

FINNEMORE JOHN

THE WOLF PATROL: A
TALE OF
BADEN-POWELL'S BOY
SCOUTS

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John Finnemore

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CHAPTER I THE 'SLUG'

'Now for the Quay Flat!' said Arthur Graydon. 'I say, Dick Elliott, you cut ahead, and see if that crew out of Skinner's Hole are anywhere about! You other fellows, get some stones and keep 'em handy!'

A dozen day-boys from Bardon Grammar School were going home one Saturday midday after morning school. All of them lived in a suburb which lay beyond the shipping quarter of the river-port of Bardon, and their way to and from school ran across a wide open space beside the river known as Quay Flat.

Below Quay Flat, and packed closely along the edge of the river, was a huddle of small houses and cottages, where lived the poorer sort of riverside workers, a squalid, dirty region known as Skinner's Hole. It was so called because it lay very low, and because hides from abroad were landed there, and dealt with by three or four large tanneries.

Between the Grammar School boys who crossed Quay Flat and the boys of Skinner's Hole there was a constant feud. At times this bickering took the form of pitched battles fought out with sticks and stones. The boys of Bardon always called these encounters 'slugs,' and, if the truth be told, they were, one and all, very fond of a 'slug.' To carefully search the hedges for a handy stick, and then cut a ferocious knob out of the root end with your pocket-knife; above all, to cast leaden bullets and march forth with them and a catapult – these things were dear to the heart of a Bardon boy.

There were now threats of another 'slug' in the air, and the boys who had to cross Quay Flat had gathered to march home in a body. At the head of a lane running down to the open space, they had paused to make preparations for any enemy that might lie in their path, and Dick Elliott, as we have seen, was despatched ahead as a scout, to report signs of danger.

But there was already a scout at work on behalf of the enemy. Half-way down the lane a narrow alley ran in from the riverside, and in this alley one of the 'wharf-rats,' as the schoolboys called the lads of Skinner's Hole, was on the watch.

The wharf-rat was a short, skinny boy, very ragged and tattered, whom his friends called Chippy; and he was their captain and leader. At the corner of the alley was a small greengrocer's shop, and Chippy, lying flat along the stones on his stomach, had thrust his head round a box full of onions which had been set outside the door. From this cover he was keeping watch for the foe.

He saw them come into sight, saw them pause, and knew that they scented trouble ahead; for they began to search about for loose stones, and to kick shaky ones out of the road. Then he saw Dick Elliott sent ahead to reconnoitre.

Chippy looked over his shoulder, and measured the distance he would have to run down the alley before he could find cover. No go. If he ran, the scout of the other side would see him scuttling, and suspect something. Besides, Chippy was well known. He was a famous leader in this kind of warfare. So he curled himself up as round as a hedgehog, and lay hidden behind the box, with his eye at a crack.

He gave a little grunt to himself as he saw Dick Elliott look carefully along the alley before he went on down the lane. Chippy was glad he hadn't run; he would certainly have been seen. But as soon as Dick had passed, he was up and away down the alley at full speed. He made a couple of

turns along side-streets, and then Quay Flat lay before him. He put his fingers into his mouth and gave a long, shrill whistle. There was no answer, but Chippy was quite satisfied. He knew that his warriors would understand. From another carefully chosen spot he watched Dick Elliott come out on Quay Flat and look all about. But the braves of Skinner's Hole had caught their chief's whistle, and were lying hidden among piles of old cordage and rusty anchors which were heaped in one corner of the Flat. Dick ran back up the lane.

'I can't see anyone about,' he reported. 'The Flat looks as quiet as can be.'

'Come on!' said Arthur Graydon to the other boys. 'Keep together; and if the wharf-rats come out, we'll give 'em beans!'

The band of Grammar School boys gained the Flat, and struck out for the bridge which crossed the river and led to the suburb in which lay their homes.

All went quietly till they were well out in the open space, and then the wharf-rats set up a tremendous yell and darted from their ambush. A furious battle was started at once on the Flat. Stones flew like hail on both sides, and then the combatants came to close quarters, and the fray developed into a series of stand-up fights, with every boy yelling like mad.

'Slug 'em! slug 'em, Skinner's 'Ole!' howled the wharf-rats. 'Out 'em! Down 'em, Skinner's 'Ole!'

'Rally, School!' shouted Dick Elliott.

'Drive 'em into the river!' bellowed Arthur Graydon. The latter was fighting with a couple of heavy books buckled tightly into a long, stout strap, and he fetched a couple of his opponents down with swinging blows. Suddenly he was confronted with the rival chieftain, the redoubtable Chippy. Arthur swung his books at Chippy's head, but the latter was far too quick for so slowly delivered a stroke, and was inside his opponent's guard in a flash. Chippy's dirty fist was planted with stinging force in Arthur's right eye, and Arthur went over like a ninepin.

At the next instant Chippy and Dick Elliott were face to face, and Chippy, who was very handy with his fists found, for the first time, a foeman to be reckoned with. They had a sharp rally; then they closed, and Dick, who was a capital wrestler, threw his man with ease. Down went Chippy, and saw ten thousand and one stars, for the back of his head was brought up hard against the flags of the quay.

But while he was all abroad, half a dozen of his followers swarmed over Dick Elliott, and made the latter prisoner. The rest of the Grammar School boys had been driven off, but Dick was a captive.

'We've copped one!' roared a big red-haired lad. 'I'll tell yer what we'll do wi' him. Let's roll him i' the sludge!'

His comrades shouted joyful assent, and Dick, fighting like a tiger, but helpless in the hands of the wharf-rats, was dragged towards the river, where his captors intended to roll him in the deep mud left by the ebbing tide.

The band, with their struggling victim in their midst, were close upon the river before Chippy got to his feet, his head still singing from that shrewd crack.

'Wot's the game?' said Chippy in a husky whisper to himself. 'I see. I heerd Carrots say it 'ud be a good game to roll one on 'em in the sludge. But that's seven on 'em to one. That ain't good enough!' And he began to hurry after them.

'Wot cheer, mates!' he shouted in his hoarse tones. 'Old 'ard a bit! Lemme come up!'

But the victorious band were deaf to the calls of their leader, and at this instant they disappeared at a point where a sloping wharf ran from the quay edge into the river.

'Bring 'im along to the other end o' the wharf!' commanded the red-haired boy; 'then we'll chuck 'im bang into the mud, an' see 'im scrabble 'is way out!'

'Lemme go, you fellows!' yelled Dick, fighting with tooth and nail to wrench himself free; but there were too many for him, and Chippy, who loved fair play, and practised it, was too far behind. But, luckily for Dick, other help was at hand, or he would assuredly have been pitched straight into eighteen inches of foul black mud.

A boat had been pulled from a ship in mid-stream to the wharf, and a tall gentleman landed from it as Dick was dragged past the spot.

'What! you, Dick?' shouted the new-comer. 'What does this mean?' and, followed by the boatman, he made a dash at the group.

The wharf-rats threw down their captive and fled, and the gentleman picked Dick up.

'Thanks, Uncle Jim,' said Dick, puffing like a grampus. 'If you hadn't lent a hand, those wharf-rats would have tipped me over into the mud.'

'How did you fall into their hands?' asked his uncle.

'They've been a-sluggin', I shouldn't wonder,' remarked the boatman.

'That was it,' said Dick. 'There was a slug between our fellows and the wharf-rats out of Skinner's Hole, and they bagged me.'

His uncle nodded. He had been a Bardon boy in his time, and knew all about it. He paid the boatman, and away he and Dick went together, for his house was in the same road as Dick's home.

'They're a jolly sly lot, those wharf-rats,' said Dick, as they walked along. 'Our fellows sent me ahead as a scout, but I never saw a sign of them, and yet they were waiting for us on the Flat all the time.'

'Seems to me you weren't much of a success as a scout, Dick,' said his uncle, smiling.

'You're right there, Uncle Jim,' replied Dick, a broad grin on his honest, open face. 'I muffed it that time, and no mistake. Hallo, here's the bobby!'

The constable who had the Quay beat came hurrying along, looking red and angry.

'You 'ain't seen any o' them young varmint's wot have been a-sluggin', have ye, Mr. Elliott?' he cried to Dick's uncle.

'Yes; I've seen some of them, Cooper, but I'm afraid they're out of your reach by now,' replied the latter.

'I just wish I could get hold of 'em,' cried the indignant constable. 'I'd give 'em what for. Two windows 'ave they broke wi' their stones and their sluggin', an' one of 'em in the shop o' poor old Mrs. Dean. The old woman has hard enow work to make a livin' without rowdy young nippers a-smashin' her windows.'

'You're right, Cooper,' agreed Mr. Elliott.

'But I'll put a stop to it,' said the constable. 'I'll be on the spot here at such times as them Grammar School boys are crossin' the Flat. Then if any game gets started betwixt them and that lot out o' Skinner's Hole, I'll be ready for 'em.'

Mr. Elliott and Dick walked on, and the latter burst out impulsively:

'That's too bad, uncle, about the poor old woman. I'll send the hat round and make our fellows fork out, and we'll square it up to her for her broken window.'

'Good idea, old chap!' said Mr. Elliott. 'Here's half a crown for a start.'

Dick thanked his uncle, and pocketed the coin.

'Well, we were talking about your scouting,' went on Mr. Elliott.

'Oh!' grinned Dick. 'Don't rot me about that. I give it up. I missed my kick that time.'

'That's all right,' said his uncle; 'I don't want to poke fun at you. I was only going to suggest this. Why don't you go in for real scouting? Learn to play the game properly. It's a wonderful game if you tackle it seriously – splendid sport, and a thousand times more useful, and better fun, than this foolish slugging business.'

'Some of the fellows at school have been talking about scouting,' said Dick. 'They've got hold of Baden-Powell's book, and they were awfully interested when I told them that you were in Mafeking with B. – P.'

'Yes, and a fine tenderfoot I was at the start!' laughed his uncle. 'When B. – P. told the townsmen they'd got to lend a hand, I was like a good few more. I thought I'd pick up what was wanted in no time. But I found that a useful man in the firing-line isn't made in a hurry. What a time he had with

some of us fellows, who scarcely knew which end of a rifle to put to the shoulder!' And Mr. Elliott chuckled at the recollection.

'Have you read the first part of B. – P.'s book, Dick?' he asked in a moment.

'No,' replied Dick. 'I should like to uncommonly.'

'Here's a copy,' said Mr. Elliott, drawing the small paper-covered volume from his pocket. 'I bought it in London yesterday. Look it through, and if you and your chums like the idea of it, remember that I shall always be ready to lend you a hand if you wish to make a start.'

CHAPTER II

THE FOUNDING OF THE WOLF PATROL

On the next Monday evening Dick burst into his uncle's house like a whirlwind. Mr. Elliott was in his 'den,' reading the paper, and he looked up with a smile as the boy entered.

'Oh, uncle,' cried out Dick, 'can't we begin scouting at once? It's the jolliest thing I ever heard of, and all my chums think the same. We'd like to make up a patrol at once. And you said you'd lend us a hand, didn't you?'

'I did, Dick,' said his uncle, laying aside his paper. 'When is your next half-holiday?'

'We get Tuesdays, Thursdays, and Saturdays half-holidays in the week,' said Dick.

'All right,' said his uncle. 'I'll give you Thursday afternoons till you're on your own legs. Bring your men up here on Thursday afternoon at three.'

At the time named eight boys turned up, each with an eager look on his face, and a copy of the first part of 'Scouting for Boys,' which he had thumbed from end to end.

'Well, you're not scouts yet,' said Mr. Elliott to them, 'for you have to pass the tests, you know.'

'We've been at work on them already, uncle,' replied Dick. 'We can most of us do the first test – the knot-tying – and the last three are easy enough.'

