because his father had never permitted it, giving as the sole excuse that, “Scouting is just another reason for you to get out of the house nights.”

Tom smiled, sympathetically it seemed, and flung the covers of the bunk in order. “There you are, Mark,” he said, briskly. “Now hop in and I’ll dash over to the eats shack and back before you get the chance to blink your eyes.” He gave the boy a friendly push toward the bunk and in a moment was gone.

Mark listened intently as the gravel crunched under his energetic footsteps and decided that he liked him very well. Into this deep contemplation of his came the sound of rain swishing against the cabin windows. It gave him pleasure to listen to it now for he was safe and sound and sheltered.

Yet despite this feeling of comfort, the thought of Mr. Wainwright's kindly, yet shrewd glances made him feel uncomfortable. The man seemed to study his every word and movement and he was convinced that there was something about these scoutmasters—this atmosphere of scouting that did not encourage lies. It made the liar feel like a veritable criminal and Mark knew that from that moment on it was going to be no easy task for him to live the little lies that he had already told.

The poor, harassed boy stretched his weary limbs and shrugged his shoulders, hopelessly. "So he wants to know whether or not I'd like to be a scout, huh!" he said, aloud. "If he only knew it—if I could only have told him the truth, I'd rather be anything, *anything* else than what I am now!"

CHAPTER XI

HEADLINES

Fate was kind to Mark for while he slept away the morning hours the aviator had visited the camp and was gone, taking with him Mr. Wainwright who had been summoned to the city quite suddenly.

“He’ll be gone a week and that means that I’ll have work enough to keep me going,” Tom announced to the waking boy. “He left word that you were to stay right here until he comes back and then he’ll see what he can do for you. Wainwright’s a fine fellow, Mark, and he’ll help you to something so be patient and stick around and try to amuse yourself until the kid is up and around. That’ll be in a few days, the doctor says.”

“He’s better, huh?” asked Mark.

“I should say,” answered Tom. “And when he heard about you he improved remarkably. He’s got you on his list for life, he says. You’ll like Lefty.”

“I like that name, I know that,” Mark said, hopefully.

“Well, he’s anxious to see you, but he said he’d rather wait until he meets you on common ground,” Tom said, smilingly.

“What does he mean?”

“He means he’d rather wait until he can stand up and shake hands with you,” Tom explained. “He’s a red-blooded kid, Lefty is, and he despises sick-bed meetings. Also he knows you’re as red-blooded as he or you wouldn’t have carried out your little stunt last night and it makes him more keen than ever to wait until he can get out in the open and hash things over with you.”

Tom hurried on out about his many duties, leaving Mark with more than a favorable impression of this unknown Lefty. He spent some time dressing in order to get a vivid mental picture of this red-blooded scout. And strange to say he had no fear in the anticipation of their near meeting.

“He won’t ask me questions like all the others have,” the boy said aloud. “I have a feeling he won’t, and if he doesn’t, I’ll like him. Gosh, I want to be left alone for a while anyhow.”

He got his wish for during the next few days he was left to his own devices except at meal times when he would come in contact with Tom and the first contingent of aspiring scoutmasters. He wandered about from morning until noon and from noon until supper between the lower reaches of Old Hogback mountain and Weir Lake. He even paddled a canoe on two or

three occasions but was afraid to venture very far up the wide murky lake for fear of capsizing.

On one of these little excursions he tore a great rent in his trousers on a projecting nail, which put the finishing touches to his already sorry-looking attire. An appeal was made to Tom for a needle and thread and after a few moments' wait in the cabin, the young camp assistant came to the rescue with a sturdy looking pair of khaki knickers and a khaki blouse.

"These are sent with Lefty's compliments and he will be with you at breakfast tomorrow morning," Tom announced. "You are to keep them, he says, for he has slightly outgrown them and his aunt put them in with his other things by mistake."

Mark took them, hesitantly. "He isn't just saying that, is he?" he asked, timorously.

"Lefty never says anything unless he means it," Tom said. "You'll find that out soon enough. He said he'll be eating breakfast with you tomorrow morning and you can depend that he will. Why he's already making plans to hike from here to Temple Camp. Next week he wants to go and you can make up your mind that he'll go!"

Mark had listened to Tom's account and was duly impressed. He thought that Lefty must have more than his share of character—that there was a good deal of the adventurer in him, but further than that he gave no more thought to this unknown boy's threatened hike to Temple Camp. It simply had no bearing on his fortunes, he was certain.

But in that reasoning, Mark was mistaken for not only was Lefty's hike to have an important bearing on his future, but the whole of sequestered Leatherstocking Camp as well was traced in the pattern of his adventurous life. Yet on this memorable day he was unaware of anything save a blissful content in the knowledge that he was quite secure in this refuge, far from the severe discipline of military schools and the world that housed and fed his father and mother. Yet at the thought of them he felt a sudden pang.

In this happy frame of mind, and feeling quite proud of his newly-acquired khaki, he strolled at noon into the eats shack. Lunch was not quite ready, but at the end of one of the long tables nearest the kitchen, Tom Slade was sitting, eating a hurried meal. There was nothing so extraordinary in his doing this for his duties that week had compelled him to catch a meal as catch can on several occasions. But the thing that struck Mark as extraordinary was that the young camp assistant seemed confused and surprised at his entrance.

"Did you think the bell had rung, kiddo?" he asked, hurriedly folding a newspaper up under his arm.

"I knew it hadn't," answered Mark. "I didn't have anything to do so I thought I'd come in and see if I couldn't talk to Happy." Happy was the camp chef and master of the cooking shack.

"Oh," said Tom, rising. "I just grabbed a little bite. Got to repair the float." He started toward the door, then hesitated. "Do you like it here, Mark?"

Mark said that he did. "I won't feel like leaving," he added, truthfully.

Tom looked at the boy, searchingly. "I guess you won't," he said, quietly.

Mark watched him go to the door and step outside, not without misgivings. Tom had not treated him like this before. Had he suddenly found out that he had been deceiving them? The boy felt not a little panicky at the thought and having no further desire to converse with Happy he left the shack.

Just as he did so, he saw Tom come out of the cabin and hurry toward the lake. Mark waited until the lodge hid him from view, then ran over to the cabin and shut the door quickly behind him. He was breathless and amazed at his own actions, yet could not quiet the beating of his heart at this strange feeling of foreboding that overwhelmed him.

There was something on Tom's bunk—his office khaki as he was wont to call it. Obviously he had hurriedly changed into his working khaki in the interim. Mark saw a newspaper lying underneath the clothes and he strolled over and picked it up to read it while waiting for the luncheon bell.

He sat down on the edge of the bunk and opened it mechanically as if the printed page before him served no other purpose than to take his mind off the vague fears that were besetting him. But that mood lasted not a minute for his brown eyes became suddenly glued upon the words—*Kent's Falls Clarion*. Below the usual date and weather report he espied a wide heading that read.

MARK GILMORE, LOCAL BOY
SOUGHT BY PARENTS AND POLICE

His eyes blurred with panic fear and he could not read the rest of the article. The print swam before his vision and he crushed the paper up with feverish, moist hands and rushed impulsively toward the cabin door.

Just as he was about to open it, the luncheon bell rang and he stood where he was, terrified. After a few moments had passed he heard as if in a dream, the steady tramp, tramp of the future scoutmasters. He pressed his pounding head against the rough wood door and heard one or two of them laughing heartily as they made their way to the eats shack.

Mark wondered if they would laugh could they know of the terrible plight he was in. He wondered what they would say if they knew that police

were after him. “*Police!*” he repeated to himself in horrified tones.

Suddenly everything became quiet. They must all be in the eats shack. He opened the door ever so slowly as if he were a thief and in the distance heard the metallic sound of an axe.

Tom!

With startling lucidity, Tom’s words came to mind and in a flash he comprehended the strange confusion and surprise of the young camp assistant. “*Do you like it here, Mark?*” he had asked. That was it—there was no doubt.

Tom had read it—he knew.

CHAPTER XII

ESCAPE

Mark leaned out and studied what would be the best means of escape. To go east, back the way he had come, would mean the chance that Tom might spy him. And to go west meant passing the cooking shack and taking the mountain trail—to where?

He did not know where. He only knew that it would take him away from accusing eyes and the inevitable punishment that he so feared. He could afford to take the slight chance of passing the cooking shack, but not of passing Tom.

A shock of moist, blond hair tumbled down over his forehead as he walked valiantly across the gravel path as if he were on the pleasant errand of going the long way round to the eats shack just to increase his appetite. He approached the cooking shack and there on the level with his head was a good-sized strawberry pie cooling. Alongside of it were seven or eight tomatoes ripening in the sun and the instinct of self-preservation prompted the boy to scoop up the whole business. It troubled his conscience a little but he justified himself with the thought that he would have eaten as much as this if he had gone inside to luncheon.

No one spoke, nothing stirred and Mark walked faster, assured that Happy had not been near the window. When he had walked five hundred yards or more and no one had challenged him he stopped and hurriedly tore the part of the newspaper that was of no interest to him and wrapped up the pie and tomatoes. Thus fortified he broke into a dead run and in less than ten minutes he was lost to sight in the mountain fastnesses.

He did not stop to rest or think for three hours. When he did it was beside one of those tiny glassy-looking lakes that one so often finds in the Adirondack wilderness. It was in the midst of this silence that he sat and munched on two half ripe tomatoes, then topped it off with a good-sized chunk of strawberry pie.

After that he washed down the remains of this singular repast by ducking his head into the lake.

Some little time elapsed before Mark had the courage to get out the bit of crumpled newspaper from his back pocket. When he did and while smoothing it out he felt the flutter of it in his trembling fingers. His eyes had a queer stinging sensation but he could see the accusing print much more clearly than when he had been back at the cabin.

He could not bear to look at the headline again. The thought of his own name in print made him feel sick, and he swept his eyes past it and down to the article. He uttered a suppressed cry but steeled himself to read on.

“Disappeared Saturday around midnight . . . irate parent discovers on Sunday that he has been stealing small sums from the house . . . tried to escape in Schmitters’ car but left it at landing field . . . out of gas, probably. His brother Edgar confesses that he has been aware of Mark’s criminal tendencies but has shielded him and withheld the knowledge from his parents out of affection. Mr. Gilmore begs police to try and find him that he may put him in reformatory before he gets a chance to commit a bigger offense.”

That was all. It was enough—too much for Mark. “*His brother Edgar confesses . . . out of affection!*” Mark shouted out in the mountain stillness. “Can you beat that—can *I* beat *that!*”

The boy sat quite still. He was almost stunned by this revelation and his mind was seething with conflicting emotions. He now felt an outcast and could not seem to think clearly of what he should do or where he should go. Only one thing was vivid to him and that was the mental picture of his father telling the constable at Kent’s Palls that his son *must* be put in a reformatory.

“And I thought that Military School was bad!” the poor boy said, hopelessly. “Why—*why*, a reformatory is a place where they send fellers for committing a crime! Why—oh, my gosh!”

Great tears welled up in Mark’s eyes and rolled down his cheeks. He made no attempt to stay them—indeed, he felt hopelessly unequal to any situation just then. The injustice of the whole sorry affair overwhelmed him and when he went back to that memorable Saturday night and the scene with his father, it proved too much for his fine, sensitive nature. He flung himself despairingly down upon the warm, dusty ground until his emotion was well spent.

When he sat up he was dry-eyed and determined, and resolved not to go home again, *ever*. They thought he was a thief and they believed Edgar. What more was there to be said? His brother had simply shifted the guilt, knowing full well that he would never deny it.

“I know,” he said in a dull voice. “He thought that I’d never come home again and that it would be all right to say I did it. So he’s taken money from the house before, huh? I might have known if he did it once that he’d do it again. And I shouldn’t have given him that twenty dollars to put in that rotten pool room again. I should have put that money right in Sis’ drawer and locked it. Oh, gosh, I think of all the things I should have done now—now, when it’s too late!”

It was a curious yet noteworthy fact that despite Mark's fear of his father's obvious wrath, he had not one bitter thought of him. Also he had no resentment toward his weak, guilty brother. In point of fact, he was even then groping about in his mind for some thing that would exculpate Edgar.

"There's something missing in his head or he wouldn't do it," he said, aloud. "At heart there's nobody better than Ed. Gosh, he just hasn't any nerve like—I bet he's scared to death for fear I'll come home or something. Well, he needn't worry, I won't. Another thing, I help him more by staying away. When a feller's got a brother like Ed, they just have to help, that's all."

And that was Mark's creed. Few would have agreed with him, but there it was—take it or leave it. He could not seem to reason it out that showing up Edgar's weaknesses was the best way of helping him. Logic had no place in his scheme of things—he never thought beyond the pale of blinding love which he had for his brother, a love that wanted to shield him and protect him from a world that couldn't and wouldn't understand.

"Poor Ed," said Mark, as he gathered up the remains of his commandeered food and wrapped it. Then he started on. And again he said, "Poor Ed! I shouldn't have given him that twenty dollars. I should have had better sense."

And that was Mark all over.

CHAPTER XIII

THE LUCK OF MARK

Sunset found the boy in the heart of the mountains. He had no plans, no hopes and looked listlessly at the beautiful shades of scarlet that the sun's reflection was making on the far horizon. It looked as if some artist had daubed the vast canvas with a half dozen careless strokes, and then left his work suddenly.

Birds of vari-colored plumage flew nestward before dusk should overtake them. But Mark was apathetic. He had no thought as to where he would spend the night and did not care. He would walk until he couldn't see to walk farther.

When dusk trailed its shadowy leaden-colored robes across the sky, he came to a beaten path that crossed his own. Without hesitation he stepped into it. That it went southwest meant nothing to him. All he cared about was that it was a trail.

After a few minutes of steady hiking and deep cogitation he resolved thereafter to take whatever trail crossed his own. He hoped in that manner to avoid towns and people for he was certain that by now the whole world must be aware of his supposedly criminal tendencies and that people were only waiting for him to appear so that they might pounce upon him and hand him over to the state police.

"That's the way they catch murderers," the poor boy whispered, fearfully. "The best thing I can do is to keep out of towns. Father's probably given them my picture to put in the papers by now. Why, it's just like as if I was a real thief or something."

A group of stately pines peered at him from out of the shadows and he heard their branches rustle slightly in the soft, twilight breeze. From somewhere in the distance came the belated call of a bird. Only then it was that he realized that it was too dark to go farther and groped his way in under the trees and sat down.

Fortunately, he found that this chance resting place was a soft, sweet-smelling bed of pine needles and more than most campers even hope for. As Lefty Leighton told him not long afterward, "You might have sat on a rattler and got the same reception that I did." To which Mark had answered, simply: "I didn't think of it—I didn't think of anything and I guess I didn't care."

And he didn't care. He unwrapped his little newspaper bundle, ate two more of the half ripe tomatoes and another piece of the strawberry pie, then stretched his weary body out on his sweet-smelling bed. He would have liked a drink of water but that being impossible he just didn't think of it again.

Sleep closed his eyes quickly. The night wore on and if a chance nocturnal prowler passed his way he did not see it or hear it. And along toward the wee hours of the morning, a wise old owl in a nearby tree kept up its incessant eerie cry but it had no more effect on Mark's consciousness than to make him dream that the state police had him cornered on the limb of a tree and one of them, who had a voice like an owl, was calling for him to surrender.

The dream passed as all dreams do, for dawn tinted the eastern sky and the owl flew back into the dark recesses of the forest. A few hours later, Mark awakened and blinked his eyes at a gray, humid day.

"I'm thirsty," he said, then proceeded to eat the remaining piece of pie. The tomatoes he could not touch—they were a little too green even for him. And when he was ready to leave the spot he said, calmly, "I'll never eat another piece of strawberry pie as long as I live."

So far he has kept this resolution.

Without going out of his way he came to a brook and at sight of it he experienced a keen disappointment. He would have to drink; he would have to wash because he had not the courage to go on when water was so near at hand. First, his thirst was great, and second, because cleanliness was instinctive with him, he would have to reject a delightful inspiration that he had had an hour before, that to be found in the mountains dying of thirst and covered with dirt was his only salvation. He had wanted to be found when he was past human aid—he did not relish being alone with death. But now this was not to be, he thought despairingly. Here was water!

Fate having denied him the agonies of thirst, he went on his way a few minutes later, starvation bent. He would not eat for days and days, he suddenly decided. Somewhere he had once heard that a man could live fourteen days without food. The knowledge was a bit discouraging but on the other hand he was reminded of another bit of lore that the more one drinks, the hungrier one becomes. He would drink and drink!

In consequence, he followed the brook and when its fickle course changed southeastward, he also went southeastward. There was an excellent berry crop that year and mile after mile he passed of ripening, luscious berries hanging full on the bushes. But he did not let himself be tempted. He kept his eyes on the brook and drank great draughts of the cold, sparkling water at frequent intervals.

By mid-afternoon, he was pretty well exhausted and sat down to rest on a moss covered rock. The brook trickled on to his right and as he gazed idly upon it, a big turtle wobbled up from under the bank and seeing him, thrust its head back into its shell. Before he was aware of it he was telling himself that if he had matches and the things to work with he could make use of the turtle. Only once had he tasted turtle soup but at the time he thought it the most delicious thing of its kind.

However, Mark thrust Temptation away with a wide sweep of his hand and the turtle was left to go its way in peace. After it had disappeared a small garter snake wiggled out of a clump of distant weeds and stretched its body across the trail.

Mark eyed it curiously for a moment and his thoughts went back to the night of his run, and the serum he had so carefully carried to the bedside of the stricken boy. Lefty Leighton was now well—had eaten his breakfast that very morning in the eats shack at Leatherstocking Camp. And he, *Mark Gilmore*, had helped him to do that! Yet notwithstanding this notable achievement he had never laid eyes on this boy—did not know what he looked like.

The snake wiggled back into the clump of weeds and Mark stared at the imprint that its body left in the dusty trail. He shrugged his shoulders, hopelessly, then went on his way.

“It’s just my luck,” he said a while afterward. “There this Lefty feller gets bitten by a rattler before he even sees it or expects it. And here I am not caring whether or not a rattler comes along and nips me—even I’m wishing it would! And instead what comes along? A little shrimp of a garter snake. Ugh!” And that was the luck of Mark.

CHAPTER XIV

DAWN

Mark was still following the trail southeast when the light in the western skies was waning. He was conscious of an inexpressibly lonely feeling for the gray, humid day had seemed interminably long. After the turtle and garter snake episode nothing had crossed his path save a skunk, and that at a distance.

He loved the company and companionship of his fellow creatures and he longed for someone to talk to. He thought of it until he reminded himself that his ostracism from people was self-imposed and that he need only go home to make his brother tell the truth.

“Well, I’ll never do that—*never!*” he said, decisively. “No matter what else I am, I’m no quitter.”

Thereafter he confined himself strictly to the arduous task of watching out for rattlesnakes. Not that he had abandoned the idea of dying by starvation. He thought it would be an heroic ending, but if there was any chance of a fatal snake bite he would prefer it for it had the advantage over starvation in that it was quicker and less painful.

And so, boylike, he ruminated on in this unhappy vein until dusk cut him off from the world once more. He chanced a resting place just as he did the previous night, but his selection was not as fortunate for his tired limbs came down almost painfully on damp, rocky ground.

He groped around in the dark for hours trying to find a dry spot and one that was free from jagged bits of rock. But he was doomed to disappointment and ended by taking off the khaki shirt (Lefty’s gift) and rolling it up so that he might pillow his head and get what rest he could.

He awakened before dawn. In the west a few stars still twinkled, but the eastern sky was stencilled with fine points of light. Sunrise was at least two hours off but he didn’t care. He was restless and wanted to be on his way.

Immediately upon arising he crawled to the brook’s edge and drank mouthful after mouthful of the cold water. It refreshed him but did not appease the hunger which was beginning to gnaw at his stomach. For a moment he completely forgot his fine resolution and peered around in the shadowy place for some sign of a berry bush but that part of the trail yielded little else but moss and hardy trees in the way of vegetation. He bethought himself quite wistfully then, of the heavily-laden bushes that he had ignored

the day before, but whisked it out of mind before he had the chance to indulge in vain regrets.

“I’m going to try and do it,” he said, after he had started on his way. “Fourteen days is a long time though.”

He was going down hill gradually, without being aware of it. Indeed he was so intent upon following the brook that he lost track of both distance and direction. And so it happened that he came down and onto the lower reaches of the mountain and thence out of the trail onto a broad, paved highway.

He was amazed, but there it was, gray and ghostly-looking in the struggling light of a newborn day. Not a soul was there, nor a sound, as far as the eye could reach and the ear could hear. A stark silence pervaded this trim-looking highway of civilization—the civilization that Mark would have given much to avoid.

A little way down, to the right of the highway, he espied the dim lines of a farmhouse. There was something friendly and warm looking about it after he had seen nothing but forests and mountains for so many hours. He was tempted to go past it, peek in if he could and get a swift glimpse of a kitchen.

A little lump formed in his throat and he gulped. He couldn’t be homesick—not that! He just wanted to be near some living things for a few seconds. That was all. And so he started toward it.

Not a light was there in all that low, rambling farmhouse. A few stars still twinkled overhead. He hurried nearer and nearer and espied the outbuildings and barns standing like frowning sentinels in the shadows. But past them he went.

He traversed the barnyard swiftly and sighed thankfully that no rooster had as yet crowed the break of day. All was in his favor. A cow lowed softly, mournfully, and he heard the stamping of the horses in the big, red barn. It made his heart quicken, not with fear but with loneliness.

At last he was at the back door—the kitchen door. He knew it because it had that combined odor of freshly chopped wood and dried apples. That was the way his mother’s kitchen smelled. His mother’s!

A sly tear rolled down his cheek and he pressed his face against the screen door. The inner door was open and beyond in the darkness he could see an arc of reddish light where the front lid of the coal stove was tipped. Directly above on the ceiling was a dancing patch of the red glow, sometimes thrown a little in the shadow and sometimes thrown into bold relief as determined by the slowly burning coals.

The scene made something tighten around Mark’s throbbing heart. Almost fiercely he pressed his eyes against the screening and soon he could

make out what were the objects in that dark interior.

There was the dim outline of the kitchen table with the chairs all grouped about it. And there at the side of the stove was the coal scuttle with its smooth, steel shovel sticking upright in it. Now and again it would catch the light from the stove and send forth a quick metallic glitter. Above all this on the projecting, wrought iron shelf was a homey looking box of red and blue, very familiar to Mark's homesick eyes.

A box of matches!

CHAPTER XV A WRONG STEP

Mark's first thought was of his growing hunger. Those matches would mean so much to him. Just a few out of that box! That was all he asked. The great need he had for them seemed to take possession of him and in his emotion he put his hands on the screen door and grasped the sides of it, longingly.

It moved at his touch! The door was unlocked.

He took a few steps back, amazed. But he did not linger in this manner more than an instant for the thought of his good fortune made him reckless and after listening for a moment he again touched the door. He acquired a courage born of desperation for he slipped his fingers along the jamb and worked the door open so that it made not a sound.

When he had at last slipped into the kitchen his fears left him. All was as still as the tomb.

On tiptoe he proceeded over to the stove. It was so easy and after all no one would miss a few matches.

Suddenly in upon the stillness came the shrill crow of a rooster.

Mark stood where he was and waited for the squawking bird to hush. When it suddenly ceased there came in its wake the sound of heavy footsteps overhead and before the startled boy had time to collect his senses he heard the footsteps continue above his head, then tread heavily down a creaking stairway.