'Very good,' said Mr. Elliott. 'Then I'll try you here on Tests 1, 4, and 6 – the knots, the laws and signs of scouts, and the Union Jack test.'

He took them in turn, and put everyone through his facings, and all came through in good shape.

'Now for Test 2,' said Mr. Elliott – 'to "track a deer's spoor, or describe a shop window." Which will you have?'

'The spoor! the spoor!' cried the boys.

'Then we'll go on to the heath,' said he.

Twenty minutes' walk brought them clear of the houses, and the road ran on through a great heath which stretched for several miles and was quite unenclosed. The party struck into a side-path, and soon gained a quiet spot. Here Mr. Elliott produced a pair of tracking-irons, which the boys examined with the most eager interest, and prepared to test the band one after another.

It was a capital place for the purpose, for clumps of gorse and holly were thickly scattered over the heath, affording excellent cover, and through these clumps the trainer would lay a track which each boy must follow for a quarter of a mile, and make the journey within fifteen minutes.

Five boys were successful, among these being Arthur Graydon and Dick Elliott. Three boys failed, not because their eyesight was poorer than that of the rest, but simply because they were unobservant, and did not pick up the trail quickly at one or two points where Mr. Elliott laid little traps for them, for he did not believe in making the test too easy.

'Well,' said Dick's uncle, 'five of you rank as second-class scouts now, and can make a beginning with a patrol; the other three will qualify next time, I expect.' And he took the failures in hand and showed them where they had slipped up in tracking his spoor. Mixed with instruction, he told them stories of the wonderful tracking he had seen performed in South Africa by both white men and natives, and the afternoon passed all too quickly for the deeply interested boys.

'What shall we call our patrol?' asked George Lee, one of the successful boys in passing the tests, as they walked home.

'I vote for Wolf!' cried Dick – 'the Wolf Patrol! That sounds jolly, I think.'

'Yes, we'll have that – the Wolf,' said Arthur Graydon.

'We must wait a little,' said Mr. Elliott, 'and see if any other patrols have been formed in Bardon. It won't do to clash, but I'll see about that.'

Mr. Elliott made inquiries, and found that though there was some talk of forming patrols here and there, yet not one was actually in existence in the neighbourhood. So Dick and his friends became 1st Bardon Troop, Wolf Patrol, and were very proud of that fact.

The Wolf Patrol now turned to with a will to convert themselves from second-class scouts into first-class. Arthur Graydon was chosen patrol leader, and Dick Elliott was the corporal. Whenever the Wolves met each other they gave the scouts' salute with great care, the rank and file receiving the secret sign in half-salute, while Arthur Graydon, as patrol-leader, was greeted with the full salute. Their pocket-money went like water for patrol flags, badges, crests, and tracking-irons, and every boy rigged himself up with khaki shorts and a khaki hat with broad brim, in proper scouts' style. Above all, they practised without ceasing the wolf's howl, which was the secret call of their patrol. Several of the Wolf Patrol lived quite near to each other, and at night they would go into their gardens, and scout would howl to scout in such mournful, long-drawn notes that peaceful, elderly gentlemen, reading the evening paper after dinner, rushed out to see if murder was being done somewhere.

CHAPTER III

CHIPPY HEARS OF NEW THINGS

One Saturday afternoon Chippy, the leader of the wharf-rats of Skinner's Hole, was crossing the heath on his way home. He had been with a message to a village some three miles from Bardon, and was taking a short cut over the heath, which he knew from side to side and corner to corner. Suddenly he stopped. He had heard a strange noise – a sound as of chanting or singing – and he wondered where it came from. In a moment he had fixed the place.

'That's in the old sand-'ole,' he muttered to himself, and he shuffled across the heath in his big, clumsy, hob-nailed boots towards the spot. In a couple of minutes he had wormed his way between two gorse-bushes growing at the edge of the deep hollow, and was looking with much interest at the sight beneath him.

It was the Wolf Patrol practising the scouts' war-dance. The old deserted sandpit made a splendid place for their patrol meetings for open-air work. They had come there that afternoon for practice in Test 12 – fire-laying and lighting, and cooking flour and potatoes without utensils. But, first of all, they were practising the war-dance. The strange words of the Scouts' Song floated up to Chippy's ears, but he could make nothing of them:

'Ingonyama – gonyama
Invooboo
Yah bobo! Yah bobo!
Invooboo.

But though Chippy did not understand the words, he understood that those fellows down there looked splendidly smart, and were having a fine time. He admired their uniform immensely; it looked so trim and neat compared with his own ragged garb. He admired their neat, quick movements as they stamped in unison with the words of the song, and moved round in a circle. The 'Ingonyama' chorus ended, and then the fire practice began. Chips and sticks were carefully piled, and a scout was allowed two matches to make a rousing fire of the gorse-stems and dried sticks to be found in the coppices on the heath. Then he went to work with his flour and potatoes.

Finally the patrol organized a hunt to finish the afternoon. George Lee was sent off on tracking-irons, and given ten minutes' start. When the time was up, the others went after him, and the sandpit was deserted. No one had observed Chippy, for the latter was a scout without knowing it, and had kept himself carefully hidden. He didn't know they were boy scouts, and on their honour to treat him and everyone else fairly; he only knew them as 'chaps we've slugged with,' as he put it to himself.

'Wot's the game, I wonder?' muttered Chippy to himself, as the last scout vanished behind a hazel thicket. 'Jolly good fun they're havin'. I should just like to know wot it all comes to.'

He slid down the side of the sandpit to examine the place where the scouts had built their fires, and soon was on the road to find out what it all meant. His sharp eyes, running over every mark the boys had left, saw something white in a long tuft of dried grass. He pounced upon it and picked it up. It was a book with a picture on the cover.

'Wot's this?' thought Chippy. 'A kid watchin' a ship round a rock. Wot for? "Scouting for Boys." Wot's inside?' He opened it at page 42, and at once recognized the scouts' uniform. 'Why, these chaps 'ad all got togs on like this,' said Chippy to himself. 'I'll bet this book's all about the game.'

He began to read, and was fascinated at once. Chippy talked badly because he had been brought up among people who talked badly, but he could read as well as any Grammar School boy, and had plenty of intelligence behind his freckled face to grasp what he read. He was deep in the little volume,

when he heard the patter of running feet behind him. He turned, and saw Dick Elliott coming up to him. They knew each other at once.

'Hallo!' said Dick. 'It looks as if you'd found my book. I felt sure I had dropped it here.'

'Yus, I found it,' replied Chippy. 'It wor' in that 'ere patch o' stuff, an' I picked it up. I've bin a-lookin' at it.'

'That's all right,' said Dick cheerfully. 'You won't hurt it.'

Chippy had rather expected that Dick would take a scornful tone to him, as most of the Grammar School boys did to the wharf-rats. He did not know that Dick was in honour bound to obey Scout Law No. 5, and be courteous to all whom he met. But Dick's friendly voice encouraged Chippy to speak out something which he had on his mind.

'Look 'ere,' said Chippy, 'I ain't in wi' that crowd as tried to chuck yer into the mud t'other day. That ain't playin' the game.'

'Well, you certainly didn't help 'em,' replied Dick, with a merry grin.

'No,' agreed Chippy. 'I was outed that time, proper. Lor! my 'ead sung for 'alf a day! But it was Carrots as put 'em up to that mud game, an' I've booted 'im out o' the crowd. As long as I'm a-runnin' the show, I'll slug wi' anybody ye like, but I'll slug fair. Here's yer book.'

There was a touch of reluctance in Chippy's manner, which did not escape Dick's quick eye.

'Have you read some of it?' asked Dick.

'Yus; I read quite a bit,' replied Chippy.

'How did you like it?'

'Oh, it's pross!' returned Chippy in his deepest, hoarsest note.

'All right,' laughed Dick. 'Take the book and keep it.'

'D'yer mean it?' cried Chippy eagerly.

'Of course I do,' answered Dick. 'Tuck it into your pocket. I can easily get another. Well, I must be on, or I shall never catch our fellows up. Good afternoon!' And away he went, leaving Chippy to growl hearty thanks after him.

Chippy walked slowly home, his eyes glued to page after page. The little book went straight to Chippy's heart. The wharf-rat felt all the delightful romance attached to being a boy scout as keenly as any member of the Wolf Patrol, and his mind was made up swiftly.

'This 'ere's a long sight ahead o' sluggin',' he reflected. 'It's chock-full o' good fun all the time. I'll turn my crowd into a patrol, blest if I don't!'

He made a beginning that night. He begged a candle-end from his mother, and gathered his followers into a corner of an old deserted storehouse on the quay, and read and explained, and so filled them with his own enthusiasm that each was resolved to become a boy scout, or perish in the attempt.

CHAPTER IV

THE NEW SCOUT

Three weeks later the Wolf Patrol, again on a Saturday afternoon, were busy in their beloved headquarters. They had flattened out a tracking patch fifteen yards square. Dick had brought his bicycle, and the Wolves were studying walking, running, and cycling tracks across their patch, when they were joined by a stranger.

The first to see the new-comer was Billy Seton; the rest were bending over the tracks which Dick's bicycle had just made. The new-comer promptly gave Billy the half-salute, and Billy returned it, and put out his left hand, which the stranger shook in grave fashion.

Billy had done this because the new-comer made the secret sign which showed that he was a brother scout; but, at the same time, Billy was full of astonishment at the odd figure before him. It was Chippy, and Chippy had been doing his best to provide himself with some sort of scout's rig, in the shape of shorts, hat, and boots. His shorts were rather on the queer side. He had only one pair of ragged trousers, and he did not dare to cut them down, or he would have had nothing for general wear, so he had obtained an old pair of corduroys from a bricklayer who lived next door. The bricklayer was a bird-fancier, and Chippy had paid for the corduroys by fetching a big bag of nice sharp sand from the heath to strew on the floors of the cages.

Chippy was no tailor, so he had simply sawn off the legs to such a length as would clear his knees, and left it at that. The waist would have gone round him at least twice, so Chippy laid it over in folds, and lashed all tight with a piece of tarry string.

His hat was an old felt one of his mother's. It was the nearest thing he could rake up to a scout's broad brim, and he had hammered the edge with a big stone to make it lie flat; but it would curl up a little, and it looked almost as odd as the capacious trousers in which he was swallowed. His boots were borrowed from his mother also. His ordinary boots, heavy and clumsy, with hobnails as big as peanuts, seemed to him very ill-suited for the soft, swift, noiseless tread of a scout, so he had replaced them with an old pair of elastic-side boots intended for female wear. The elastics were clean gone, and his feet would have come out at every step had not, luckily, the tabs remained. These he had lashed together, fore and aft, round his ankle, for, being a riverside boy, he was very handy with string.

The toes were the worst bother. His mother was a long-footed woman, and the toes of the boots sailed ahead of Chippy's feet, and turned up, after the style of the boots of the Middle Ages, as depicted in history-books, and went flip-flop-flap before him as he walked. And so Chippy had come to visit the Wolf Patrol as a friend and a brother.

'Hallo! who's this?' cried Arthur Graydon, looking up from the tracking-patch.

The others looked up, too, and some of the boys raised a great shout of laughter.

'What do you want here?' went on Arthur, stepping forward, patrol flag in hand.

The flag told Chippy that he stood in presence of the patrol-leader, and he gave the full salute. But Arthur did not return it.

'Who are you?' demanded Arthur.

'My name's Slynn,' replied the other. 'They gen'ly call me Chippy.'

He announced himself in his usual husky notes. It seemed as if Chippy was bothered with a perpetual cold, which had settled in his throat. Perhaps it came from living in the continual damp of Skinner's Hole.

'And what do you want here?' went on Arthur.

'I come over wi' a little challenge,' growled Chippy. 'Our patrol 'ud like to have a fren'ly try wi' yourn, at any sort o' scoutin' ye like.'