He flung open the screen door and bounded out into the barnyard. On he ran blindly, not knowing or caring where he was going as long as he got out of sight of the farmhouse. To do this he had to run the length of a vast green field. An apple orchard lay just beyond.

He did not look back once but he sensed that the farmer had heard him and must now see him for there was enough daylight. It seemed an interminable time before he reached the orchard, but once there he ran along, stopping at the farther end a minute for breath.

He looked back where the orchard opened into the field and saw a shadow move there. He took to his heels again, leaving the orchard and running out onto a dirt road. Along this he went until he saw a narrow trail and in a flash slipped into it as if he had been a mere phantom.

The farmer knew that this intruder was not a phantom, however. But he didn't know where he went after he had been seen to leave the orchard, and

as the indignant man was out of breath and unable to run farther he searched only a few bushes along the road and gave it up.

Mark was safely ensconced in the crotch of a tree by this time, not a little frightened. He could see and hear the irate farmer as he searched among the bushes. And when the man decided to give up the task, he did not rejoice in his disappointment.

To be sure, he was thankful that the trail and the hidden tree had offered him safety in his hour of need. But in the man's despairing gestures he found little to comfort him. After all, he had not actually taken anything. No little wonder was it then that he clasped tightly at the limb on which he was sitting when the farmer passed close to the trail loudly proclaiming what he would do to the thief should he catch him.

"I'll whack him soundly, that I will!" the man was fairly shouting. "Comin' in my house and stealin' my food! A loafer! A hobo—that's what he is! I'd just like to lay hands on him—that's all!"

Mark leaned forward, trembling, yet perplexed. He could see the farmer's head, then his chin, then his nose. The man turned completely around before he crossed over into the orchard and the frightened boy saw his full face before the trees had hidden him.

It was Farmer Tomkins.

CHAPTER XVI

SUNSHINE AND SHADOW

Mark sat as quiet as a mouse in his hiding-place with his mind in a whirl. He could not reason out the meaning of Farmer Tomkins' accusation of stealing food. In point of fact, he was deeply puzzled about the whole unfortunate situation which he now found himself in and the only lucid angle of it was that he had made a complete circle of the mountain trails and was back where he had started from.

Here he was on the trail to Leatherstocking Camp—the one place in the world that he least desired to be! But how to get away from that trail was a problem to which he could find no answer. Only one thing was clear in his mind and that was that it would be foolhardy for him to venture out upon the road that day. Farmer Tomkins had doubtless informed the state police of his troubles by now.

Mark peered through the leafy boughs and could see for some distance up the road. At that memorable point beyond the farmhouse the broad shining highway intersected it and somewhere beyond that was the trail that had played him false—the trail that had given him no warning of its nearness to civilization.

The frightened boy reproached himself again and again for ever having left it and given way to the temptation of entering the farmer's kitchen. And now in the broad light of day he could not even attempt running that short distance in order that he might find it and hide himself from this new danger.

The lesser danger was to stay on the camp trail and keep his eyes and ears alert for any sign of human beings. He thought that perhaps he could find a cross trail somewhere along it that would bring him into the mountains and safety once again. And if he couldn't find it, why he would come back under cover of dusk and try his luck then.

The sun was well up when he left the tree and his hunger was acute.

He picked his way cautiously along the trail hour after hour but he did not see one berry bush nor hear the pleasing tinkle of a brook. Not that he remembered hearing a brook along there the night of his run—it had been raining too hard. The first water he had encountered had been the creek under the bridge. And that was out of the question—it was too near the camp.

And so along about mid-morning it happened that he thought he heard the sound of dripping water. Perhaps a spring. He glanced to the right and

left of the trail, but when he stopped the sound also ceased. A wild rabbit scurried a little distance ahead and made no more than a quick, swishing sound. Other than that the woodland seemed wrapped in a deathly calm.

Mark looked up and down the trail cautiously and was suddenly aware of footprints in the soft earth alongside of and very often intermingled with his own. Also he discovered the prints of a small car—Tom's Ford. They were not fresh marks as the footprints were, he decided, and was secretly proud that he had at least one scouting instinct.

In a moment he was on his way again but he had not gone more than a few feet when he heard the swishing sound again, and louder this time. He was truly alarmed and stopped where he was.

Was it someone coming along the trail? He tried to listen but the fear he felt caused a beating sound in his ears and he seemed not to be able to hear. Instinctively he stepped back behind the trees.

The sound continued but from where he stood it seemed to be coming from the eastern end. Now indeed he was perplexed and decided that the trail was too dangerous for him. He would reconnoiter into the forest a short way and wait there until sundown.

He had a fear now of losing the trail altogether and from the time he left it, he stamped down on the brush and weeds heavily so that he could distinguish the direction on his way back. And later he conceived the idea of getting out his penknife and using it to blaze his own trail by marking the various trees as he passed. He always thought of this adventure afterward as his first step in scouting, as indeed it was.

It was about noon when he became suddenly aware that the brush and weeds of the deep forest were thinning out. Presently he stepped out onto an overgrown path and a little ahead the sun was gleaming brightly. He hurried toward it, breathlessly.

He wasn't sure, but he thought he saw a shadow pass from the sunlit area to the dim edges of the forest. But when he approached his delight at seeing a sparkling creek just ahead was so great that he completely forgot about it.

He knew, of course, that the creek was the same as that which ran under the little bridge on Leatherstocking Trail. Also he judged that he was at least a mile away from it—far enough for safety. And best of all, the trail he had been on continued right on the other side and up into the mountains if he cared to go. But he didn't. He was satisfied to stay where he was.

His first thought was to appease his hunger and he began looking around on the ground to see if he could find anything that could be used for a fish line. All he saw, however, was a pile of ashes at the side of a big rock.

He was instantly curious and on his guard and took one, then two quick steps nearer. A little wisp of smoke blew up from it in the wake of the breeze. Mark stopped and stood like an animal at bay. It was smouldering—indeed, it bore all evidences of having just been left and that hurriedly.

It was then that he heard the bushes move, followed by the unmistakable sound of footsteps.

CHAPTER XVII

A REUNION

Mark wheeled around, frightened yet courageous. He was prepared to face the worst, but not prepared to face the person that confronted him. Surprise, bewilderment, then utter joy he felt all in that flashing second. “*Ed!*” he cried, shrilly. “Ed—my gosh!” Edgar Gilmore stood and looked at his younger brother as if he too had seen a phantom face. But being the boy he was, he pulled himself together and almost too quickly assumed his old, cynical air. Then he smiled that cheap, sneering, sophisticated smile that brought to Mark a host of memories.

“Well, if it ain’t little Mark himself,” he said, making a painful attempt at jocularly. “Darned if I expected to see you here, kid—darned if I did.”

“Ed,” said Mark with perfect naivete, “I can’t believe it’s you. Not even now I can’t.”

“Well, it’s me, kid—no one else but,” the other said. “Here I was expecting to see you up at that Leatherstocking Camp. I was waiting until it sort of got dark before I went up there. Now you saved me the trip—you always were a brick at doing me favors.” He got out a package of cigarettes from his coat pocket, took one and lighted it.

Mark thought that his hand shook slightly and that he seemed confused in spite of his nonchalant talk. “Aren’t you glad to see me, Ed?” he asked, joyfully. Then: “How did you know I was up at Leatherstocking Camp, huh?”

“One thing at a time, kid,” Edgar said, picking up a stick and poking at the fire. “Here, let’s keep this thing going. When I heard footsteps I beat it behind those trees and took all the stuff with me—wood and all. Wait until I get it.”

“Stuff?” questioned Mark.

“Yeh, grub.”

“Oh, my gosh—oh, my gosh,” said Mark, quite beside himself. “I haven’t eaten hardly anything in three days now, Ed. It’s most three days.”

Edgar had come from behind the tree by that time bearing a small bag. He opened it with his studied smile and Mark, to his ineffable joy, beheld a little camping outfit and a can of beans, some coffee, bacon and biscuits.

“Now we’ll eat,” said Edgar. “It’s lucky I saw it was you that time. I would have—I—say, kid, what’s the idea you ain’t had anything to eat, huh?”

“I ran away from the camp,” Mark answered. “I had to on account of Tom Slade had the *Clarion* with the story about me. I was afraid he’d have me sent back—back home.” Edgar flushed perceptibly and set about preparing the coffee. When that was done he opened the beans and got the bacon in the little pan while Mark gathered up bits of wood from under the trees.



HE GOT THE BACON IN THE LITTLE PAN WHILE MARK GATHERED UP BITS OF WOOD.

“I—I bet you’re mad that I blamed it on you, huh?” asked Edgar, after what seemed to Mark an interminable time. “I didn’t think you’d come home.”

“I wouldn’t go home and I wasn’t mad,” said Mark, looking affectionately at his weak brother. “I—I knew you must have had a reason or something for not putting that money back. The only thing, Ed—I never knew you had been taking it before.”

The color deepened in Edgar’s usually pasty looking cheeks. “Er—well, I ain’t going to take anything any more, kid. Honest, I’m off everything like that now. I am, sure as you live.”

Mark’s brown eyes sparkled. “Gosh, that’s good, Ed,” he said. “Maybe it’s helped you that I ran away, huh?”

“Maybe,” said Edgar, trying to affect a bored sort of yawn. “Anyway, I’m square with Mickey Keeler.”

“That—that pool room feller?”

“Yeh. I don’t owe him anything.”

“Now I’m glad that Mother and Father and Sis didn’t hear anything about you going there,” said Mark. “It’s all happened for the best, Ed. I always believe in that.”

“Hm-mm,” said Edgar, looking into space. “Anyway, I didn’t tell you were up here. Nobody even knows where I am for that matter.” Mark was nonplussed. “Ed, it’s all like a riddle,” he said. “We meet here so unexpected and all and me—I didn’t know you knew where I was even. There’s something—you don’t tell it straight even. Gosh, I’ve been alone and knocking around in the mountains and all. I guess the whole business’s made me nervous. Tell me one thing—did they tell on me at the camp here?”

“You mean did they send word to Old Horse Ears?” asked Edgar. Old Horse Ears was the nickname that young Kent’s Falls had applied to the constable.

Mark nodded, fearfully. “Did they?”

“Nope,” answered Edgar. “Quit being so nervous. Nobody knows where you are—nobody but Larry Vreeland and he won’t tell. He likes you too much.”

“Larry?”

“Yeh,” said Edgar, with an impatient wave of his hand. “Now don’t pester me with questions, kid. Not now. I’m hungry and I want to eat and when I’m feeling like it, I’ll tell you the whole story. There ain’t a thing you got to worry about. I’m the one to do that. But I should worry. Let’s eat.”

Mark, of course, did not have to be coaxed to do that. To be sure, he was more puzzled at his brother’s behavior than ever before, but the boiling coffee, the beans and the bacon had a soothing effect upon him and he was quite content to hear an explanation at any other time but then.

And so they sat there together, Mark chatting amiably in between the luscious mouthfuls of food, and Edgar, silent and obviously preoccupied. He

seemed to hear just enough of his brother's talk to be able to give only barely intelligible answers.

Mark was too happy at being with his brother again to notice any of this. Neither was he aware that at almost two minute intervals, Edgar would clutch at his coat pocket with marked anxiety, but always bring his hand away, however, with an air of reassurance.

CHAPTER XVIII

CONFESSION

“It’s lucky,” said Edgar, as the sun was setting, “that I met you here like I did.”

The two brothers were sprawling out on the warm ground, having slept through the long afternoon and eaten once again. It was a perfect evening for Mark and his brown eyes glowed warmly with a sense of well-being and joy. Only one thing tended to mar this happiness and that was an occasional wistful thought of his mother and father and sister. He missed them more than he had realized and Edgar’s presence served to bring this fact strongly before him.