'Patrol!' cried Arthur in astonishment. 'What's a rum-looking beggar like you got to do with a patrol? What patrol?'

'Raven Patrol o' Skinner's 'Ole,' announced Chippy.

The Wolves received this with a shout of laughter, but Chippy remained as solemn as a judge.

'I like that,' said Arthur. 'Do you suppose anyone will take notice of a patrol you wharf-rats would set up? Why, I know you now! You're the fellow that blacked my eye the other week, confound you! It's like your cheek to come here! You'd better clear out of this!'

'Well,' replied Chippy, 'wot if I did black yer eye? I did it fair and square. I stood straight up to yer. Ye'd a-blacked mine if yer could! Wot yer grousin' about?'

'Oh, shut up and clear out!' said Arthur impatiently. 'What's the use of coming here and talking about a patrol of wharf-rats? Where's your patrol-leader?'

"Ere 'e is!"

And Chippy tapped his breast.

'Oh, you're patrol-leader, are you?' returned Arthur 'Where's your patrol-flag?'

"Ain't got none!" replied Chippy in laconic fashion.

'Where's your badge?'

"Ain't got none.'

'Where's your shoulder knot?'

"Ain't got none.'

'Where's your lanyard and whistle?'

"Ain't got none.'

'You're a fine lot to call yourselves the Raven Patrol!' cried Arthur jeeringly. 'What have you got, I'd like to know?'

Chippy looked him straight in the eye.

'The mind to run straight an' play fair,' he said. 'Ow's that for bein' good enough?'

'Pooh!' said Arthur. 'A patrol of scouts must be turned out properly. That's the first thing.'

'I dunno about that,' growled Chippy, and drew a very dirty and well-thumbed book from the inner pocket of his ragged jacket. 'I bin a-goin' by what the cove says as writ this 'ere book – B. – P.'

'You can't teach me much about that book!' said Arthur loftily. 'I know it from end to end.'

'Well, I bin through it about ten times, I shouldn't wonder,' huskily murmured Chippy, 'an' I've got it all wrong if 'e don't say as to run straight an' play fair is just about all there is to it.'

Chippy began to turn over the leaves, and there was silence for a moment. The patrol had left everything to their leader. No one else said a word. But Dick Elliott felt interested above all. He knew that this was his doing. It was he who had really started the Raven Patrol by giving the book to Chippy Slynn.

The latter looked up quietly. He had found the place he wanted.

'I can't teach yer much out o' this 'ere book, eh?' he said. 'I can teach yer "Scout Law No. 4."' And Chippy read in a loud voice: "'A scout is a friend to all, and a brother to every other scout, no matter to which social class the other belongs.'"

'Wait a bit!' said Arthur. 'You think you're very sharp, but how do I know you're a scout?'

'Page forty-two,' said Chippy, who certainly knew the text-book very thoroughly. 'See it? I gi'ed yer the signal.'

'And then you show your badge!' cried Arthur triumphantly. 'Now, where's your badge, wharf-rat?'

For a moment Chippy looked stumped. Then he recovered himself and read out: "'Or proves that he is a scout,'" and scratched his jaw and looked hopeful again.

'Yes; but how are you going to prove it?' said Arthur. 'You can't prove it! Clear out, and don't waste any more of our time!'

'Yus, I can prove it!' replied Chippy. 'Try me! I'll let yer 'unt me, if yer like. If yer cop me, yer can call me no scout!'

'That's a fair offer, Arthur,' said Dick quietly.

And two or three of the patrol expressed the same feeling.

'Oh, rubbish!' cried Arthur impatiently. 'I'm patrol-leader, and I give orders. I don't mean to go shuffling over the heath after a chap like that!'

Chippy's sharp eye fell on Arthur's necktie. It was hanging outside his waistcoat, with a knot in the end of it. Every boy scout has to do one good turn a day, and the knot is to remind him of that duty.

'Look 'ere,' he said, 'the knot ain't out o' yer necktie yet! Now's yer chance for a good turn. Lemme prove it.'

Everyone had to laugh at this clever twist of the argument, and Billy Seton murmured:

'I'm hanged if this chap is any sort of a fool! Come, Arthur, give him a show! It'll be great fun, anyway. We're tired of hunting each other. Perhaps he'll give us a merry little run.'

'Well,' said Arthur, 'if you fellows are keen on it, I won't stand in your way. Seems to me a pretty poor sort of game. Still, it will do to choke him off with as well as another.'

CHAPTER V

THE CHOKING-OFF OF CHIPPY

'We'll make a man-hunt of it,' said Billy Seton. 'I suggest that somebody lends him a pair of tracking-irons, and we give him a quarter of an hour's start. When we come up to him we'll fire at him with tennis-balls, as usual. If we hit him three times, he's dead. If he hits one of us first, that man's dead, and out of the hunt.'

'Righto!' said Chippy. 'I've studied them rules. I'm ready.'

'And I'll lend the tracking-irons,' cried Dick Elliott.

Chippy put on the tracking-irons with immense pride and delight. He had wondered so much what these things were, and to fasten a pair on his feet, and to make tracks with them for a real patrol to pursue him – it was simply great.

'Wait a bit!' said George Lee. 'We've got our tennis-balls to fire at him; but how is he going to fire at us?'

'That's all right,' said Chippy. 'We've played that game. I've got mine 'ere.'

He dived a hand into one of his wide-spreading pockets, and brought out a ball.

'That isn't a tennis-ball,' said Arthur scornfully.

It was not. Chippy's funds did not run to tennis-balls. It was a bottle-cork wrapped up in pieces of rag, and whipped into shape with string.

'I'll tek my chance wi' it,' said Chippy calmly, and prepared to start.

The patrol laughed as he scuttled out of the pit, and Dick stood with watch in hand to give him the proper law.

'He's a rum-looking beggar!' said Billy Seton, 'but I'll be hanged if he isn't wide-o. And I reckon he stood it uncommonly well, the way you jawed him, Arthur. He didn't get a bit raggy; he just hung on to his chance of showing himself to be a boy scout.'

'Pooh!' said Arthur. 'This is turning the whole thing into piffle. You fellows seemed to want to chivvy him, so I agreed just for the joke. But it isn't likely that we shall recognise wharf-rats as brother scouts!'

'Not likely!' cried No. 6, whose name was Reggie Parr; but the others said nothing.

When time was up, away went the Wolf Patrol on the tracks which Chippy Slynn had made, and for some distance they followed them at an easy trot, for Chippy had posted straight ahead over grassy or sandy land, on which the irons left clear traces. But within a mile and a half of the sandpit the track was lost.

Arthur Graydon drove in his patrol-flag beside the last marks which could be found, and ordered his scouts to separate and swing round in a wide circle until the line was picked up again.

The tracks had ended beside the wide high-road which crossed the heath, and half the patrol took one side of the road and half the other. Within three minutes Dick Elliott raised the wild howl which was their patrol-call, and everyone rushed towards him. He had found the trail. It was on the further side of the high-road, and ran straight ahead beside it, and on raced the Wolves along the tracks.

Chippy had observed how clear a trail he left, and when he came to the high-road, he thought it was about time to throw his pursuers out a little, for they could travel much faster than he could go in the tracking-irons. So at the edge of the high-road down went his head and up went his feet, and he walked across the smooth hard road on his hands, leaving no trace, or such a trace as the Wolf Patrol were not yet clever enough to pick up. With the tracking-irons safely hoisted in the air, he went quite thirty yards before he turned himself right side up again, and scuttled off. He went another mile, and practised the same manoeuvre once more, and then he crept very warily forward,

for the land was rising to a ridge. Unless he crossed this ridge with the utmost caution the boys behind him on the heath would see his figure against the sky-line. He marked a place where the ridge was crowned with gorse-bushes, and through these he wriggled his way, receiving a hundred scratches, but troubling nothing about that.

On the other side the ridge went down even more steeply than by the slope which Chippy had just ascended, and up this farther side a huge waggon, drawn by four powerful horses, was slowly making its way.

As soon as Chippy saw the waggon an idea popped into his mind, and he hurried forward to meet the great vehicle. He kept among the bushes so that the driver did not see him. The latter, indeed, from his high perch, was too busy cracking his whip over his team to urge them to the ascent to see that small, gliding figure slipping through the gorse. So Chippy dodged behind the waggon, swung himself up by the tail-board, and climbed in as nimbly as a cat. The forepart of the waggon was full of sacks of meal, and a heap of empty sacks lay against the tail-board. In a trice he had hidden himself under the empty sacks, and lay there without making sign or sound.

The waggon rolled on over the ridge, and soon Chippy heard the long-drawn note of a Wolf's howl. He knew the patrol was now near at hand, but he lay quite still, and peered out at the side of the tail-board, for the latter was hanging a little back.

At the next moment he was being carried clean through the lines of the Wolf Patrol. They had separated, and had been searching busily at the second place where he had thrown them off. Not one glanced at the familiar sight of a big waggon rolling back to the town, for as it passed, Billy Seton raised the patrol call to tell his companions that he had found the trail. All rushed towards him to resume the hunt, and away they went.

As soon as they were out of sight up jumped Chippy, swung himself over the tail-board, and dropped into the road. He dived at once into the bushes which bordered the way, and the waggoner never knew that he had given anyone a lift. Now Chippy set himself to track the trackers. He followed them up as fast as he could go, taking advantage of every patch of cover, and holding his ball in his hand ready to fire.

He saw the first Wolf at the foot of the ridge; this was Billy Seton. The track had again been lost on a hard, stony patch where Chippy had stepped very lightly and carefully. The Wolves had separated, and Billy became an easy prey. He was bending down, carefully examining every twig, every inch of soft soil, when something hit him on the right ear and dropped to the ground. For a moment Billy stared in wonder at the queer rag-ball; then the truth broke upon him – he had been knocked out. He was no longer a pursuer; he was dead.

He looked up, and saw Chippy's queer old felt hat poked out of a bramble thicket some eight yards away.

'Got yer,' murmured Chippy in his husky whisper. 'Don't gie me away!'

Billy checked the exclamation which was rising to his lips, for he saw at once how unfair it would be to betray Chippy's presence. He approached the bush, and tossed the rag ball back.

'All right,' he said quietly. 'I'll go to the rear; I'm done for.'

'Thanks; you're a straight un,' returned Chippy, and sank into the depths of the bramble thicket and crawled on like a snake.

The next Wolves he saw were running in a pair – Nos. 7 and 8. They had their heads together over a mark, and were debating what it meant, if it did mean anything. It was a long shot, but Chippy did not hesitate. He took a ball in each hand and hung for a second on his aim. He was a first-rate thrower.

It was a favourite sport in Skinner's Hole to cork an empty bottle, toss it far out into the river, and give each player three shots to knock the neck off. Chippy was an easy winner at this game, and when a thrower can hit the neck of a bottle dancing along with the stream he isn't going to miss a boy.

'Hallo!' said No. 7, as something took him in the neck. No. 8 turned to see what was the matter, and pop went a ball into his eye. A felt hat rose from behind a neighbouring bush, and a finger beckoned.

'Why, it's the wharf-rat,' said No. 7. 'He's got us!'

They surrendered at once, for they could do no less, and Chippy sent them to the rear, and crept on in search of fresh victims.

Suddenly he saw a patrol flag fluttering. Ah! that was the leader who had bullyragged him. Chippy's heart gave a leap. If only he could bag the proud leader, and show him that a scout could come out of Skinner's Hole! That would be splendid. And Chippy went down flat on his face and wriggled forward to work his way within firing distance.

CHAPTER VI

CHIPPY CHOPS THEM UP

Nearer and nearer crept Chippy to the vainglorious patrol-leader who had spoken so scornfully of his ambition to become a boy scout.

Arthur Graydon was on the other side of a small open space, and Chippy paused and peered from behind a holly-bush to see what chance there was of a surprise shot. He waited a moment, and the chance that came was excellent.

Arthur had just struck on the trail again. He threw back his head and opened his mouth to its widest, and let out a tremendous howl to call his patrol together from their wanderings. Suddenly his howl was interrupted. Taking a most careful aim, Chippy let fly at the wide-open mouth, and put the ball fairly on the mark.

Arthur spluttered with rage. He thought that one of his patrol was having a lark with him.

'What's that game?' he yelled. 'Who's playing the fool?'

He looked angrily round, but his face became a picture of surprise when Chippy walked quietly up to him and remarked:

'Yer outed. Step back wi' th' others I've a-took prisoners.'

'Where have you come from?' roared Arthur.

'Never mind,' returned Chippy, picking up his ball: 'that's my business, I should fancy. I've got yer, and that's enough for now.'

There was a crashing through the bushes at a short distance away, and Dick Elliott burst into the open. He saw Chippy, and it was an instant duel. Dick fired first, but Chippy leapt aside as nimbly as a goat, and the ball flew wide. Chippy feinted to throw, and Dick jumped. Before he could move again, Chippy let fly and struck him on the arm.

'I'm done for,' said Dick, and came forward to pick up his ball. Chippy vanished into a clump of gorse, for the remaining members of the patrol were running towards the place, and all three had seen him.

The five who had been put out of the hunt gathered together, and watched the three effective fighters, who now began to beat the surrounding gorse in search of Chippy's hiding-place.

George Lee, Reggie Parr, and a comrade named Harry Maurice were left in the pursuit, and they went very warily to work to seize this wily bird.

Reggie Parr was creeping down a narrow alley between the gorse, when he saw something which pulled him up at once. He dropped flat, and signalled to George Lee, who was behind him, to come up.

'I can see him. I know where he is,' whispered Reggie eagerly when George was at his side. 'Lift your head very carefully and take a look at a big blackthorn-bush just ahead.'

George did so; and there, sure enough, was Chippy's queer old felt hat, with his rather pale face under it.

'We'll rush him from three sides at once. One of us is sure to get him that way,' whispered Reggie.

George nodded, and crept away to take up his position, while Reggie slipped off to find Harry Maurice and place him for his share in the attack. The signal for the charge was the cry of the patrol.

When all was ready, Reggie gave one howl, then the three scouts darted from their hiding-places, and bore down at full-speed on the little covert where Chippy's hat was still to be seen through a thin place in the blackthorn-bush.

But they burst into the covert, to find it quite empty. No Chippy was there, only his old hat cleverly arranged on a stick as if he were crouching behind the bush. And while they stared at the

hat and each other, there came a swift fusillade of balls from an ambush a dozen yards away. Chippy had three balls, and every one hit its man.

'Got yer,' grunted Chippy in a tone of deep satisfaction, and crawled out of a patch of tall dried bracken, and came forward to fetch his hat.

'Well, by Jingo! That's an artful touch,' cried Reggie Parr. 'Why, I saw you. I saw your face plainly.'

'I know yer did,' replied Chippy, with a cheerful grin. 'I meant yer to. As soon as I wor sure yer'd seen my face, I rigged up th' ole 'at an' 'ooked it.'

At the sound of their voices in conversation the other five scouts came racing towards them. Dick Elliott was leading.

'How goes it?' cried Dick. 'Have you bagged him?'

'Not a bit of it,' replied George Lee. 'It's the other way about. He's bagged us.'

'Oh, Jerusha!' cried Billy Seton. 'The whole patrol! He's a scout and a half, this one.'

For the most part the patrol took their defeat with the utmost good humour, but Arthur Graydon's face wore a dark and angry look. This look deepened as Dick chuckled:

'Well, Arthur, not much choking him off about this. Our friend from the Raven Patrol seems to be doing the choking. There's nothing left for us to do but smile and whistle, according to Scout Law No. 8.'

'Look here,' said Arthur sharply to Chippy, who was smiling on the Wolves with a most amicable air; 'what do you mean by turning up behind us? We expected you to be in front.'

'Well, I dunno,' replied Chippy. 'Seems to me a scout 'adn't ought to expec' nothin'. He ought to be ready for wot may turn up – front, back, or anywheer else. That's 'ow I read the book.'

He dived into an inner pocket and fetched out Part II. The Raven Patrol had purchased it by putting together a halfpenny each, and Chippy was the custodian.

'Page 81,' read out Chippy. "'A scout must not only look to his front, but also to either side, and behind him; he must have 'eyes at the back of his head,' as the saying is." Now,' went on Chippy, 'that's 'IMSELF. Wot about it?'

Arthur had no answer to this home thrust. He turned to another point.

'How did you get behind us?'

'Me?' replied Chippy – 'I come clean through the line.'

'Oh, nonsense!' cried two or three boys. 'We were watching on each side and in front too closely for that.'

Chippy grinned. 'Yer worn't watchin' close enough to see wot wor in the waggon from Bland's Mill,' he remarked.

'You were in the waggon?' cried Billy Seton. Chippy nodded, and went on to explain.

'But at that rate,' said Arthur, 'you abandoned your duty of laying a track.'

'Well,' said Chippy, 'there's plenty o' track now. I've bagged the lot of yer long afore the track's finished. I reckon I'm in my rights theer.'

'Yes,' said Dick; 'there's a good deal in that. In my opinion it was a jolly smart bit of work.'

'Rather,' cried Billy Seton; and he began to sing the Scout's Song: 'Ingonyama' (He is a lion); and Dick responded with the 'Invooboo' chorus (Yes; he is better than that: he is a hippopotamus).

But Arthur Graydon's angry voice struck in: 'Stop that fooling, Seton and Elliott,' he said. Then he went on: 'Wolf Patrol, you will at once return to the sand-pit and then home. March!'

The patrol fell in at once, for orders must be obeyed instantly, and without question.

'Wot about my challenge now?' cried Chippy.

'The Wolf Patrol refuses to receive any challenge from you,' replied Arthur shortly. 'We're not going to have anything to do with a set of grubby bounders out of Skinner's Hole.'

He ordered his men forward, and was at once obeyed. Chippy had already given up the tracking-irons, and away went the patrol for the sandpit to fetch Dick's bicycle, which had been carefully hidden there.

Chippy watched them go with a sore heart. He had felt certain that he would be recognised as a brother scout, after capturing the whole patrol. But it seemed that he was not to be, and his bitterness found vent in speech.

'Fine ol' patrol, yo' are!' he called after them. 'I'll lay a bit as B. – P. wouldn't be any too proud of yer if he knowed about it. Ye've got too much edge on yer. Smart togs ain't everythink.'

Chippy's speech, all things considered, was very natural, but in the main it was undeserved, as we shall soon see.

CHAPTER VII

THE PATROL DECIDES

The Wolf Patrol were to meet Mr. Elliott the next Thursday afternoon. If the day should be fine they were to practise tracking tests on the heath; if wet, it was to be Kim's game in Mr. Elliott's study.

The day turned out one of pouring rain, and at three o'clock the Wolf Patrol had gathered in Mr. Elliott's room, where a tray of small articles, covered by a handkerchief, lay on a side-table.

'We'll begin with Kim's game,' said Mr. Elliott, 'and I'll be umpire. On that tray I have put twenty-five small articles, all different – a button, a pin, a stud, a ring, and so on. I shall give you each a pencil and a card, and I shall allow every boy one minute to study the tray. Then he will go away and write down every article that he can remember. The card with the longest list, of course, wins.'

He was about to give out the cards and pencils, when Billy Seton spoke up.

'Mr. Elliott,' he said, 'there's another matter that two or three of us would like you to umpire upon before we begin this game.'

'What is it, Billy?' said the instructor.

Billy told the story of Chippy's challenge, of his capture of the patrol, and told it fairly. 'We left him standing there,' concluded Billy, 'and I didn't like it, and I found that some of the other fellows didn't like it; but we had the order to march, and we had to go; that's Scout Law No. 7. But the same law says that we can reason about an order if we don't think it's fair, and I don't think that was fair.'

'What does the patrol-leader say?' said Mr. Elliott, turning to Arthur Graydon.

'I gave the order to march because it seemed to me the thing was too silly from beginning to end,' cried Arthur. 'I'm not going to scout about with a parcel of dirty, ragged wharf-rats. I think we should look a lot of idiots if we did.'

'Now, Mr. Elliott,' said Billy, 'what do you say?'

'Not a word, Billy,' replied Mr. Elliott quietly. 'Not a syllable. This is a thing for the patrol to decide for themselves.'

There was a short silence, then Billy murmured gently:

'What do you think, Mr. Elliott, that B. – P. would say if he was here?'

Mr. Elliott smiled, and shook his head. He was not to be drawn that way.

'I'll tell you this much, Billy,' he remarked, 'that I think he would do exactly as I am doing – leave it to the patrol. The very foundation of the thing, you know, is to teach you to stand on your own legs.'

'Why not vote upon the question?' suggested Dick Elliott; and the idea was received with a burst of applause.

'Yes,' said Mr. Elliott, 'that's a good plan. Hold a secret ballot, so that every member of the patrol may feel quite free to express his real feelings. We can soon arrange that.'

He took a sheet of plain foolscap from his writing-table, and carefully divided it into eight equal pieces, and gave each boy a piece. From the mantelshelf he took a tall china vase, and placed that on the writing-table.

'Now,' said he, 'I propose that each of you shall go out in turn to the hall table. There you will mark your papers. A circle means that the voter is willing to meet the boys from Skinner's Hole in friendly contest; a cross means that he is not willing. When a paper is marked it will be folded across the middle with the mark inside, brought back, and dropped into the vase. In that way the ballot will be perfectly secret, and you may freely express your feelings.'

There was deep silence as the boys voted in turn according to their patrol numbers. The party in the study kept their backs to the writing-table, so that a voter was not even seen to drop his paper in, and within five minutes the eight votes were in the vase which served as ballot-box.

The boys looked on eagerly as Mr. Elliott fetched the vase after No. 8 had voted and returned to the group of his comrades.

'First of all,' said Mr. Elliott, 'I shall shake the vase well, so that the papers may be thoroughly mixed up.'

He did so, then held the vase upside down, and the papers fell out. He opened them one after the other. There were six circles and two crosses. It was an immense majority in favour of Chippy's challenge.

'Six to two,' announced Mr. Elliott. 'The Wolf Patrol is willing to meet the Ravens from Skinner's Hole.'

'Then they'll meet them without me!' burst out Arthur Graydon, his face scarlet with rage, for he had quite expected to carry the patrol with him. 'I shan't be patrol-leader any longer!'

He whipped off his badge and flung it on the table, and was gone before anyone could stop him or remonstrate with him. He snatched his cap from the stand in the hall, and was out of the house in a flash. The Wolf Patrol had lost their leader!

'That's Arthur all over,' murmured Billy Seton. 'He's frightfully shirty. But I didn't think he'd hook it.'

'Oh, he'll think better of it when he's cooler,' said Mr. Elliott. 'We'll get on with our game. But I'll say that I'm quite with you in your decision.'

'Half a minute, please,' said Reggie Parr, flushing to the roots of his hair. 'I'm going to come out into the open. The other cross was mine. But I don't want to leave the patrol.'

'You needn't leave it, old man,' cried Billy Seton. 'We should be jolly sorry to lose you.'

'I'll run with the rest,' jerked out Reggie. 'But I shouldn't like to stop and keep quiet about the cross.'

'It's forgiven! It's forgotten! Come to my arms!' sang out Billy, and pretended to embrace his comrade as a lost sheep returning to the fold. This caused much laughter, and the Wolf Patrol, save for their lost leader, were completely reunited, and plunged into Kim's game with great earnestness.