“I hope I don’t have to run away from you or anybody again, Ed,” he said, at length. “But as much as I’d like to go home I won’t for your sake.”

Edgar looked at the scarlet tinged clouds and ripped a blade of grass from out of the ground. He bit off a piece of it and said, “No, you can’t go home, kid. Not now you can’t. You’d queer everything and besides I won’t stay alone in this neck of the woods. And I’ve *got* to stay here for a while anyhow!”

“Why?” asked Mark, sitting up.

“Account of Larry Vreeland.”

“What’s he got to——”

“Remember the night you sneaked off?” Edgar asked, nervously.

“Sure.”

“I heard you go off the porch. Something told me you wasn’t coming back and I got curious kind of to see what you’d do when nobody was watching you. So I slipped on my trousers, grabbed my slicker and followed you after you swiped Schmitter’s car.”

“Did you know what I was doing it for?” Mark asked, anxious that his motive be thoroughly understood.

“Sure. I heard that plane myself, but I didn’t know what your game was until you started to flood the carburetor.”

“You were there, Ed? All that time?”

“Sure. I sat on the rim at the back and let you drive me out there. Heck, I almost got jounced to death too.”

Mark was dumbfounded. “And I never knew it—gosh! Then you heard everything—you saw everything, huh?”

Edgar smiled sneeringly. “So did Larry Vreeland hear everything. He came riding up on his bike just as you ran up to talk to that aviator. Heck, I never heard Larry hardly. It wasn’t until I saw him hop off his wheel that I knew it was him. I saw him good though—in the light of those beacons.”

“Why didn’t he say something to me?” asked Mark. “Gosh, he didn’t have to be so sneaky, did he?”

“He said he didn’t know who you were at first so he slid behind the beacon pole. He thought there was something phoney going on with those home-made beacons and you and that aviator talking so low.”

“Well, there wasn’t anything phoney about it,” Mark said, indignantly. “I did it to save that aviator’s life and I came up here partly to save a feller’s life.”

“Yeh, I heard all that, kid,” said Edgar, cynically. “And Larry coming home from Plattsville from that Boy Scout meeting got the bug of listening in too. We even saw you start away and heard the lies you told about being an orphan and all.”

“I did it so’s nobody’d find out where I’d gone to. Anyway, it helped you, didn’t it, Ed?”

“Sure, I’m not complaining. I’m telling you about Larry. Neither of us came out and gave you away to that aviator, did we?”

“Nope, I’m glad you didn’t. I mean I’m glad Larry didn’t.”

“That’s the trouble with Larry, kid,” said Edgar with a quickened tone. “He likes you too much for my own good.”

“What do you mean, Ed?”

“He knows more about me than I thought he did,” answered Edgar. Two patches of color appeared on his cheek bones and deepened as he talked. “I couldn’t stand for that.”

Mark looked questioningly at his brother.

“He came out from behind the pole after you’d flown away with that guy,” Edgar said in faltering tones. “I came out from behind the car too and I told him that he shouldn’t say anything about what he heard you say. I told him you’d had trouble with the old man.”

“*Father*,” Mark corrected, gently.

“Aw, all right—what’s the difference!” Edgar said, indifferently. “Anyway, Larry told me not to worry, that he’d be a dead one before he’d give away on you.” He stopped and coughed nervously, letting his cigarette dangle carelessly from his lips.

“Gosh, I always liked Larry,” said Mark, feelingly. “And he’s a scout and . . .”

“Never mind about that,” Edgar interposed, quickly. “It’s more important what happened—I mean, what he said after that. For one thing he told me

how he knew you were up at Carlin's all that week and he got wise somehow (I don't know how) that you did it for me. And he told me up and down that he was going straight home and tell the old man on me. Heck, but that guy was sore at me—he even up and said what he knew about me down at Mickey Keeler's. Do you think I could stand for that—do you think I could stand there like a dummy and let him ride home on his wheel and spill the beans? I should say I couldn't and I *didn't!*”

Edgar's face was colorless now. His agitation was obvious for he pulled and twisted the blade of grass in his mouth until nothing was left of it. Mark was alarmed and the old sense of foreboding came back to him with a rush.

“*Didn't?* What do you mean, *didn't?*” he asked, in hushed tones.

“You know those stone bases around the beacon poles, huh?” Edgar asked, evasively.

“Sure, I know them,” Mark answered, moistening his dry lips. “What about it, huh?”

“Well, we were standing right by the one,” Edgar answered, slowly. “I told you how Larry had been hiding behind it and listening to you—anyway, he was standing with his back to the base when we were arguing.”

“The one at the east or the west of the field?” asked Mark.

“Aw, what difference does it make,” Edgar said, contemptuous of such trivialities at a time like this. “It was the one at the east end.”

“Oh.”

“Don't interrupt me again,” the elder boy said, peevishly. “Anyway, he got me so mad like I told you and I was good and afraid because I knew Larry Vreeland would do what he said he was going to do. And he turned around like to go and get on his bike. He had his back turned to me. . . .” Edgar's voice trailed off—he seemed unable to go on.

Mark looked at him searchingly—moved closer for dusk was closing in about them. He could only see Edgar in a shadow and yet. . . .

“Ed—*Ed!*” Mark cried in a hushed whisper. “Tell me—*what next?*”

Edgar gulped audibly. “Er—er, I saw that base so clear, Mark. It tempted me, kind of—gave me an idea that maybe I wouldn't have to let Larry go home and spill the beans after all.” Mark was cold as ice now. When Edgar called him *Mark*, it was significant. But he kept his silence.

“Larry had just taken a step, that was all,” Edgar continued in a droning sort of tone. “So quick as a flash I put my foot out and tripped him and when he fell backward I gave him an extra push so's that he'd land—*land on the base!*”

“*What—what did it do, Ed?*” came the small whisper.

“I didn't know then,” Edgar answered dully. “I meant for him to crack his head on it and he *did*. But I meant only that it should knock him out for a

little while.”

“*And did it?*”

Edgar could hardly speak. He choked on his words several times before he could utter them. “For—for two days he was un—unconscious. You see he had been there all night before anybody found him. I got so scared when I saw him lying there that I hopped on his bike and beat it home. Neither Mom or Pop heard me come in—they didn’t even know I was out. I had to hide the bike in the garage till the next day—oh, I managed that all right. . . .” Again his voice trailed off; again the weak boy broke down and this time he sobbed.

Mark’s heart was wrung. “Ed, *please!* Gosh, it was something in your head—I know. You didn’t. . . .”

“*Don’t*, don’t say anything till you hear the end of it, will you? Heck, I can’t stand it!” the remorseful boy cried, brokenly.

“He cut his head, *did he?*” Mark asked, gently.

“*Cut it?*” Edgar repeated, mechanically. “I wish that was all, Mark—I wish that was all. He had a fractured skull, that’s what he had. They couldn’t make him talk except he was delirious a few times Mrs. Vreeland told Mom. Then Tuesday—Tuesday, *he died!*”

A cry of horror escaped Mark’s lips and echoed long in the still, night air.

CHAPTER XIX ADDED INJURY

Some time elapsed before either of the brothers stirred. To be sure, Edgar was crying steadily, and at intervals great sobs racked his slender frame. But Mark had sat dry-eyed and silent since that terrible cry and did not get up from the ground until the stars were thick in the heavens and every bird had gone to roost.

He left Edgar to pace up and down along the creek and he tried concentrating his mind on the soothing sound of the water as it washed over its rocky bed coming down from the hills. The moon came out—a moon that was very like the one that had guided him on to camp that memorable night. It now seemed long ago.

Now and again he would hear the plop-plopping sound of a fish as it came up to the surface of the water, until the deafening chorus of some nearby bullfrogs filled the air. But even they could not compete with Mark's steady tramping up and down and back and forth along the creek, and not having a very receptive audience they retired to more favorable shores.

Mark did not dare think of the terrible story that Edgar had just narrated to him. He could not bear it. What he was most concerned about now was what was to become of his brother—this weak, sobbing brother of his!

He was more collected now—he could ask his brother about some of the points that had not been so clear to him. Edgar, too, was quiet; he could not hear a sound coming from his direction.

Mark approached him slowly. "Ed," he said, gently. "Just tell me one thing—how did they know you did it? Why did you have to come away?"

"They didn't know I did it," Edgar answered dully. "I don't know even yet whether they know it or not. But Mickey Keeler—I told him about it. He's the only one I told and he's got a mouth that stays shut. Anyway, I was going to tell you that Mickey called me on the phone to come down to his place."

"Mother didn't know it was he, huh?" poor Mark asked, anxiously.

"Aw, no—that's the least of my troubles," said Edgar, impatiently. "I went down like he asked me to and he told me that Hanky Cotton, the peddler, had told Horse Ears what a nice bike he bought from young Eddie Gilmore—*meaning me!*"

Mark flung his hands up, desperately. "You don't mean to tell me you sold it to that peddler, Ed! *You don't mean. . . .*"

“Sure, I mean—what else could I do with it? I couldn’t keep it in our garage and I couldn’t be seen wheeling it out, so I had to sneak Hanky in through the back and let him take it out! How else could I get rid of it?”

Mark was choking with despair. “Ed, oh Ed! Why couldn’t you have left it in the field! Why couldn’t you have found some way to get it over to Vreeland’s house! You could have——”

“I had to have money to get to Harkness, didn’t I?” the weak boy asked as if that justified his misdeed. “Besides, I didn’t sell it until—until I heard that Larry couldn’t—wouldn’t be able to use it any more.”

Mark flung himself down on the ground and buried his face in his hands. “Ed,” he said, after a time, “it’s too awful, this thing. It’s just like as if you didn’t know what you’re doing, that you could do so many things—be a *criminal* like.”

Edgar winced, even in the darkness. “I tell you I didn’t mean it!” he cried, weakly.

“About Larry—I know you didn’t,” said Mark with a calm that seemed far beyond his years. “But with the bike—*his* bike, you did awful wrong—you stole, sort of. You’re my own brother, Ed, but you’re wicked—you’re. . . .”

“You’re going to turn on me!” cried Edgar, leaning over and pulling at Mark’s sleeve. “You’re going to tell—I bet you’ll spill the beans, aren’t you?”

Mark shook his head slowly, pityingly. “Nope,” he said, listlessly. “That’s just what’s the matter, Ed. I can’t.”

Edgar straightened up with an air of security. “You’re all to the good, kid,” he said, with his old air of cheap sophistication. “I won’t forget. . . .”

“All right,” Mark interposed, not unkindly. “You didn’t tell me about this Keeler—what did he say?”

“What I told you,” Edgar answered. “Old Horse Ears was in the place—the pool room—when Hanky told him. He said that Horse Ears kind of grinned and said, ‘Eddie Gilmore, eh? He sold you a bike, eh? Funny that they can’t find Larry’s, now ain’t it?’ Mickey called me ten minutes after they left his place and he told me they were on their way around to Cotton’s barn to look at the bike so he advised me to beat it away and I did. I was on the train to Harkness in fifteen minutes and I got Keeler to thank for it.”

Mark smiled sardonically. “I guess you have him to thank for all this trouble, Ed,” he said. “If you hadn’t gone there a couple of years ago you would have been all right. . . .”

“Now don’t start picking at me,” Edgar whined. “Things are had enough. But maybe it won’t be so bad. Maybe they won’t be able to prove anything.

Mickey's going to let it be known that he got a job for me in New York and sent me there so's it won't look as if I ran away."

"And what about Cotton, huh?" asked Mark, anxiously. "Do you suppose that won't finish things?"

"Cotton's so old and hard of hearing that they can't exactly take his word for things," Edgar said, sneeringly. "He couldn't prove whether it was you or me that sold it to him. Anyhow, no one was suspicious of me 'cause I fixed that the morning after you went away. I told Pop that you went out of the house and that I saw you get in Schmitter's car and drive away. That's how it come to get in the paper because Sis came home and raised a big fuss about the money so I had to say something."