CHAPTER VIII

THE PATROL-LEADERS

A few days later Dick Elliott was standing outside a shop in Bardon High Street waiting for his sister, who was inside. He was on his way to a party, and so was dressed in full fig, a thing he hated very much, but had to put up with on such occasions.

Presently a second boy came along the pavement towards him. It was Chippy, with a big bundle under his right arm. Chippy looked at the smart figure staring into the shop-window, and recognised it.

'One o' them Wolf toffs,' thought Chippy. 'I wish I'd a chance to slug 'im now. I'd soon knock 'is top-'at in the gutter.'

The vengeful Chippy was staring at Dick's glossy silk hat and irreproachable gloves, when Dick looked up straight into the other boy's face. At the next moment Chippy was taken utterly aback, for Dick stepped forward and gave him the full salute. Chippy could scarcely believe his own eyes when he thus received the honours of a patrol-leader.

But he tucked his bundle between his legs, for the pavement was dirty, returned the salute, and proffered his left hand.

'Wot cheer, brother!' murmured Chippy in his husky whisper, for he could think of no more appropriate salutation.

'Oh, I'm all right,' said Dick. 'How are the Ravens getting on?'

'Peggin' away,' returned Chippy. 'We done most o' the things out o' them books.'

'Ah!' said Dick. 'Now about that challenge. When would you like to try a friendly turn against us?'

'Any Sat'day artemoon,' cried Chippy eagerly. 'Yer would meet us, then? Yer leader ain't agin us now?'

'Well, it isn't the same leader,' replied Dick. 'The leader you saw has left us. We tried to get him to come back, but he wouldn't come. I'm the leader now.'

'Good, good!' said Chippy gleefully. 'Wot about nex' Sat'day at three, up at yer sandpit?'

'Yes, I think I can arrange for that,' returned Dick.

'We'll be there, an' proud to come,' said Chippy, whose face shone again with pride and satisfaction. 'An' we'll put up the best we know to gie yer a good practice.'

'We shall get all the practice we want if there are a few more like you among the Ravens,' laughed Dick.

'A bit of luck,' said Chippy modestly, 'that wor all. Well, I must get on. I'm in a job now, an' goin' on an errand. An' when yer at work, there's Law 2 to reckon with – playin' a straight game wi' yer boss.' So the patrol-leaders gave each other the full salute, and each went their way, for Dick's sister was now waiting for him.

'Who's your friend, Dick?' asked his sister. 'He looks like a ragged errand-boy.'

'That's just what he is,' replied Dick; 'but he is also a brother scout, and so I was doing the civil.'

'Good gracious!' said his sister. 'I didn't know boys like that were in it.'

'They run in all shapes,' replied Dick, 'as long as they run straight.'

CHAPTER IX

THE WOLVES AND THE RAVENS

On the next Saturday afternoon, accordingly, the Wolf and Raven Patrols fraternized in the old sandpit on the heath, and Mr. Elliott attended as umpire. The boys were far from being strangers to each other, for they had often met before in a slugging match, but all such foolish old feuds were laid aside, and they prepared eagerly for a friendly struggle in this most fascinating sport of scouting.

'Now, Slynn,' said Mr. Elliott to the leader of the Ravens, 'as your scouts are the visitors, I think you ought to have the choice of the game at which to challenge the Wolf Patrol.'

'Well, sir,' said Chippy, 'wot about "Scout meets Scout"? I think that 'ud suit us, if it 'ud suit the Wolves.'

'Yes,' said Mr. Elliott, 'that would give you some good fun. And, as it happens, that is a game I have been thinking over. I believe you would enjoy it better still if you combined it with hunting. You've all got a ball apiece, haven't you?'

Yes, everybody had a ball of some sort, and all were listening eagerly to the instructor. Mr. Elliott drew a small parcel from his pocket, and opened it. Inside there were sixteen little flags – eight yellow and eight black.

'You see, I am prepared with your patrol colours,' he said. 'The truth is, I was intending to suggest this game myself as one to be taken. Now, let every scout fix a flag in his hat.'

The Wolves took the yellow, and the Ravens took the black, and the flags were fixed.

'The next thing,' said Mr. Elliott, 'is full trot for the Beacon;' and away they all went.

The Beacon was a small hill which rose sharply from the heath, and stood quite alone. It was not very high, perhaps a hundred feet, but from the top you could see far over the heath on every side. In old days a beacon-fire had been lighted on it to warn or arouse the country in times of danger; a fire had burned there when the Spanish Armada came.

The scouts swarmed up the side, and raced each other to the top. Then they gathered once more about the umpire.

'Now,' said Mr. Elliott, 'here's my idea of "Scout meets Scout." The Wolves will go to that patch of burnt gorse which is about half a mile east of the Beacon. The Ravens will go to that big oak which is about half a mile west. Those are the boundaries, and no one must pass them. North and south the land becomes open quite close to us, and nobody may go out there. It isn't likely he would wish to, for he would be seen at once. When I blow my whistle, the two sides will begin to work towards each other, and the hunt opens. The scout who strikes an enemy with his ball captures that enemy's flag. The flag is handed over, and the beaten scout comes up at once to report to me on the Beacon. He is dead, and will leave the contest. That patrol wins which finally captures the whole of the flags belonging to the other patrol.'

'But, Mr. Elliott, suppose you hit a man who has already taken two or three flags belonging to your own side, what then!' asked Billy Seton.

'He gives up everything,' replied the instructor, 'both his own flag and those he has taken. You see, it's a fight to a finish. The last man will simply collect the whole of the flags. The patrol with the finest scout is bound to win, and it gives everybody first-rate practice. There are heaps of hiding-places, and you may employ any means to decoy or deceive an opposing scout, except using his patrol cry, or, as the book says, disguise. But disguise is out of the question at the present moment. Now, away with you!'

Off the boys dashed, the Wolves scouring down the eastern face of the Beacon, the Ravens down the western. Within five minutes both patrols were in position, and they signified this to Mr. Elliott by holding up their patrol flags. Chippy had made the flag for the Ravens, and made it very

well too, cutting the raven out of a scrap of an old green curtain, and stitching it on to a piece of calico. When the umpire saw the patrol flags raised above the gorse clumps which hid the patrols, he blew a long blast on his powerful whistle, and the contest began.

On the side of the Wolf Patrol, Dick Elliott ordered his men to spread out widely in the thick cover of gorse-bushes and low-growing thickets, and to push slowly and cautiously towards the Ravens.

'You've got to be jolly careful,' said Dick, 'or if there are many like that patrol leader of theirs, we shall be snapped up before we know where we are. Work in pairs, and one scout will support the other.'

So the Wolves split into four couples, and spread themselves as widely as possible on their front. On the other hand, Chippy sent his men out singly, but also on a well-extended front; and so, creeping, gliding, stealing from patch to patch of cover, and watching closely on every hand, the Wolves and the Ravens drew nearer and nearer to each other.

Dick, with the corporal, Billy Seton, had taken up a post in the centre of their patrol line, and they advanced together. Dick looked on every hand, and was very satisfied with the way in which his men took cover. He could not catch a glimpse of one of them among the patches of gorse and heather and brushwood.

Suddenly Dick stopped dead. He scented danger. Twenty yards ahead a wren was perched on the topmost twig of a thorn-bush, chattering and scolding furiously. Now, there is no bird which gives prompter warning of an intruder than the wren. Whether the intruder be two-legged, man or boy, or four-legged, stoat, weasel, or pole-cat, the plucky little wren always gives the enemy a piece of her mind.

'That bird's been disturbed,' thought Dick, and he dropped behind a great tuft of withered fern and waited and watched. Billy Seton crawled up without a sound, and lay beside him. Three minutes passed, and then Dick saw a shock of black hair pushed right under a low-growing blackthorn, a dozen yards in front.

It was one of the Ravens coming along flat on the ground like a snake. The Raven put his head out of the blackthorn bush and looked and listened carefully. He seemed reassured by the silence, and made a swift dash across the open for the very patch of cover where his opponents were in hiding. Both were ready for him, but he came in on Billy's side, and fell to Billy's deftly-thrown ball.

'You're done for, old chap!' chuckled Billy. 'Hand over your flag, and leg it for the hill, and report yourself.'

The Raven pulled a wry face for a moment, then remembered Law 8, and tried to look cheerful. 'It's a fair cop!' he remarked. 'Ere's the flag. 'Ope you'll soon lose it!'

The others grinned and retired to their ambush, while No. 7 of the Ravens ran to the Beacon to report himself as out of the hunt.

Twenty minutes of careful reconnoitring passed, but Dick and Billy had seen no further token of any Raven on the move. They gained a thick hazel copse, and crept into the heart of it to wait in ambush a little for any sign of an opponent's presence. Peering through the boughs, Billy whistled below his breath.

'What is it?' whispered Dick.

'Look at the top of the Beacon,' replied Billy, 'We can see it from here.'

Dick looked, and understood Billy's whistle. Four at the Wolf Patrol were up there with Mr. Elliott, while of the Ravens there was but one, the scout whom they had discovered.

'Our fellows have been bagged pretty easily,' whispered Billy. 'I shouldn't be surprised if that artful patrol-leader isn't at the bottom of it.'

'Oh, by Jingo! Look there, look there!' burst out Dick, but below his breath. Billy rounded his eyes, and the leader and corporal looked at each other in anxious surprise. Two more of the Wolves were climbing the hill; they were being sent in as captives.

'Why,' murmured Billy, 'there are only the two of us left. Every man Jack of the Wolves has been settled except us, Dick!'

'Yes, and there are seven Ravens out for our blood!' said Dick, 'We've got to do something, I can tell you, or it's a very easy win for Skinner's Hole.'

'What's the best plan?' whispered Billy.

'Stay here a bit,' replied Dick. 'We're in good hiding, and they'll scatter freely, and very likely be more careless in showing themselves, for they know there are only two of us left.'

Each clutching his ball ready to fire, the two remaining Wolves lay closely in their ambush, eye and ear strained to catch the first glimpse, the faintest sound. Within five minutes a Raven appeared, stealing as softly as a cat, though his boots were heavy and clumsy, over the short, crisp heath-grass. His very care led to his capture. He was watching the grass so closely lest he should step on a dried twig or fern-stalk that he only looked up when Dick's ball bounced on his shoulder. He gave up his flag and retired, and the odds against the Wolves were now six to two.

'Billy,' said Dick, 'we must separate. If they catch us together, it's all over with the Wolf Patrol this time; but apart we can only be collared one at a time.'

'Right!' said Billy. 'Which way do we move?'

'The Beacon's in front of us,' replied Dick. 'I'll work round it to the right, you to the left. If we're not caught, we'll meet at the oak-tree where the Ravens started.'

Billy nodded, and the two survivors of the patrol slipped out of the hazel copse and went against their friends, the enemy.

Billy's suspicion that the patrol-leader of the Ravens had had much to do with the downfall of the Wolves had been correct. Chippy, working well ahead of his line, had soon discovered that the Wolves were in pairs. He hid himself in a hole under a mass of bilberry-bushes, and soon one pair of scouts passed him. He let them go a short distance, followed them up, and bagged them one after the other. Then he began to work across the front of the Wolves, feeling certain that another pair would not be far away. Within ten minutes he had located his next pair of victims. One of them lost his mate and gave the Wolf-call very low. But, unluckily for the Wolves, that call did much mischief. First of all, it brought up Chippy, who promptly settled the caller, and then it brought up the caller's companion, whom Chippy bagged also. So the leader of the Ravens now wore four yellow flags in his hat – two on either side of his own black one.