"Yes, I know, Ed," Mark said, quietly. "You had to blame it on me. That's all right. Everything's all right. Only what about poor Larry—what about him being found near Schmitter's car when everyone knew then that I had taken it?"

"That's it, Mark," answered Edgar, falteringly. "I—I didn't think you'd ever be coming home so I told Old Horse Ears that I saw you a little later that night coming in toward the garage on a bike and that it wasn't gone until the next night.—I hope it's all right, Mark, because I didn't think you were coming home."

"I—in other words, they think I, *I* did it?" Mark asked, amazed.

"If they don't push the bike business on to me, they will think it," Edgar answered, slowly. And for the dozenth time he added: "I didn't think you'd be coming home."

For the first time that night, Mark was speechless.

CHAPTER XX

FEAR

A restless, moaning pair were those two brothers sleeping beneath that starlit sky. They tossed and flung themselves about continually with Edgar muttering at intervals and Mark breathing heart-rending sighs on the clear night air. Even the moon seemed to look down upon them with pity—pity for the weak one and pity for the wronged one.

Morning dawned bright and fair, however, and they awakened to face the unsolved problem that had torn at the very core of their lives.

“We’ve got to think of something,” said Mark, sensibly, after a hasty breakfast. “We can’t wander around like this all the time. Why, we’ll get sick—we can’t live on just nothing and you haven’t any money and neither have I.”

“We should worry about that,” said Edgar, lightly. “We can get food without money—I did the other morning.”

“Where?”

“I don’t know where it was. Somewhere’s before you come to that trail. At that farmhouse—do you know where I mean?”

Mark looked puzzled. “You don’t mean—not the white place with the orchard?”

“Yep,” said Edgar. “That’s the place I guess. Why, the kitchen screen door was unlocked so I walked in and helped myself to the beans and the coffee and the bacon. They’ll never miss it—they have oodles of food, those people. Keeler loaned me the camping outfit—in case I got swamped in the mountains, he said.”

Mark was sitting with his mouth agape. Now he understood it all; Farmer Tomkins’ indignant gesticulations and his angry words. So it had been Edgar, his own brother, who was the thief! And with a sudden shock he realized how near he himself had come to being a thief.

He understood more than ever that his brother’s moral sense was seriously impaired.

And he realized also that in his own incapable hands rested an awful responsibility. He knew that the right thing would be to take Edgar home to his parents and relate the whole, tragic story from the time of those petty misdeeds up to the present moment when his misguided brother had so coolly narrated the manner in which he had procured the food from the farmer’s kitchen.

But young as he was, Mark knew that such a course could have only one result for Edgar—a result that would be a terrible blow to his mother. His father could stand it if he had to—fathers could, but the poor perplexed boy knew what his mother could stand. He had even then a mental picture of her sitting in the living room that night when he had come in and been questioned by his stern father. He could see her almost vividly as she rocked back and forth, back and forth. . . . She had looked haggard and worn then. If this new trouble came upon her. . . .

Mark turned his eyes upon the horizon, hopelessly. He would have given much to be able to tell Tom Slade his terrible story—he would have given much to tell anyone, in point of fact. The burden of it on his mind felt leaden. And Edgar was no help, no comfort.

In desperation he at last turned and offered a plan to the cringing young man. It was a plan to go back to Kent's Falls—to do the right, the most honorable thing. But Edgar whined, pleaded and finally broke down.

"They won't have any pity for me, Mark," he cried, desperately. "They'll say I did it on purpose—they can do anything to me then."

"But you didn't do it on purpose, Ed—tell me you wouldn't have done it if you'd known what was going to happen to poor Larry?" Mark's anxiety was poignant.

"Didn't I tell you I didn't do it on purpose!" Edgar answered with a shriek.

Mark could bear no more of it that day. It was too much even for his young, steady nerves. He took the bit of fishing rod that the worthless Keeler had so thoughtfully provided the runaway with, and sought a quiet place under a shady tree. There he sat for hours.

At noon he cooked his catch, three young trout. He did not touch the remaining beans nor the coffee. They were repellant to him now and his conscience was so sorely troubled that even the thought of the matches he had almost stolen grieved him.

As the day wore on he became sick with fear. Every scurrying rabbit that crossed their path startled him anew. He was certain that by now the Kent's Falls constable had established either Edgar's or his own guilt and that the state police were scouring the hills and highways of Harkness and beyond for some sign of Edgar.

"It's great how quick they can trail a feller," the poor boy muttered to himself as he was fishing again that afternoon. "They get it down pat so's they know even where you go after you leave a train. I bet that's what they've done with Ed!" His voice rose a little higher than he was aware of and Edgar heard it.

"Are you picking at me about something again?" the young man whined.

“Nope,” Mark lied, bravely. “I was just telling myself that it’s a good thing for us that there’s plenty of fish in this creek. It’s a good thing.”

CHAPTER XXI EAVESDROPPING

Another sun set, another night closed them out from the great world. Dawn came and with it a resolve that that day should see them on their way to Kent's Falls to give themselves up. That is, it was Mark's resolve—Edgar knew nothing about it.

Mark had come to think of himself as being in some way an accomplice. He had once heard of a man being tried as an accessory after the fact and he was certain that he was guilty of the same thing. Wasn't he still shielding his brother from the law after he was aware of his guilt?

"If that isn't being an accessory like, I'd like to know what is," the harassed boy murmured to himself during their hurried breakfast.

"Is it something else you're going to bawl me out for?" Edgar moaned, complainingly.

"No, Ed, no," answered Mark, in the tones of a tried, but gentle parent. "I'm just wondering to myself what we're going to do if we stay here much longer. I'm getting to think that I'm losing my senses—I can't even think what's right to do or what's wrong to do."

"You're going to squeal on me, huh?" Edgar whined.

Mark shook his head, pityingly. "You know it would take an awful lot for me to do that, Ed."

"That means you are," Edgar snapped suspiciously. "That's why I beat it, because I knew I'd give way or something on myself if they questioned me. Are you that way too, Mark? If they asked you, would you give way, huh?"

Mark could not resist the supplication in his voice, and forced himself to smile reassuringly. "I won't be where they can ask me questions, Ed," he said. "I'll stay here first and starve."

Edgar smiled with satisfaction and it made Mark wonder whether or not his brother was really benighted or just cunning. It was indeed amazing the way the young man could turn from anger to humble entreaty within a second.

It was after another meal of fish—their noon-day meal—that Edgar complained again. "I'm sick of it," he said, angrily. "I'm going to beat it out on that trail tonight and see what I can find. I'll go up to that camp maybe."

Mark was alarmed. "No, Ed, don't do that," he pleaded. "Stay right here. I'll go out this afternoon and see if I can scare up some berries. There ought to be lots in the woods."

“Who wants berries? I haven’t even a cigarette.”

“You’re better off without them,” said Mark, gently. “I’m never going to touch them, I’m not. A feller’s better off without ’em. And you’ve got to be satisfied with berries, Ed. If you don’t want to be caught, you’ll have to eat them.”

Edgar whined and complained but in the end was submissive. He also had a sickening fear of running into the hands of the law. He was willing to put up with almost anything, but not without a good deal of protest.

And so it happened that a little later, Mark started off berrying. He took the coffee pot and hiked off by himself feeling pleasantly exhilarated at the prospect of this solitary excursion. It offered him a little peace, a little rest from Edgar’s continuous complaints, and he was determined to try and reach the camp trail before he started back.

He went his way leisurely and the coffee pot was almost full in two hours’ time. After that Mark lingered around in the woodland, inspecting several birds’ nests and watching the earnest endeavors of the father and mother birds in feeding their young.

He was reminded of Larry Vreeland in this little adventure. Larry had been a scout and an ardent admirer of birds. Time and again he had talked to Mark of the fun one could get out of watching these feathered creatures and had fairly bubbled over with joy when he captured the merit badge for bird study.

“I used to wonder what he saw in it,” Mark confessed, wistfully. “Now I know. I’d like it myself. Poor Larry!”

He rambled on and on with his thoughts taking always this trend, and he could see through the thick trees the light from the camp trail. He decided he would give it just one look and then turn back.

Secretly he was hoping that some member of the camp would be passing, particularly Tom Slade or Lefty Leighton. “I’d almost know it was him, even if I didn’t ever see him,” he said, wistfully. “Gosh, I’d just love to meet fellers once again and have a good time. I’m kind of sick of sneaking around like a—a criminal. Gosh!”

He walked nearer and nearer yet never forgetting that caution was now a part of his program. He had even acquired that easy, noiseless step that one acquires after a time spent in the great outdoors. In this manner then he approached the trees that bordered the trail.

Here he stopped, however. A look of fear came into his eyes and he put out his hand and grasped the tree at his side for support. Then just as suddenly he became calm and stood stark still listening to two state policemen who had stopped a little way down the trail. They were sitting astride of their motorcycles and apparently resting.

“Sure, he came this way,” said the one who was fair and slim. “Didn’t that farmer tell us he saw him with his own eyes?”

“Yeh,” said the other, who was dark and stout, “I know. Do you realize though that it’s a good day’s job to comb these pesky woods thoroughly?”

“Day or no day, we’ll comb them!” exclaimed the slim man. “We’ll comb them if it takes a week.”

Mark did not wait to hear more, but turned with a decisive air and fled through the thick woodland as noiselessly as the squirrel in his path.

CHAPTER XXII

GOOD INTENTIONS

“They’be after Ed, that’s what,” he told himself more than once as he ran back. “And now’s the time for him and for me to do what’s right. I’ll march him right up to them and he won’t know he’s going either.”

With that resolve added to his many good intentions, he felt easier in mind and ran not so fast after he had gone a quarter of a mile or so. There was not such great need for haste now. Had they not said they would comb the woods if it took them a day? Well, it wouldn’t take himself and Edgar any more than two hours before they had thrown themselves on the mercy of those two state troopers.

Mark hugged the berry filled coffee pot to him as he hiked along and was glad that Fate had once more thrown a good opportunity across his path. The troopers had looked to him like angels of mercy when once he had got over his fright. They would give Edgar and himself good food and best of all they would have a mattress at least on which to rest their weary bodies that night. He now felt that that would be worth the shame and punishment meted out to him for shielding his brother so long.

Edgar also would feel easier in mind once he had confessed. Perhaps he would be a better young man afterward and never sin again. Indeed Mark had hopes that some kindly judge would be lenient with his erring brother and allow him to go on probation under their father’s guidance. He had heard of such things, and he wondered if Edgar’s misdeeds would warrant such clemency.

To be sure, before Mark approached their little camping spot he had already repented of his decision to make his brother confess his sins to the troopers. He had valiantly determined that he would take the blame for it all and shoulder the burden of his brother’s punishment. In that way (and he was certain it was the best way) Edgar would be more contrite and certain to go the straight and narrow path forevermore in consequence of what, he, *Mark* would suffer for him.

And so in the warm glow of late afternoon, the determined boy approached their camp site only to find Edgar stretched out in front of a dead fire, sleeping. In repose, the young man’s face looked not unlike that of a mischievous child and Mark stood still to watch him.

“He doesn’t look as if he means to be bad,” he whispered to himself. “He honestly doesn’t. And I believe that he didn’t mean to—to do what he

did to Larry—gosh!”

Mark’s lip quivered and in order to keep his determination, he hurried about clearing their camp site and burying the dead ashes like a true scout. In the midst of this task, Edgar stirred uneasily, then groaned.

Mark glanced at him anxiously, but quickly set his jaw again and finished clearing away the ashes. “I’ll pack up the camping set,” he told himself, “then I’ll wake him.”

When everything was finished, he glanced again at his brother. He was sleeping so soundly. Almost too soundly. And he was breathing quite heavily. At intervals he would stir uneasily and groan.