Right away on the other side, No. 3 of the Ravens, a very wideawake scout, had captured Nos. 7 and 8 of the Wolves by sheer speed and clever throwing, and, so far, the Ravens had made a big sweep of their opponents. But the odds were not so great as they looked. Dick and Billy were by far the cleverest scouts among the Wolves, and the destruction by the Ravens had been accomplished by their two cleverest men.

Before long the odds went far to be equalized by the capture which Dick made of No. 3 of the Ravens. This able scout fell a victim to his own impulsiveness. He saw six Wolves on the hill; he became most eager to seize the other two; he forgot that for a scout there is only one word – caution, caution, always caution.

So he jumped into a little gully to hide himself, without first making sure that no one was there already. As it happened, Dick had crept into it three minutes before, and No. 3 felt Dick's missile before he knew what was in the wind. Rather crestfallen, he gave up his own black flag and the two yellow ones, of which he had been so proud, and made his way to the Beacon. Dick had now five flags in his cap – two black and three yellow – and he redoubled his vigilance now that he had become so valuable a prize. He went on and on, but he never saw another Raven. Soon he became aware that Billy had not only seen some, but seized them also, for Raven after Raven marched up to the summit, until Billy's captives numbered three fresh ones. When the patrol leader and his corporal met at last under the oak, they greeted each other joyfully.

'Well done, Billy!' said Dick. 'You've pulled 'em down in great style. I've only had one; but he'd got a couple of our fellows' flags.'

'Oh,' said Billy, 'a couple of 'em were very easy shots. The third chap was rather more sticky, but I had him at last.'

'Now we'll work back and tackle the other two,' said Dick. 'There are two on each side in the game now.'

'All right,' said Billy; 'we'll go for 'em in style this time. There'll be some flags handed over, whoever gets collared!'

Each of them showed five flags in his hat. Billy had his own yellow and four of the Ravens' black. Dick had three yellow, two recaptured, and two black. And now they plunged into cover for the final round.

Billy was the first to come into touch with the enemy. He was stealing along under cover of a patch of hollies, when, faint but clear, he caught the Ravens' patrol call – 'Kar-kaw! Kar-kaw!'

'Where's that merry hooter?' thought Billy. 'He's giving himself away, calling for the other fellow. He's mine if I can spot him.'

Again the call came, a short distance ahead, and Billy crept forward with the utmost caution. The cry seemed to come from the other side of a space littered with blocks of turf. Some cottagers who lived on the heath had the right to cut turves, and this was a place where they worked. Here and there the turves were gathered into little heaps. In the centre of the open ground was a larger heap.

'I can get a shot, perhaps, from cover of that bigger heap,' said Billy to himself, and he began to worm his way across the ground. He reached the big heap and crouched behind it, and peered round it in search of the Raven who had been uttering his patrol call.

'Where is he?' muttered Billy to himself, and at the next second he knew. A faint hiss sounded in the corporal's very ear. Billy thought of the vipers that swarmed on some parts of the heath, and jumped round in affright, and at that instant a ball was flipped into his eye from some unseen thumb and finger.

'Hang it all!' said Billy. 'I'm bagged! Where are you?'

'Wot cheer, brother!' came a husky whisper from the centre of the turf-stack.

Billy gave the stack a kick, and it collapsed, and revealed Chippy crouching there with a cheerful grin on his face. He had built himself round with turves, and lay securely hidden.

'Nice little lot o' flags ye've got!' murmured Chippy. 'It'll be a case of all round me hat this time.'

Billy felt disgusted at the neat way he'd been taken in, but he proceeded to hand his flags over at once. Presently his usual friendly smile broke out.

'After all, Slynn,' he said, 'it was a fair catch. What a jolly artful dodge to draw me up with your patrol call!'

'Not bad,' chuckled Chippy. 'I know'd ye'd think there was a lost Raven a-flitterin' about, an' then yo'd come to look 'im up.'

'Well, I must be off and report myself,' said Billy, and off he strolled, leaving the leader of the Raven Patrol to fix in his hat the fine trophy of flags he had captured.

Chippy was some little time at his task, for he had now five black flags – his own and four recaptured from Billy – and five yellow flags; four he had already seized, and the fifth was Billy's own original badge. He was scarcely ready to renew his quest, when a long, shrill call rang from Mr. Elliott's whistle. This signal had been arranged for the moment when only two rival scouts remained in the field. Now the battle must be finished during the next twenty minutes, or the contest was drawn. Some such sharp close was necessary, or a pair of over-cautious opponents might scout about or hide up and never find each other.

The two left in were the rival leaders. Just about the time that Billy was drawn into range, Dick bagged the other Raven, and when Mr. Elliott saw the two defeated scouts running for the Beacon he sounded his whistle.

The scouts out of the game had not had a dull time of it. If they were not in the combat, they enjoyed a splendid view of it as spectators. From the top of the hill almost every movement of the fighters below could be watched, and the excitement now rose high among both Wolves and Ravens as they saw their leaders running through the cover below in eager search of each other.

There was no hanging about in hiding. That would mean the loss of too much precious time, but each patrol-leader moved warily as well as swiftly as he sought his opponent. Neither sight nor sound was made on top of the hill. That would have been unfair: the men below must be left unaided or unhindered to fight it out. But there was laughter which no one could suppress when Dick and Chippy passed each other on either side of a thick hawthorn copse and neither had the least idea that the other was near. Then there was a joyful murmur among the Wolves as Dick swung round the far end of the copse, saw Chippy, and darted after him. But the Raven was on the alert, and observed Dick almost at once, and turned to the combat.

Now it depended on the sureness of the eye and the speed of the throw; whoever touched the other first with his ball would secure the victory for himself and his patrol.

CHAPTER X

THE PATROL'S SURPRISE – A THIEF

There were several quick feints, but neither loosed his ball. Then Dick ran right in, and Chippy threw straight at him. The Wolves raised a howl of joy when their patrol-leader made a clever swerve and dodged the flying ball. Then Dick let fly in turn, as Chippy sprang away to the right. But no sooner did the latter's quick eye detect that the ball had left Dick's hand than he dropped flat on his face, and the ball skimmed just clear of him.

Down the hill streamed the two patrols, for the battle was over. By the laws of the game no second shot may be taken at the same enemy.

'Who has won, Mr. Elliott?' cried the boys, as they raced up to the place where the rival leaders were laughing at each other's failure in bringing off the finishing touch.

'I shall call it a drawn battle,' said the umpire, 'with the advantage slightly on the side of the Ravens, as their man has more flags than the other;' and this decision gave much satisfaction, and all voted it a first-rate piece of sport.

'Now back to headquarters!' cried Mr. Elliott. 'We'll make a fire, and try our hand at baking chupatties, for some of you are not up to Test 12 yet.'

The Ravens were very keen on this, for none of them had yet tried their hands on cooking a quarter of a pound of flour and two potatoes without cooking utensils, and they were anxious to see how it was done.

'Cut over and fetch the basket, Dick,' said Mr. Elliott, as they gained the sandpit; 'there's a score of oranges in it as well. They'll come in handy after scouting over the heath.'

'Rather!' said Dick. 'A good juicy orange is just what I want, uncle;' and away he ran.

'Shall we gather some sticks ready for the fire, Mr. Elliott?' said Billy Seton.

'We'll have our oranges first, Billy,' replied the instructor. 'We can soon get plenty of sticks if all hands turn to.'

A shout of surprise rang across the pit, and all eyes were turned towards Dick. He was bending over the corner where the basket containing the flour, potatoes, and oranges had been carefully hidden under ferns and tufts of dried grass.

'It's gone!' yelled Dick. 'There's no basket here!'

Gone! All ran over to the place at once, and there was the hollow in the sand where the basket had been set down; but the hollow was quite empty, and the fern and grass had been tossed aside.

'Someone's bagged it!' cried Billy Seton. 'It's been stolen while we were away at the Beacon.'

'There's nothing else to account for it,' said Mr. Elliott. 'Now, my brave Boy Scouts,' he laughed, 'here's your chance to prove your mettle and skill. Track this thief – for a thief has been here without doubt.'

The boys were full of delight at the idea, and sprang with the utmost eagerness to search for the track of the rogue who had stolen the basket. The Wolves took one side of the pit, the Ravens the other, and began to look out closely for any mark of a foot entering or leaving the place. Almost at once a Wolf's howl was raised. Harry Maurice had found the mark of a heavy nailed boot, which had scored the sharply rising slope at the southern end of the pit. The mark was fresh, and led out of the hollow, and it seemed very likely that it was the trail of the thief.

The patrol-leaders took it up and raced along it, with their scouts at their heels.

For a quarter of a mile it was followed as easily as possible, for the ground was broken and sandy; then the trail ran on to short, close turf, and was lost. The patrol flags were driven in, and the band spread out on a broad front, and carefully advanced, searching for the spoor. No. 5 of the

Ravens hit on it well away to the right, where the marauder had set his foot on a mole-heap in the turf, and left a clear track of his big, square hob-nails.

'Kar-kaw! Kar-kaw!' The call gathered everyone to the spot, and the leaders were agreed that it was the right track. And again they spread out on a new front, for the trail was once more lost on hard, crisp turf.

This time it was not eyesight, but smell, which put the pursuers on the track of their quarry. Chippy had gone some distance ahead on the probable line, and Dick was near at hand. Suddenly Chippy lifted his head and sniffed at the air, his nostrils working like a hound's on hot scent.

'What is it, Chippy?' said Dick, who had noticed his companion's movement.

'Bacca,' said Chippy briefly. 'Right ahead! Come on!'

'Yes; I can smell it now,' said Dick, as they ran forward. 'It's coming down the wind.'

The two patrol-leaders burst through a bramble-thicket, stopped dead, and raised with all the force of their lungs their patrol cries; for they had run their man to earth. There, straight below them, in a little hollow, sitting on the stump of an old thorn, and peacefully smoking, was a man with their basket set before him, its contents rolled out on the grass.

'Why, it's a big, dirty tramp!' said Dick.

'Yus,' agreed Chippy. 'It's a Weary Waddles, right enough. Now we'll get 'im on the 'op.'

Up dashed Wolves and Ravens, and there was no need for their leaders to say a word: the situation explained itself.

'Charge!' roared Dick; and the two patrols burst from the thicket and swept down upon the marauder in a wild, mad wave of shouting boys and whirling sticks. For a second the tramp sat moveless in paralyzed astonishment. Then he grasped what it meant, and he jumped to his feet and scuttled away as hard as he could pelt.

The swift-footed boys pursued, yelling in delight, and promising that he should feel the weight of a scout's staff, when a long shrill call on a whistle checked them. Mr. Elliott had come in sight of the chase, and he recalled the pursuers at once.

'Let him go,' said Mr. Elliott; 'you've given him a good fright; and the next time he comes across a hidden basket perhaps he won't be so prompt in carrying it off.'

'Has he done any harm, Mr. Elliott?' asked Harry Maurice.

'He's had a couple of oranges, Harry, that's all,' said Mr. Elliott, putting back into the basket the bag of flour and the potatoes which had been tumbled out. 'Now all of you take an orange apiece – there are plenty left – and we'll start back and have a go at our chupatties after all.'

'He knew the heath, that fellow,' cried Billy Seton. 'He'd made for a jolly quiet place to unpack the basket and see what was in it.'

'Yes,' said the instructor. 'You might have rambled over the heath all day in a haphazard fashion without hitting on him. It was quite a scout's bit of work to follow him up. You're coming on; I shall be proud of you yet!'

So, laughing and talking, and eating their oranges, the Wolves and Ravens and their instructor marched back to the sandpit, where the rest of the afternoon was spent in the merriest fashion, so that all were sorry when the dusk began to settle over the heath and drove them homewards.

CHAPTER XI

CHIPPY MEETS A STRANGER

On a Sunday afternoon, some three weeks after the contest round the Beacon, Chippy was crossing the heath towards the little village – or, rather, hamlet – of Locking, three miles from Bardon. He was taking a message from his mother to his grandmother, who lived in the hamlet. The latter consisted of not more than half a dozen scattered cottages, tucked away in a quiet corner of the heath – a lonely, secluded place.

Chippy's destination was the first cottage beside the grass-grown track which was the only road into Locking. He lifted the latch of the gate and entered the garden. Standing in the garden was a young man whom Chippy had never seen before. Chippy looked hard at the stranger, and the stranger took his pipe out of his mouth and stared hard at Chippy.

'Hallo, nipper!' he said at last.

Chippy acknowledged the politeness by a nod, and went up the paved path to the cottage door. His grandmother was busy about the wood-fire on the broad hearth, making the tea, and she told him he'd just come at the right time to have a cup with them.

'Who's that out in the garden, gra'mother?' asked Chippy.

'That's my lodger,' replied the old woman.

'I never knowed yer 'ave a lodger afore!' said Chippy.

'No; I never did,' she replied. 'But he come here an' he begged o' me to gie him a room, an' I did. 'Twas Jem Lacey's mother as brought him. He's come from Lunnon. His name's Albert.'

At this moment the latch of the door clicked and the lodger came in.

'Tea ready, Mrs. Ryder?' he asked.

'In a minute,' she replied. 'This here's my grandson. He've a-come over from Bardon.'

The stranger gave Chippy a cheerful nod, and they soon fell into conversation, and Albert proved very talkative.

'First-rate place to pick yer up, this is!' remarked the lodger.

'Been ill?' asked Chippy.

'Ain't I just?' replied the other. 'I'm boots at a big 'otel in the Strand, an' there's a lot o' them Americans come to our place. An' I can tell yer their stuff tykes a bit o' handlin'. Them American women, they travel wiv boxes about the size of a four-roomed cottage, more or less. An' I got a bit of a strain pullin' of 'em about. Then I ketched a bad cold, an' it sort o' settled in the bellows!' – and the stranger gave himself a thump on the chest – 'so I had to go on my club, an' I was laid up eight or nine weeks. Well, arter I'd been on the box that time, the doctor, 'e says to me, 'e says: "What you want now is a change an' fresh air." So Jem Lacey – he's porter at our place – put me up to this spot, an' it's done me wonders!'

'Yer look all right now,' said Chippy, and Chippy spoke truly.

The lodger appeared the picture of health. He was tall, broad, of fair complexion, had sandy hair and blue eyes, and, as he drank his tea, he looked as fit as a fiddle.

'Ah, it's a healthy place here on th' old h'eth!' said Mrs. Ryder.

'Look at me!' said Albert. 'I'm a livin' example!'

The conversation now turned on Bardon, and the stranger showed keen interest in the ships which had lately gone up and down the river.

'I know a bit about ships,' he remarked, 'I 'ad a brother as went for a sailor.'

After a time he returned to the garden to smoke his pipe, and Chippy looked after him through the window.

'He seems a smart un!' remarked the boy.

'Ay, that Lunnon do mek 'em lively!' replied Mrs. Ryder. 'He's the best o' comp'ny – a very nice young man, I'm sure! He's no trouble at all – blacks his own boots, an' looks arter hisself all ways! I worn't willin' at first to let him have my empty room, but I'm glad I did. The place has done him a power o' good, though he didn't look very ill time he come down!'

'What's his name?' asked Chippy.

'Albert,' replied the old woman.

'I know that one,' said the boy, 'What's t'other name?'

'I dunno,' returned Mrs. Ryder. 'He told me to call him Albert, and I niver asked his other name.'

Everything that happens, everyone that appears, must furnish food for practice for a Boy Scout, and Chippy ran his eye over Albert from head to foot, and noted every detail of his perfectly commonplace appearance. Then the boy followed him into the garden, and, true to the habit which was rapidly becoming an instinct, he dropped a glance on Albert's track. There was a patch of damp earth near the door, and the lodger's footprint was plainly stamped on it. At the first swift look Chippy gathered that there was something slightly different from usual about the heel-print. He did not look closely, for you must never let anyone know that either he himself or the trail he leaves, is being watched; but there was something. Chippy strolled forward, but no other mark was to be seen; the garden path was hard, clean gravel.

Albert had seated himself on a bench nailed against an elm in the garden fence, and was smoking calmly in the sunshine. As Chippy drew near, he turned his head and smiled in a friendly fashion.

'I s'pose you know all the creeks along the river pretty fair?' he asked.

'Most of 'em,' replied Chippy.

'I've heerd Jem Lacey talk of a place they called Smuggler's Creek, where the old smugglers used to run their boats in,' went on Albert; 'I should like to 'ave a look at that. When I was a kid I used to be fair crazy arter tales of old smugglers an' that sort o' thing.'

'I know it all right,' replied Chippy. 'There ain't no 'ouse nor anythin' for miles of it.'

'Not nowadays?' cried Albert.

'Yus!' returned Chippy. 'It's just as quiet as it used to be.'

'Could a boat from a ship in the river go up it?' asked Albert.

'Oh, easy!' replied Chippy; and, in response to the other's request, he gave clear directions for finding the spot.

'I'll 'ave a look at it,' said the lodger. 'I like a good long walk. The doctor told me as that was the best thing for me. So I got a good strong pair o' trotter-cases, an' I tramp out wet an' dry.'

He raised one of his heavy boots for a moment, and let it fall.

'Got it,' said the pleased scout to himself, but gave no sign of his discovery. The heavy iron tips on Albert's heels were screwed on instead of nailed on, and the groove in the head of each screw had left a small but distinct ridge in the earth at each point where the screws came in the heel.

It was only practice, but Chippy was as keen in practice as he was when chasing the thievish tramp for the lost basket. He had mastered the idea that it will not do to be keen by fits and starts: you must be on the spot all the time. So he took away from Locking that afternoon one fact which he had discovered about his grandmother's lodger – the boots from a London hotel – that the tips on his heels were screwed on, whereas the common method is nailing.

CHAPTER XII

DICK AND CHIPPY MEET A SERGEANT – THE QUEER TRAIL – A STRANGE DISCOVERY

The Monday week after Chippy's visit to Locking was Easter Monday and a general holiday. The Wolves and the Ravens made it a grand field-day, and they were on the heath by nine o'clock, each with a day's food in pocket or haversack, and a grand scouting-run ahead – a run which had been planned from point to point by Mr. Elliott, who accompanied them. The patrols had by now worked together several times, and had become brothers in arms.

The old foolish feuds between them were completely forgotten, and when Dick and his friends crossed Quay Flat the wharf-rats would now swarm out, not with sticks for a 'slug,' but with salutes and eager inquiries as to progress in this or that game dear to the hearts of Boy Scouts.

But it is not with this Easter-Monday scouting-run of the combined patrols that we are about to deal. We shall go straight away to the hour of three o'clock on that afternoon, when a very memorable and exciting experience for the two patrol-leaders began to unfold itself.

Mr. Elliott had set his band of scouts the hardest task of the day. He himself had put on the irons, and was laying the track. He had warned them that it would be a tough test – something to really try them – and so it proved. If they failed to run him down, they were all to meet at a little railway-station about two miles away, from which they would go back to Bardon by rail. They were already a good eight miles from home, for they had marched right across to an unknown part of the heath to carry out their manoeuvres.

At one point, where Mr. Elliott's track seemed to have vanished into the very earth, Dick took a long cast away to the right by himself. As he moved slowly forward he heard a rustle of bushes, and looked up and saw Chippy trotting to join him.

'He's done us one this time!' said Chippy, grinning; 'I'm blest if I can 'it the trail anywheer!'

'It's jolly hard to find any sign,' answered Dick; 'but he told us it was to be a stiff thing, and if we can't get hold of it we shall have to head for the station, that's all. But we'll have a good go at it. What about a cast round by that rabbit warren over there? The ground's half covered with soft soil the rabbits have thrown out of their holes. If he's gone that way the irons will leave a dead certain track.'

'Righto!' murmured the Raven leader, and they trotted across to the rabbit warren and began to search the heaps of sandy soil.

They were working along the foot of a bank with faces bent to the earth, when suddenly they were startled by a voice hailing them a few yards away.

'Hallo, there!' called someone.

The boys glanced up, and at once straightened themselves and came to the salute. A tall man in khaki and putties stood on the top of the bank looking at them, a revolver in the holster strapped at his side.

'And who may you be, and what do you want here?' he asked pleasantly, and returned the salute.

'We're Boy Scouts,' replied Dick, 'and our patrols are out for a big scouting-run over the heath.'

'Ah, yes! Boy Scouts – I've heard of you,' said the big man, still smiling at them. 'Well, I'm in the same line myself. But you can't come any further this way, mateys. You'll have to scout back, if you don't mind.'

'Why must we do that, sergeant?' asked Dick, who had noted the chevrons on the big man's sleeve, and understood them.

'Well,' said the good-natured soldier, 'it's like this: We've got a lot of big, bad convicts at work over there,' and he jerked his head behind him, 'and we keep 'em strictly to themselves, you see.'

They're bad company for anybody but the men as looks after 'em, so we keep this corner of the country clear of other people.'

'At that rate,' laughed Dick, 'the track we want isn't likely to be laid your way?'

'Not it,' said the sergeant, 'else I should ha' spotted it on my round. No, mateys, you can cut right back. Ta-ta!'

The boys gave him a farewell salute, and ran back towards the spot where they had left the rest of the patrol.

'That's a rum game, ain't it?' remarked Chippy – 'a soldier a-walkin' round in a quiet place like that ther. Who's he a-tryin' to cop?'

'Perhaps watching to see that no convicts escape,' suggested Dick. 'You know, Chippy, they often try to cut and run if they see a chance.'

'Yus,' said the Raven. 'I've seed that in the papers. But wot do they want convicts for on the h'eth?'

'I know,' cried Dick – 'I know. I heard my father talking about it at dinner the other day. It's the Horseshoe Fort at the mouth of the river. They're making it ever so much bigger and putting new guns there so as to be ready if ever some enemy should come to our country and try to sail up the river. The convicts are at work there, digging and building and doing all sorts of things.'

'I see,' nodded Chippy; 'that's 'ow they mek' 'em useful, I s'pose.'

'That's it,' said Dick, 'and that sergeant we saw was one of the men in charge of them.'

'He soon started us back,' murmured Chippy.

'Yes,' said Dick; 'I heard my father say that they are very strict about letting any stranger go near the place.'

'That was on'y gammon of his about them convicts,' remarked Chippy.

'Of course it was,' agreed Dick; 'he wouldn't let anyone go nearer the fort on any account.'

'How far are we off?' asked Chippy.

'I'll soon tell you!' replied Dick, and pulled his haversack round. From this he took out a small leathern case with a map tucked away in it. The map was a shilling section of the Ordnance Survey on the scale of one inch to a mile. Dick had bought it and carried it as patrol-leader. The space it covered – eighteen miles by twelve – was ample for their work.

Dick knelt down and spread the map on the ground; Chippy knelt beside him. Chippy had never seen such a map before, and his keen intelligence was soon deeply interested. His finger began to run along roads he knew, and to point out spots he had often visited.

'Why, wi' this,' he declared, 'ye could go anywhere if ye'd never seed the place afore. Look here, this is the road to Lockin', an', I'm blest! why, 'ere's my gra'mother's house, this little black dot, just off o' the road. An' 'ere's the Beacon, an' there's the san'pit!'

'Yes, it's a jolly good map,' said Dick, 'and very clear in the heath part, for there are few roads and few houses, and every one is put in. Now, where are we? Let's find the rail and the station. That will give us our bearings.'

The boys considered the map very carefully for a few moments; then Dick put his finger on a certain spot.

'That's just about where we are now,' he said, 'and I can prove it, I think.'