Mark went over and sat down on his haunches beside him. “I’ll wait a few minutes before I wake him,” he said. “It’s a shame to wake him.”

The sun was again on the wane—another night would close them out from the world and leave them in darkness and alone. Mark was determined. Not another night would he stand it! He leaned forward and touched Edgar ever so slightly.

The other stirred and groaned again. Mark was distressed. Once more he touched him. Edgar blinked his eyes a little, then slowly opened them.

“That you, kid?” he asked, frightened. He put out his hand and touched Mark’s bare arm.

“Sure, it’s me,” Mark said, trying to sound severe. “Who’d you think it was, huh?”

Edgar grasped his brother’s arm with a trembling hand. “I had a dream, kid,” he said, in a thick voice. “I had a terrible dream—most like a nightmare, I guess.”

“You did?” Mark asked, a little less indifferently than before. “What did you dream, huh?”

“Terrible things, Mark—terrible,” Edgar answered. His hand gripped at his brother’s arm, tighter. “You’d never do what I dreamed you did, would you?”

Mark’s face flushed a deep scarlet. “How do I know what you dreamed I did?” he asked, trying to laugh lightly.

“Anyhow, I know you wouldn’t,” answered Edgar. “I dreamed you ran away from me and told the troopers on me and that they came and beat me so’s I’d say that I knocked L—ll—Larry down on purpose.”

Mark winced and put his hand over his brother’s trembling one. It felt terribly warm—almost too warm.

“They do those things sometimes, Mark,” said Edgar, in a frightened voice. “I’ve heard say that they make you say a lot of things that you didn’t do. And I didn’t do it on purpose.”

“Cross your heart and hope to die?” asked Mark, naively.

Edgar crossed his heart solemnly. He also hoped to die. “Then you wouldn’t tell on me, Mark?” he insisted.

Mark’s face for a moment looked like stone. Edgar sat up, fearfully. “Mark!” he exclaimed, then suddenly put his hand to his head. “Mark—kid, I think I’ve got a fever or something. My head’s like fire. Gee, I’m dizzy.” Mark was instantly on the alert and that strange, almost maternal instinct in him came to the surface in a bound. Resolutions were forgotten, never to be recalled. He put his hand on his brother’s head and a shadow crossed his own fair brow.

“Ed, you’re sick!” he cried, worriedly. “Now this is a mess! Oh, my gosh—come on, let’s get out of here, quick! We’ll wade over the creek and hide up in the mountains or somewhere. Anywhere! Only we got to get out of here and not leave any traces!”

“Why?” asked Edgar, alarmed. “Did you . . . is there . . .”

“Now keep as quiet as you can, Ed,” Mark said, more calmly. “Mother always tells you that when you get those fevers, remember?”

“I know, but don’t mother me, kid,” answered Edgar suspiciously. “It’s sissyish. Anyhow, I want to know what’s up, huh?” Mark looked at his brother’s deeply flushed face and saw that his eyes too were heavily bloodshot. There was no doubt that he was sick.

“There’s nothing up, Ed,” he said, at length. “I spotted a couple of fellers hunting back there on the trail, that’s all. They might just happen to come along this way and so I thought that the further we get up that mountain tonight, why the better off we’ll be.”

“That’s the kid, Mark,” said Edgar, rising with great difficulty. “You’re always thinking of me, you little brick, aren’t you?”

“Yes,” said Mark, simply. “That’s the trouble, Ed—that’s the trouble.”

CHAPTER XXIII

A VIGIL

A few minutes later they waded the brook and made their way up into the mountains. Before a mile and a half had been traversed, Edgar began to lag behind. Mark was worried.

“We won’t go much further, Ed,” he said, consolingly. “Just try and keep up until I can find a nice warm place with pine needles. I’ve never slept on such a comfortable spot since that night and with you feeling sick, it’s important. Maybe you have a cold or something, huh?”

Mark knew, however, that his brother was not sick with a cold, but with one of his very frequent attacks of fever. He had them at intervals of about every four months and would be sick from three to four days at a time, shrieking with delirium and crying with thirst.

Yes, Mark was only too familiar with the symptoms but never before had he been called upon to take care of the sick boy.

The Gilmores’ family physician had never been able to diagnose Edgar’s fevers. He could only prescribe and so alleviate the distressing effects upon the patient. And Mrs. Gilmore, being the good mother she was, sat up all night at his bedside administering to his crying needs. Fate had now turned the task over to the boy, Mark.

Sunset was little more than a pink shadow in the skies when Mark found the bed of pine needles that he had so earnestly sought. And Edgar was by that time incoherent in his speech and already crying for water.

Mark had provided for that as best he could. He had thrown the berries into the creek and filled the coffee pot with water, but he was cold with fear when he saw that Edgar had consumed more than half of its contents in one draught. And the night had only just started!

The sick boy slept for a few hours after that drink. Mark sat by him, watching intently.

Then as the moon came out he awakened and cried with thirst.

“I’ll have to sneak back down to the creek and see if I can get some more,” Mark tried to tell him. “Only drink a little and I’ll get more.”

Edgar was too far gone in his delirium to understand or care. He lay twitching his burning eyelids and clutching at his brother’s arm. Mark was afraid to stir and decided that he would not leave him for a while.

Far into the night the sick boy fell off to sleep. Mark’s head nodded wearily and in spite of brave attempts to keep his eyes open he gradually slid

down at his brother's side and was soon lost in sleep among the pine needles.

Morning found Edgar worse. He cried, almost shrieked, for water and to Mark's despair, he found that there was not more than a small gobletful of water left in the coffee pot. And that was all he could get until nightfall!

Mark never forgot that day. It was an interminable nightmare. At intervals he had to fairly drag himself out of earshot of his brother's cries in order to keep his wits together. His own thirst and hunger were great but he tried not to think of them and kept calm and collected by patiently watching the sun in its progress through the afternoon sky.

Long before dusk, Edgar fell asleep and Mark took advantage of the opportunity and started on his long hike to the creek. He ran most of the way and seemed to make it in good time, arriving there at dusk.

He could see nothing over on their former camp site. Shadows hid the place from view and he drank to his heart's content and washed noiselessly. He listened every few minutes and felt certain that no troopers were camping there. But one never knew, the boy thought. They might not build a fire, purposely.

He wasted no more time and after making a reassuring survey of the surroundings, hurried on. Another night, another moon. He was so thankful for that moon. It made his way as clear as day and seemed to put added zest into his weary steps.

The last turn he made with relief and hurried into the little pine grove, eagerly. If Edgar was sleeping, it was more than he had hoped for. He put down the coffee pot and tiptoed anxiously back of the tree. But something was wrong; he sensed it even before he knelt down and felt around on the ground.

Edgar was gone.

CHAPTER XXIV

DESPAIR

Mark's despair knew no bounds. He did not know where to go or what to do and walked aimlessly up and down before the little pine grove calling for Edgar in guarded tones. Time and again he was tempted to shout but was afraid that the troopers would hear if they were about.

He feared to go very far lest that Edgar should come back and not find him there. And he surely would come back, the distracted boy thought. He could not go on as sick as he was. He must come back!

Up and down, up and down the overgrown trail he paced. Then as the moon went behind a cloud he retreated to the grove and sat down, utterly weary. He knew that the most sensible thing for him to do was to wait until morning.

He slept at intervals, waking now and again and thinking that he had heard Edgar's voice.

But it was only the cry of an owl not far away. After a time he would nod his head, propping himself against the trunk of the tree so that he would not sleep soundly.

In spite of those precautions, however, he did sleep soundly and awakened long after dawn. He was startled and reproached himself for having slept at all when he should have been constantly searching for the sick boy.

"I don't feel so peppy myself," he said aloud, as he started up the trail. "I don't even feel as if I slept."

Neither did he look it. Worry and lack of food and proper rest were beginning to tell on him. He walked along listlessly and his calls for Edgar were little more than whispers. Every movement he made was an admission of utter exhaustion.

Despite his hunger and thirst he kept up the search in the upper reaches until mid-morning. "I've done all I can, that's all," he said, worriedly. "Ed's been an awful lot of trouble lately—he certainly has. But gosh, there's something about him—I just can't seem to get good and mad at him."

He smiled wanly and trudged down hill again keeping straight on in the trail and heading for the creek. He was past caring whether the troopers saw him or not—he had to drink if he couldn't eat. He *had* to!

He stumbled and fell; he ached in every limb. But he bethought himself of his brother wandering about those mountains in a delirium and he put self

out of mind as he realized that if he didn't find Edgar by noon he would *have* to get the aid of the troopers.

"It'll be all for the best," he mumbled, tonelessly. "So much has happened—gosh, so much has happened!"

His clothes were covered with dirt—those shining khaki clothes that had been the gift of Lefty Leighton. And his fair hair was disheveled and caked with mud and the cow-lick on his forehead was the resting place of a smudge. But Mark did not care—he hadn't the energy.

Down the trail he stumbled, yet always looking to the left and the right for some sign of the missing Edgar. He searched behind boulders and floundered around in a bit of swampy ground that was hidden by a clump of trees. He was on the very lowest ledge—just down around the turn was the creek.

He broke into something resembling a running step, but fell pitifully short of it. His legs were incapable of such strenuous movements and he had to content himself with a slow, measured step.

"I feel like an old man," he said, with a wan smile. "But maybe things 'll be better—I'll find. . ."

He had made the last turn and it was there that he stopped short, for he saw a moving figure just below. It was someone bending over the creek. Mark threw all precaution to the four winds and ran and the nearer he got the harder his heart beat with joy and expectation. Suddenly the figure turned away from the creek and around, facing him.

"Mark!"

"Ed! Oh, Ed! It's you!" Mark cried, convulsively, and as he flung his arms wide, his brother ran to him.

CHAPTER XXV

A SHOT

Edgar leaned heavily, weakly, on his younger brother's shoulder and wept a swift second, unashamed. All the old cynicism, all the cheap sophistication that he had so carefully acquired, seemed gone and Mark rejoiced. He had occasions to remember that throughout the rest of his life and always spoke of it as the time that Ed was sorry for all he had done.

But the moment passed and Edgar backed away, ashamed. Mark pretended not to notice it and helped him to sit down. "Do you know you've been good and sick, Ed?" he asked him, anxiously. "Do you know you had the life scared out of me last night when you ran away?"

Edgar lay down, weak and exhausted. "I didn't know anything until a few minutes ago," he answered, quietly. "I was drinking out of the creek and all of a sudden I missed you."

"You don't remember going up in the pines last night to sleep, then?" asked Mark.

Edgar shook his head. "I feel pretty shaky. I wish I was home."

Mark was all pity. "So do I, Ed. For your sake, anyhow. You had the fever again."

"I thought so. We've got to do something, Mark. This is getting terrible."

"We can get help, Ed," Mark said slowly. "Are you willing for me to tell and take your chances?"

Edgar looked up at the blue sky overhead and the old look of fear shadowed his face. "Give me time to think about it, Mark. Just give me time," he said. "Let me sleep today—tomorrow I'll probably feel like saying yes."

Mark let him sleep and, after a plunge in the brook, sat patiently on the bank and caught some trout. He had no appetite for the fish, but he had to eat something and as he went about building a fire, he pinned his hope and faith to the troopers and wished silently that they would comb that end of the woods and deliver them out of their misery.

Edgar awakened while Mark was cooking the fish. He rose weakly and came over to his brother's side, sniffing the air disgustedly. "I'm plain sick of smelling that stuff," he said, peevishly. "I'm just plain sick of it. I want something decent to eat!"

"So do I, Ed," Mark said good-naturedly. "And we can have something decent too."

“How?”

“The way I told you about before.”

“Give myself up, you mean?”

“Yes. It’s the only way I can see, Ed. We’re crazy to starve here.”

Edgar passed his hand across his forehead. “You mean we’d be crazy to let them put me in jail! No sir! I can get something decent to eat without going there for it, thanks. I can . . .”

“Not the way you did before, Ed!” Mark said, appealingly. “You don’t mean that, do you?”

“It’s better than starving, isn’t it?” Edgar sneered. “A feller can’t be so awful particular when he’s as hungry as I am.”

“If you’d only listen to reason, Ed.”

“I listen to my own reason, that’s what,” Edgar returned, angrily. “Maybe if you hadn’t tried to beat it away like you did—maybe if you’d have been willing to stay and go to Military School, everything would have been different! I wouldn’t have had that argument with Larry either!”

Mark turned around, hurt and amazed. “You don’t forget why I would have had to go to Military School, do you, Ed?” he asked, not unkindly. “Maybe things *would* have been different if it hadn’t been for that!”

Edgar turned away, sullenly. Before he had a chance to think of any retort they were startled by a flapping noise and saw a beautiful, white pigeon float gracefully down and land on the limb of a tree on the opposite bank.

“It’s a carrier pigeon, Ed!” Mark exclaimed, enthusiastically. “Isn’t she a beaut?” Edgar’s eyes glittered and he chuckled unpleasantly. “Whatever she is, she won’t be long,” he said, significantly, and his long, slim fingers stole around to his coat pocket.

Mark stood up, alarmed. “Wh—what is it, Ed? What have you got?” he asked.

Edgar drew a small gun out of his pocket and smiled sneeringly at his brother. “Mickey Keeler gave me this too,” he said, thickly. “He gave it to me to use in just such a case as this. And that bird means food to me.”

Mark was horror-stricken. The bird rested on the bough, so unsuspecting, so trusting. Her beautiful white feathers gleamed like driven snow in the noon-day sun, and the frightened boy looked from her back to his brother with a kind of fearful fascination.

“Ed, you wouldn’t do it—you wouldn’t do it!” he cried, pleadingly. “It’s so—oh, I don’t know! It seems that you could get something else I should think—gosh!”

A shot rang out in the air. Edgar’s aim was bad and the bird never stirred. She seemed entirely oblivious of the struggle that was taking place

below.

Edgar was angry that his shot went wild and placed the gun in a position that afforded him better aim. Mark was frantic and protested, but the stubborn youth maintained a maddening silence. Nothing that his brother said seemed to move him to pity.

“I’m willing to go out and hunt for you,” Mark said, desperately. “I’ll even go and beg at the farmhouse if you’ll only let her alone, Ed—honest, I will!”

Edgar seemed not to hear and continued to study the pigeon’s position.

“Maybe she’s got an important message on her or something, Ed!” cried Mark. Then: “I’ll even make a fool of myself and go back to Leatherstocking Camp and ask them for some grub, huh?”

There was a certain determination about Edgar’s usually weak looking jaw that warned Mark. He knew that it was a sign, a warning to act quickly. And he did.

Without another word, he plunged into the stream, shoes and all, and waded across. He scrambled up the bank on the other side, panting but determined, and like a flash of lightning was shinnying up the tree and reaching for the bird.

It all happened so quickly that he was never able afterward to recall the details. All he remembered was that as he reached the crotch of the tree and put his hand toward the upper limb, he heard his brother’s sneering laugh.

“So you think you can stop me, huh?” Edgar had jeered. “You think you can prevent me from getting some good food, huh?”

Mark had turned at that moment to make a last minute plea. He saw Edgar’s arm upraised and heard the rustle of the bird’s wings. Then came the shot.

Mark felt something prick at his shoulder and neck. A sickening wave of nausea passed over him and he flung out his hand to grasp the limb, but missed it. Then came oblivion.

He was unconscious when Edgar ploughed through the waters of the creek and scrambled up on the bank. He stood there a moment like one in a trance and looked with horror upon his brother’s still, white face.

Suddenly he was aware of the revolver still dangling in his hand, and with a wild whoop of fear he flung it into the creek and like a madman plunged into the forest.

CHAPTER XXVI

LEFTY LEIGHTON

"I'm going to take a new trail," said Lefty Leighton that morning. "I'm going to see where I come out at and if I don't like it, I'll be back. If I do like it, you'll see me at Temple Camp when you get there."

"Suits me," said Tom Slade. "Only be careful, Lefty. That rattler left you with more than his best regards and I'm not keen about seeing you take such a long hike. You're shaky enough to stand a week's more rest."

"Maybe," said Lefty, with that easy-going way of his. "I'm not gone yet, Slady—not to Temple Camp anyway. And it's ten chances to one that I won't be so stuck on that trail."

"I hope you're not," smiled Tom. "I'd rather see you potter around here until I can get the chance to break away with you."

Lefty smiled pleasantly. "I'm always out to please, Slady," he said, "so just wait and see what the cat brings back."

"Is that a promise, kid?"

"Absolutely," Lefty said, and strolled away behind the lodge as if nothing in the world mattered.

He walked, or sauntered is the better word—Lefty was never known to run in his life. He had once said that he found one could get where they were going just as quickly by walking as any other way. And that morning's stroll wasn't any exception to his rule for he crept almost at times, and made his way up the mountain trail without the least exertion.

But Lefty always got there. He was never late—indeed, he was always just about on time. He said he never tried to be, that it was just pure luck. Certainly it seemed pure luck that morning for he left the trail he had been on and took another one that crossed it, and before the sun had been gone from the meridian more than an hour and a half he was again coming down hill and could see the clear, sparkling waters of the creek.

"Well, Slady's got his wish, all right," he chuckled. "Here I am at old Weir's tributary, as Mr. Wainwright would say."

He sauntered down the trail and around the bend and as his clear, bright eyes swept the opposite bank of the creek he saw the still form of a boy lying under the tree.

Lefty removed his shoes and stockings hastily and, after throwing them across, waded in and up on the further bank. He was at Mark's side in a

second and knelt down quickly and felt his pulse. In doing so he noticed a tell-tale stream of red flowing out from under the prone boy's shoulder.

"Hmph," said Lefty, and looked instinctively up into the tree.

No would-be enemy was hidden there, he saw. Nothing but the beautiful, white carrier pigeon nestled comfortably on one of the upper limbs. She seemed content to rest there all of the afternoon.

Lefty rolled Mark over gently and examined the wound, and was thankful that his first aid training in scouting was going to help him here. He could see at first glance that the boy was weak from loss of blood and he worked the khaki shirt off first and set about bathing the wound and using measures to revive him.

It was in doing this that he got his first glimpse of Mark's belt with its initials, M. G. Quite curiously then he lifted back the flap of the shirt breast pocket and saw the little white tag with his own name printed on it—the tag that his aunt had sewn on not so many weeks before. She had done that with all his clothes and he had laughingly called them identification disks.

He did not laugh now. Instead he glanced anxiously at Mark's still white face and while he worked over him, he wondered how the boy had come to be in such a condition.

"And he's the feller that saved my life," Lefty said, reverently. "I wanted to see him and I was disappointed, but now I've got my chance to kind of pay him back."

Some semblance of color crept back into Mark's white hands and arms; then slowly it mounted to his cheeks. Presently he opened his eyes and looked at his rescuer.

Lefty smiled. "It's all right, Mark," he said, and as he leaned over a thick lock of his wavy brown hair tumbled down over his forehead.

"Doesn't that make you mad," said Mark, weakly. "Mine does that too, only it's straight and yours is curly."

Lefty laughed outright. "I knew I'd like you, feller," he said. "I knew I'd think you were just right. Do you know who I am?"

Mark said he didn't. "You know who I am though, huh?" he asked.

"Hope to tell you," answered Lefty. "I'm the very guy that you got into trouble for."

"Lefty! Not *Lefty*?" Mark asked, wide-eyed.

"The one and only, absolutely," Lefty laughed. "And now I don't think you better talk any more, Mark. You look as if you've been through a lot and I want to get you back to camp—quick!"

"I always knew you were the kind that wouldn't pester me with questions," Mark got in. "And I was right."

"Absolutely," said Lefty. "I'm a good listener."

“Then you’ll hear me talk.”

“All right,” Lefty said. “Now I’m going to give you a regular old-fashioned horse back ride, only it’s a little different. They call it the Firemen’s lift. Ready!”

“Sure,” Mark answered. And as Lefty got him across his shoulders and thence over his right arm, he said, “I bet you learned this in scouting.”

“Right the first time, Mark,” said Lefty.

Mark’s head drooped a little. His eyes seemed to be having a difficult time in keeping open. “Are you going to carry Ed, too?” he asked in a weak, whispering voice.

Lefty stopped a moment. “*Ed?*” he repeated.

“Sure, where did he go? He was standing. . . .” Mark’s voice trailed off into nothingness and all was still.



MARK'S VOICE TRAILED OFF INTO NOTHINGNESS AND ALL WAS STILL.

Lefty stepped down into the creek, having decided to wade it up to the bridge. It would be a little more difficult carrying his burden through the

stream but it cut off the distance by more than a mile and a half. After he had gone a few hundred yards he stopped, rested a moment, then went on.

“Poor kid,” he said, feelingly. “He sure looks all in.”

CHAPTER XXVII

LEATHERSTOCKING AGAIN

Mark was not allowed to sit up until the next day. His arm was in a sling and his neck felt painfully stiff and sore, but he was content. He had slept on a mattress in Tom Slade's cabin.

It was noontime, the doctor had called and everything in the world seemed at peace. Only one haunting fear, one sorrow, kept Mark from enjoying that peace, and that was Ed's continued absence.

"No sign of him yet, Mark," said Lefty as he and Tom strolled in to see the invalid.

"Think he could have gone on home or something?" Mark asked, anxiously.

"Let's hope so," said Tom. "Anyway, try and rest easy about it, kiddo. We have all the fellows out scouring these hills for him. I've even had them post signs along the trail we found you on telling him to come here—that good news awaited him. That ought to fetch him."

Mark was nonplussed. "News?" he asked, curiously.

Lefty glanced at Tom. "I didn't tell him this morning, Slady," he said. "I thought I'd wait and let you spill out the whole thing. You know how I like to listen."

"Yes, I know," Tom smiled, and turned to Mark. "I got in touch with your people after you ran away, kiddo, and I've been hearing from your father on the average of once a day. Three days ago he drove up here with your mother and sister."

"Slady likes your sister," said Lefty with a grin. "He's fond of red-haired girls."

Mark smiled.

"Never mind what I'm fond of, Lefty," Tom laughed. "Just now I'm anxious to see this crossword puzzle straighten itself out. For one thing, Mark, your little scout pal, Larry Vreeland, is alive and on the road to recovery." Mark was speechless with surprise.

Tom continued with a nod. "I don't blame you for being surprised at all. From the time you had with your brother I guess you thought the poor kid was pretty far into Paradise by this time. But what counts is this—it let you right out when I told your father you were with that aviator at midnight and your brother had told him he saw you ride on that Larry kid's wheel at that

time. He's all broken up about the way he accused you, kiddo, for he said that once the thing came out in the paper he found out everything."

Mark sat quiet.

"Aren't you ready to say *whoopee* yet?" Lefty asked.

"When Ed comes—then I will, Lefty," answered Mark. "It's terrible to go through what we did. And if he hasn't eaten yet, I'd feel terrible."

"Well, perhaps no news is good news, kiddo," Tom said, encouragingly. "Don't give up hope."

"And did my father say much about *him*?" Mark asked, timorously.

"Lots," Tom smiled. "He says he blames himself for not keeping an eye out at your brother's companions—he said if he had it to do over again he'd make him go into scouting. But he fixed it up about the bike—that's all settled. And about the other punishment—it won't be any harder than just going to work for six days a week."

"That'd be punishment enough for Ed," Mark smiled. "Still, you can't tell. He almost told me he was sorry that one time—in a way he did."