'I should just like to know 'ow ye do prove it,' said Chippy, to whom this map was a new and wonderful thing.

'Well,' said Dick, 'we know in a general way we're no very great distance from the Horseshoe, and here that is.' He placed his finger on the spot where the big redoubt was shown on the map. 'Then here's rising ground with trees on it, marked Woody Knap. Now, where's that?'

'Why, theer it is,' replied Chippy, pointing to a hill which rose above the heath at some distance. 'It must be that. There ain't no other hill wi' trees on it in all this part o' the h'eth.'

'And how far is it away from us?'

"Bout a mile.'

'Which way does it lie?'

Chippy considered the sun, and thought over the directions Mr. Elliott had given the scouts time and again.

'Right away north,' he answered.

'Very well, then,' said Dick. 'We're a mile to the south. And a mile on the heath is an inch on the map. Now, my thumb-nail is just half an inch – I've measured it; so twice my thumb-nail to the south of Woody Knap brings us to the spot where we are.'

'So it does,' cried Chippy, with enthusiasm. 'It's as plain as plain now ye put it that way. An' that's a proper dodge, to measure it off wi' yer thumb-nail.'

'Oh, uncle gave me that tip,' laughed Dick. 'It's very useful for measuring short distances on the map. When you want a rule, you generally find you've left it at home, but your thumb-nail is always on the spot.'

'Yus,' smiled Chippy; 'ye mostly bring it wi' yer. Now,' he went on, 'wot's the distance to the Fort?'

'To the Horseshoe?' said Dick, and began to measure. 'Barely a couple of miles,' he said. 'We're quite close. Isn't it lonely country all round it? There isn't another building for miles on this side of the river.'

The broad tidal river curved down the western side of the map, widening rapidly as it neared the sea. Its western bank was dotted with hamlets and villages and scattered farms, with roads and lanes winding in every direction; from the eastern bank the heath stretched away with scarce a road or house to be seen for a great distance.

'We must get on, Chippy,' said Dick, starting to fold up the map, 'or we shall get clean out of touch with the other fellows. We've been studying this thing quite a while.'

'Oh, we'll soon drop across 'em,' replied Chippy; 'they ain't found anythin', or they'd be a-hootin' like mad.'

He rose to his feet and strolled slowly forward, while Dick put the map-case back into the haversack. The latter was adjusted, and Dick was just rising in turn, when something moving caught his eye. Seventy yards away a rabbit flashed at full speed across an open strip of turf, and dived full into its burrow, and vanished with a flick of white scut.

'Down, Chippy!' hissed Dick; and the Raven fell flat on his face behind a gorse-bush, and Dick crouched lower and watched.

'Someone has disturbed that rabbit,' thought Dick, and he waited to discover who that someone was. Dick knew the ways of wild rabbits perfectly well. If a rabbit feels certain that no one is near, he ambles about in the most unconcerned fashion; but scent, sight, or sound of man, dog, or other enemy sends him to his hole at treble-quick speed.

Three minutes passed, and no one appeared. Four, five, and Dick began to think it was a stoat or weasel from which the rabbit had fled. Then he knew it was not; it was a man, for there was a movement in the clump of bushes from which the rabbit had darted, and Dick saw a tall figure moving very slowly. He waited for it to come into the open, but it did not. It bent down and disappeared.

'Why,' thought Dick, 'he's going to work just like a scout. Is he slipping off under cover of those low blackthorns?'

The boy watched the line of dwarf bushes, and was soon certain that the stranger was doing this. He caught a glimpse of the man's form through a thin patch, then lost it as the hidden figure crept on.

Dick dropped flat on the ground, and slid along to the spot where Chippy lay behind the gorse-bush, and told his companion what he had seen.

'Rum go, that!' murmured Chippy, who from his post had been unable to catch any glimpse of the stranger. 'Yer sure that it warn't Mr. Elliott!'

'Oh no; it wasn't my uncle!' whispered Dick. 'I didn't see the man clearly, but I should have known at once if it had been my uncle.'

'How about the sergeant?' said Chippy. 'P'raps he's come a-creepin' arter us, to be sure we've cleared off.'

'No; I'm sure it wasn't the sergeant,' replied Dick. 'The man had a cloth cap on, and the sergeant had a flat-topped soldier's cap.'

Suddenly Chippy's eyes became round and bright, and he turned a look full of meaning upon his companion.

'Wot about a convict?' he whispered.

'By Jingo!' murmured Dick. 'There may be something in that, Chippy! Has a convict escaped? Is he trying to steal across the heath to find somewhere to hide himself? Is that it?'

Chippy said nothing, but he gave a nod of deep meaning, and the two boys stared at each other.

'We must follow 'im up,' said Chippy at last. 'Track 'im down an' see wot it means.'

'Yes, we must,' agreed Dick. 'You see, Chippy, if he is an escaped convict, he may be a very dangerous character to be at large. I've heard of them attacking lonely places to get food and clothes to help them to escape.'

'I've heerd o' that, too,' said the leader of the Ravens; 'an' some o' the h'eth folk, they live in cottages all by theirselves.'

'Yes; and suppose such a man went to a place where there was no one at home but a woman, or a woman and children?' said Dick.

'Who knows wot 'e might do?' And Chippy shook his head. 'We're bound to lend a hand, then – Law 3, ye know.'

'Right you are, Chippy,' said Dick. 'Law 3. Come on!' And the two boy scouts, game as a pair of terriers, crept swiftly up to the clump of bushes from which the mysterious stranger had emerged.

From the bushes the track was easy to follow for some distance. There were no footmarks, but the ferns were brushed aside and some were broken, and these signs showed which way the man had gone. When the ferns were left behind, there was still a fair trail, for the heavy boots of the stranger had broken the grass, or scraped a little earth loose here and there along the slope of the ridge which led up to Woody Knap.

Suddenly the boys lost the trail. It disappeared on a strip of turf, and they slipped back at once to the last spot of which they could be sure – a soft patch of earth where hobnail marks were fresh and clear.

'Now we've got to separate and try to pick up the line,' said Dick softly. 'I'll work right, and you left; and we'll meet at that big thorn-bush right in front, if we've found nothing. If one of us hits on the track, he must call to the other.'

'Wait a bit,' said Chippy. 'Wot call? Our own calls 'ud sound odd, an' might give 'im the tip as somebody was arter 'im.'

'You're right,' said Dick; 'the wolf howl, at any rate, is no good here.'

'Let's 'ave a call for ourselves this time,' suggested Chippy. 'One as you might 'ear at any minute, an' never notice. How about the pewey?'

'First-rate!' said Dick. 'The pewey. There are plenty of them on the heath!'

Bardon boys always called the 'peewit' the 'pewey,' and every one of them could imitate its well-known call. Nothing more simple and natural could have been adopted as a signal.

Dick was working most carefully round his half of the circle, when the cry of the peewit rang out from the other side. Away shot Dick, quickly and quietly, and, as he ran, the call was repeated, and this guided him straight to the spot where Chippy was kneeling beside the mouth of a rabbit burrow. The rabbits had been at work making the burrow larger, and a trail of newly thrown out earth stretched three or four feet from the hole.

'Have you got the track?' breathed Dick eagerly.

'I've got summat,' replied Chippy; 'it looks pretty rum, too!'

Dick dropped beside his companion, and saw that a foot had been set fair and square in the trail of earth. But there was no sign of a nail to be seen; the track of the foot was smooth and flat, and outlined all the way from heel to toe.

'That's not a boot-mark,' said Dick.

'No, it ain't,' murmured Chippy. 'If you ask me, I should say it wor' stockin' feet.'

'But what should he pull his boots off for?' said Dick, knitting his brows. 'This is an awfully strange affair, Chippy.'

'Ain't it?' said the latter, his eyes glittering with all the excitement of the chase, and the pleasure of having found this queer mark. 'As far as I can mek' out, he wanted to step as soft as he could tread.'

'But why – why, in the middle of the heath, here?' went on Dick.

'I dunno yet,' said Chippy; 'let's get on a bit, an' see if we pick up summat else.'

Dick blew out a long breath. 'It's going to be jolly hard,' he murmured, 'to track a fellow in his stockings. We've got to keep our eyes open.'

Chippy nodded, and they went on slowly and warily. As it happened, Dick scored the next move in the game. Thirty yards from the rabbit burrow a heath track crossed the trail they were following. The weather had been very dry lately, until about twelve o'clock of the present day, when a heavy shower had fallen – a shower from which the scouts had sheltered in a hovel where the heath-folk store their turves.

This shower had wetted the dust of the track, and Dick at once saw clear, heavy footmarks, as if a man had quite lately walked along the path and gone on.

'Here's a perfectly fresh track,' said Dick; 'and this chap in his stockings has crossed it at this patch of grass where he has left no sign on the path.'

'Seems to me,' remarked Chippy, 'as 'im wot we're arter heerd this one a-comin',' and Chippy pointed to the firm new tracks; 'an' then he off wi' his boots to dodge along on the quiet.'

'I don't see anything else for it,' said Dick; 'and that would make it plainer than ever that he's up to no good.'

'Look theer!' snapped Chippy swiftly, and pointed.

Dick whirled round in time to see a man's head and shoulders appear over the bushes at a far bend of the way, and then vanish as the walker turned the corner. But both boys had recognised him. It was the sergeant with whom they had spoken.

Dick gave a long, low whistle. 'He was dodging the sergeant, Chippy!'

'It's a convict!' said Chippy. 'Can't be nuthin' else!'

For a moment the boys discussed the plan of running after the sergeant and laying the matter before him, but they gave it up, for several reasons. He was a good way ahead, and out of sight. He might turn right or left across the open heath, and in that case they would have to hunt his track while their quarry was going farther and farther away. They decided to stick to their man, and turned to his spoor.

'Here's his road,' said Dick, pointing along a grassy glade. 'He's gone on, and he must have gone this way. It's all bramble and gorse everywhere else, and a man isn't going through that in his stockings.'

Chippy nodded in agreement, and the two scouts ran at full speed along the narrow ribbon of grass between the prickly, spiny bushes.

'He'll soon put his boots on again,' said Dick, 'and then we'll get this line a lot easier.'

But the fugitive had not stayed to do so for a long way, as was plain from the flat, smooth marks which the boys found twice in soft places. Then the trail went again, and they pulled up and began to beat round in search of it. It was Dick this time who uttered the cry of the peewit, and Chippy ran up to find his brother scout holding a fragment of something in his fingers.

'Picked it up just here,' said Dick. 'What do you reckon it is, Chippy?'

'Bit of an old cork sock,' replied the Raven.

'Just so,' said Dick, 'and it's quite dry, so it was dropped here since the rain.'

'One to you,' said Chippy; 'that come out of 'is boot – jerked out as 'e was runnin'. We're on the line.'

He made a few steps forward, then gave a low cry. 'Here's the place where he put 'is boots on,' called Chippy eagerly. 'Here's all sorts o' marks.' And then Chippy gave another low cry, this time full of such astonishment and wonder that Dick looked at him quickly.

To Dick's surprise, Chippy seemed fixed to the spot, his finger pointing, his eyes staring, his mouth gaping open, as if he could not believe what he saw. 'I know the tracks,' gasped Chippy. 'I know 'im! I can tell yer who it is!'

CHAPTER XIII

ALBERT, WHO WASN'T ALBERT

'You know who it is?' cried Dick. 'Well, who?'

'It's Albert,' said Chippy. 'It ain't no convict at all. It's Albert.'

'Who's Albert?' asked Dick.

Chippy told the story of his grandmother's lodger, and pointed to the heel-mark before them. It was the first time since they hit the trail that the heel-mark had been clearly shown. 'Screws in the heel-tip,' said Chippy. 'That settles it. It's Albert.'

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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