"All he needs is good hard work out in the open," said Tom. "I've an idea he'd respond to treatment."

"He would," Mark smiled. "It was only because he was so hungry that he got to acting so crazy like again."

"Sure," Tom said, sympathetically. "And now your best bet is to be a scout and smile. Everything will come out all right."

Mark smiled bravely and before Tom had a chance to open the door he called to him. "Did my father say anything about me being a scout?" he asked, still smiling.

Tom grinned. "*Did he!*" he exclaimed, with a hearty laugh. "He told me on the phone this morning that if you refused you'd have to go to Military School."

"Oh boy, that's easy," said Mark, with a little laugh.

Lefty leaned over and pulled his blond hair down over his forehead. "Now can you say *whoopee*?" he asked, bantering.

"*Whoopee!*" Mark answered as loud as he was able.

CHAPTER XXVIII

SMOKE

The next day Mark was able to take a short hike with Lefty and they sauntered down the camp trail, or the wagon trail as Tom called it.

“That’s because he never saw a wagon on it,” Lefty remarked as they strolled along.

They came to the little bridge which had been repaired since Mark’s adventure on it. “It seems so much different in the daylight though,” he observed as they leaned over the rail and gazed into the clear water. “That night it seemed I walked so long before I came to the part that was burned.”

“Everything looks different at night,” said Lefty. “You’ll learn that when you’re a scout.”

“I’d like to learn what good those trees do by being so thick through there,” Mark said, nodding at the point beyond the bridge where the woodland began. “I’ve had a feeling ever since I got better that maybe if they were all down I could see Ed.”

“Slady said he wished he had the money to hire some men or the time to do it himself and he’d have that whole place cleared out in no time,” said Lefty. “It wouldn’t even be so good as fire wood, he says. It’s wood that burns right up—they’re all the same kind of trees.”

“I know. I ought to. I looked at them long enough,” Mark said, wistfully.

They turned back slowly, thoughtfully. Lefty did not urge Mark to talk. He knew that he would do that of his own accord when the time came.

The day passed and still no word of Edgar. His father had phoned again and he had talked with him, but Mr. Gilmore had said that there had been not the slightest news of his elder son anywhere.

Still Mark seemed hopeful. There was a doggedness about his hope that Lefty and Tom admired. He talked little of Edgar, but there was a shadow in his eyes that betrayed his thoughts.

“If he doesn’t come by tomorrow, I’ll go home,” he said, that evening. “I’ll know that he couldn’t be around here any longer than that. Don’t you think so?”

Tom and Lefty both agreed and eyed the wistful looking boy covertly as he gave hurried glances out of the lodge window. At times he would stand still wherever he was and listen intently and when the sound proved to be some one of the campers, the same shadow returned to his eyes.

That evening had seemed particularly long to all of them. Some sat reading, some writing letters—indeed, the lodge was a homey enough place offering either rest or diversion. And everyone that night was doing something—everyone but Mark.

He had been walking back and forth between the window and door for at least a half hour. Suddenly he stopped and peered out of the window, cupping his face with his free arm. Only a minute he stayed there before he turned quickly and walked to the door.

“I smell smoke,” he announced, standing quite erect and sniffing the night air.

“It’s from the eats shack,” said Tom, deeply engrossed in the magazine article he was reading. “Happy’s probably burning up his love letters.”

Everyone laughed and when this subsided, Mark said again, “I smell smoke, and it isn’t from the eats shack. It’s more than that.”

“Well maybe Happy’s taken to burning them up outside,” Lefty said, quietly. “That’s what I’d do with mine. Dust to dust.”

No one was prepared to take Mark seriously—no one wanted to. There was a sort of tacit agreement among them that they should try and humor the strange boy and jolly him out of his trouble. They tried every known method of laugh making during the next fifteen minutes just to hear him chuckle. And while they were performing this task, a knock was heard at the door and Happy came rushing in.

“Sho’s yo live, boss—ah b’lieve dem woods am afire!” he exclaimed.

Everyone jumped up at once and ran out. Mark mingled with the small group of men, and his heart beat strangely. He had been right, after all, for there reflected in the dark sky was an angry looking glow.

“She’s blowing away from the bridge,” said Tom anxiously. “We can’t stop her now—she’ll burn right on to the road unless the wind changes and I hope it doesn’t. Still it won’t hurt for some of us to stand around down near the bridge and watch the way things go.”

Some hurried one way and some the other and in the tense excitement, Mark found himself suddenly alone. It was chilly and he felt not so well in the night air yet, and went back into the lodge.

He walked around a few times the same as he had been doing all the evening. Occasionally he would open the door and listen for Lefty’s or Tom’s return, but neither of them came. He ventured to smile at their long absence. “I’d be there too I suppose,” he said. “All that’s keeping me is the way I feel and——”

“She am burnin’ straight on to th’ road, Massa Slade says,” Happy called in. “Ain’t dat de luckiest, chile, eh?”

Mark agreed that it was and would have liked to detain Happy and talk to him, but he like the others wanted to get as near to the flames as possible.

After a time, Mark began to feel sleepy and sat down in the willow chair, stretching out his body comfortably and throwing his head back on the head rest. In this position he fell asleep and because of his unnatural posture his mouth gaped open little by little and his jaw dropped grotesquely.

And it was because of this rather ghastly attitude that the tragedy occurred.

CHAPTER XXIX

A LIVE GHOST

He might have been asleep an hour, perhaps less, when he was slowly aroused into consciousness by the feeling that someone was staring at him. He was terribly fatigued and it was difficult for him to get his eyes open.

Perhaps he had tried to waken long before he actually did, for he said he remembered dreaming that he was struggling to get out of the chair. When he really wakened he found that his body was as relaxed as when he had first fallen asleep.

Only two soft lights were burning in the lodge and those at either corner of the spacious living room. Consequently Mark sat almost in the shadow and so it was no wonder then that he had such difficulty in convincing himself that he was really awake.

He did not move his body an inch but lay in the same reclining position, blinking his eyes from the shadow that surrounded him. A slight draft was coming from somewhere and he became suddenly aware that the door was slowly opening.

There was something about that opening door that held Mark as if he were in a vise. He could not seem to move hand or foot and yet each second it swung farther and farther into the room. At last it stopped.

Mark was as rigid as death for nothing happened, nothing moved at that door for fully two minutes—minutes that seemed hours to him. Finally a shadow flitted across the threshold, then stopped again, and a cold sensation danced up and down the watching boy's spine.

Suddenly another shadow crossed the threshold and Mark saw a foot slowly move forward. Then just as slowly another foot came and before that ceased moving a hand gripped the door—a hand that had long, bony fingers.

Mark could have screamed in sheer hysteria, but there was that about the ghostly thing that held a certain fascination for him. He watched with eyes that must have blazed like points of fire.

The door moved again slightly and then a head appeared, deliberately. Mark held his breath but did not move, for the next moment he saw that it was not a ghost, not an apparition, but the emaciated head and fingers of his own brother, Edgar.

A shrill scream escaped him, and yet he could not move.

Edgar stood, transfixed. He looked about the room, his sunken eyes and hollow cheeks moving about as if on an axis. Suddenly he looked in Mark's

direction and as his great, staring eyes became used to the dim light, his mouth opened wide and his jaw dropped much in the same posture that his brother's had a few moments before.

Mark shrieked again and Edgar's hand dropped from the door.

Mark cried, "*Ed!*"

Edgar looked more ghostly than ever. He stood and watched Mark, then put up his hands as if to bar the memory of those heart-rending shrieks.

"Don't you know me, *Ed!* *Ed*, don't you know me?" Mark cried.

"Don't!" cried Edgar, flinching. "Don't speak to me! How can you when I killed you? How can you?"

"Killed me?" Mark asked, mechanically. He rose at last.

Edgar stepped back onto the stone step. "Don't!" he cried, "don't!"

"Why, *Ed*, it's me, *Mark*," the boy called reassuringly. "Don't be afraid! Gosh! It's *me!*"

Edgar stepped out into the darkness as Mark stepped forward. Mark ran toward the door and Edgar ran just as fast into the night. There was no doubt left in the younger boy's mind that his brother had become deranged from his long exile. His emaciated body told the whole terrible tale.

Mark ran out and after the fleeing shadow. Every step he took brought some thought of what might have been. But Edgar was too weak to keep it up. He did not run more than a few feet before he turned again and hid behind the big elm tree.

Mark called after him, fearing to frighten him by going closer. He just called and called but no Edgar appeared. Finally the waiting boy gave it up and cautiously approached the tree.

"Now be sensible, *Ed*," he said, in as calm a voice as he could muster. "I'm alive and I'm real as can be. I want to help you—we all want to help you. And Larry isn't dead after all. Father's going to let you go to work—he isn't going to punish you! Do you hear?"

No sound was there to all these entreaties. Mark took a few steps nearer. Then he reached the tree, looked behind it and saw no sign of Edgar. Suddenly he heard a sound—the sound of pattering feet, running toward the lake. He turned around and saw his brother almost at the edge and making for the float.

"*Ed!*" he called. "Won't you listen? Won't you?"

Now his brother became a mere shadow standing on the float and as Mark hurried on to get to him he seemed to dissolve in space. He called, once, twice, but there was no answer and when he approached the float there was no sound save a tiny ripple of water from the murky looking lake.

Mark stood stark still and gave one last shout. He knew it was futile—he knew it seemed to mock all that had transpired in the last few minutes.

Perhaps it was all a dream, he thought. Perhaps he had not even seen Ed!

He stepped forward on the very edge of the float and looked down at the black, rippling water. Something scraped against his heel and as he pulled his foot away it gave a queer, metallic sound.

He stooped down wearily and picked it up and knew by the feel of it that it was a watch. Breathlessly he ran back into the lodge and held it under the light. His fingers trembled but he could see only too plainly that the initials on that cheap little time-piece were E. G.

Edgar was gone.

CHAPTER XXX

FACING THINGS

Tom and Lefty found Mark dry-eyed and smiling bravely when they came back at midnight. He had had it out with himself as he told them after the whole tragic affair had been related. He said that never again would he have to listen and wait for footsteps.

“I guess it all had to be,” he said, with a wisdom far beyond his years. “Don’t you think he wasn’t supposed to come across those signs or something?”

“That’s a question, Mark,” Tom answered. “He must have suffered.”

“But he isn’t suffering now,” Mark said, simply. “I’m glad I don’t have to worry about him any more. He sort of wouldn’t listen to me ever and yet I knew what he was doing would get him into trouble. That’s the way he was.”

“And he couldn’t seem to understand what you said about everything being all right, eh?” Tom asked.

“He didn’t seem to understand anything,” Mark answered. “All he said was that I shouldn’t speak to him because he had killed me.”

“It had become an obsession with him,” said Tom. “But don’t worry, kid, just try and face things. We’ll have to pass the word on now, I suppose.”

“Well, I can stand it now,” Mark said bravely and stood up, smiling. “Things have a funny way of happening sometimes, that’s all I can say. All I was worried about was that he was wandering all around without a decent place to sleep or a decent meal to eat.”

What Mark’s real feelings were no one has ever known. That he loved his weak, erring brother and would love his memory as well is evident. But he never spoke about the tragic affair after that night.

Tom always remembered, however, that he had never once heard Mark talk of his brother’s weaknesses except when he was going to bed that fateful night. He had said, “No matter what you hear about Ed, don’t believe that he really meant to do those things, will you, Mr. Slade?”

Tom promised he wouldn’t. “I only believe half of what I hear anyhow,” he said, laughingly.

“Well, it’s good you do,” said Mark, sagaciously. “The reason I told you that is because I sort of knew him better than anyone. I got to know that there was something wrong inside of this head. Do you believe that, Mr. Slade?”

Tom believed it. And I believe it too.

THE END

[The end of *Mark Gilmore—Scout of the Air* by Percy Keese Fitzhugh]