

On Guard

by Thornton W. Burgess

On the bald top of Old Scraggy stood a slender figure in khaki. The broad-brimmed regulation Scout hat was tilted back, revealing a sun-browned face which was good to see. The eyes were clear and steady. The mouth might have been called weak but for a certain set of the jaw and a slight compression of the thin lips which denoted a latent force of will which would one day develop into power. It was, withal, a pleasant face, a face in which character was written, a face which denoted purpose and determination.

The boy raised a pair of field-glasses to his eyes and swept the wonderful panorama of forest and lake that unfolded below him on every side. Like mighty billows of living green the mountains rolled away to fade into the smoke haze that stretched along the horizon. The smell of smoke was in the air. Over beyond Mt. Seward hung a huge cloud of dirty white against which rose great volumes of black, shading down to dingy sickening yellowish tinge at the horizon. Through his glasses the boy could see this shot through here and there with angry red. There was something indescribably sinister and menacing in it, even to his inexperienced eyes. It was like a huge beast snarling and showing its teeth as it devoured its prey. On the back side of the Camel's Hump another fire was raging. But neither of these seriously threatened Woodcraft Camp, for a barrier of lakes lay between.

"I'm glad they're no nearer," muttered the watcher half aloud. He swung his glasses around to the camp five miles away by the trail, though not more than three and a half in an air line, and his face softened as he studied the familiar scene. There was a song in his heart and the burden of it was, "They have got some use for me! They have got some use for me! They have got some use for me!" It was Hal Harrison.

There had been a wonderful change in the boy in the few weeks since his meeting with Walter Upton at Speckled Brook. It had been a hard fight, a bitter fight; sometimes, it seemed to him, a losing fight. But he had triumphed in the end. He had "made good" with his fellow Scouts. He had friends, a lot of them. With only one or two was he what might be called intimate, but on every side were friendly greetings. From being an outcast he had become a factor in the camp life. He was counted in as a matter of course in all the fun and frolic. He had done nothing "big" to win this regard. It was simply the result of meeting his fellows on their own ground and doing his share in the trivial things that go to make up daily life.

He was thinking of this now and his changed attitude toward life, toward his fellow men. In a dim way he realized that a revolution had been worked within himself, and that his present status in the little democracy down there on the edge of the lake was due, not so much to a change in the general feeling of his comrades toward him, but in his own feeling toward them. His present position had always been his, but he had refused to take it.

Somehow money, which had been his sole standard whereby to judge his fellows, had dropped from his thought utterly as he strove to measure up his comrades. It had even become hateful to him as he gradually realized how less than nothing it is in the final summing up of true worth, of character and manhood. And with this knowledge all his old arrogance had fallen from him like a false garment, and in its place had developed a humility that cleared his vision and enabled him to see things in their true relations.

“My, what a cad I was when I hit Woodcraft, and how little I realized what the Scout’s oath means!” he murmured. “The fellows have been awfully white to me. If—if I could only do something to show ’em that I appreciate it, could only really and truly ‘make good’ somehow. Seems to me this smoke is getting thicker.”

He turned once more toward Seward. The wind was freshening and the smoke driven before it was settling in a great pall that spread and gradually blotted out mountain after mountain. The blue haze thickened in the valleys. When he turned again toward Woodcraft it had become a blur. The sun, which had poured a flood of brilliant light from a cloudless sky, had become overcast and now burned an angry red ball through a murky atmosphere. His throat smarted from the acrid smoke. There was a strange silence, as if the great wilderness held its breath in hushed awe in the face of some dread catastrophe.

Hal was on guard. It was Dr. Merriam’s policy to always maintain a watch on the top of Old Scraggy during dry weather that any fire which should start in the neighborhood might be detected in its incipient stages and a warning be flashed to camp. The boys were drilled in wig-wag signaling, and in the use of the heliograph, the former for use on a dull day and the latter on a bright day, the top of Old Scraggy being clearly visible from camp, so that with glasses the wig-wag signals could be read easily. At daybreak a watch was sent to the mountain station, while another went on duty at the camp to receive the signals. At noon both guards were relieved. Only the steadiest and most reliable boys were detailed for this duty. This was Hal’s first assignment and, while he felt the responsibility, he had hit the Scraggy trail with a light heart, for he realized the compliment to his scoutcraft. And was not this evidence that he was making good?

The smoke thickened. The smart in his eyes and throat increased. Uneasily he paced the little platform that had been built on the highest point. Suddenly it seemed as if his heart stopped beating for just a second. Why did the smoke seem so much thicker down there to the east at the very foot of Scraggy itself? With trembling fingers he focussed the glasses. The smoke was rising at that point, not settling down! Yes, he could not be mistaken, there was a flicker of red! There was a fire on the eastern slope!

Hastily he sprang for the mirror with which to signal his discovery, but even as his hand touched it he realized the futility of his purpose. The sun was hopelessly obscured by the smoke. The flags! He grasped them and turned toward the camp. Where was the camp? Vainly he sought to locate it. The smoke had drawn a curtain over it through which even his powerful glasses would not pierce. For a minute panic gripped him. Then into the chaos of his mind broke the calm quiet voice of Dr. Merriam in one of his weekly talks at the camp-fire: “The man or boy to face an emergency is the one who keeps cool—who stops to think.”

Deliberately Hal forced himself to sit down on the edge of the platform and review the situation. It was five miles to camp. By the time he could get there and a party be organized and return the fire would have gained such headway that there would be no checking it. To the west, nearer by at least a mile and a half, lay the Durant camp. But there was no broken trail there, nothing but a blazed trail which he had never even seen and which at best would be slow following. But hold on! The loggers were at work this side of the camp, not over two miles distant in a straight line! Perhaps they would discover the fire. A moment’s reflection, however, convinced him that this was unlikely, at least until it was too late. A shoulder of the mountain intervened. Was he Scout enough to hold his course for two miles through that tangle of wilderness?

It seemed the only thing to do if he was to get a warning through in time. There was no time to lose! His lips tightened and he got up abruptly and began to tighten his belt. He would try it. He would do it! Turning for another look at the fire his glance was arrested by a box half hidden beneath a corner of the platform. In a flash he was on his knees, half sobbing with relief as he dragged it forth. Why hadn't he remembered Jack Appleby's wireless outfit before?

Jack had been on Old Scraggy the day before experimenting with wireless messages to camp, and had left his apparatus on the mountain, intending to return this afternoon to continue his experiments. How Hal blessed the good fortune that had led him to take an interest in wireless and join the little group of boys who were continually experimenting with it in camp! There were several outfits there, and one or another was in use most of the time. He prayed with all his soul that such might be the case now, as, with hasty fingers, he adjusted the apparatus and sat down to the key. One after the other he sounded the private calls of all the stations in camp, between each call listening for a reply. Would they never hear? Click, click, click, click, over and over and over again he repeated the calls, while the cold sweat stood out on his forehead. Would they never hear? Would they never hear? Should he give it up and make the plunge for the Durant cutting? No, this was his best chance.

Click, click, click! What was the matter with them down there? Ha! Was that Joe Brown's answering signal? With feverish haste he pounded out in the Morse code, "Is this you, Brown?" The reply came promptly: "Yes. Who are you?" With a sigh of relief Hal bent over the key and forced himself to send his message slowly, that there might be no confusion in receiving it: "This is Harrison, watch on Scraggy. Fire just started on eastern slope. Warn Doctor."

"Warn Doctor of fire. All right," spelled the receiver at his ear.

Hal shouted aloud in his relief. Hastily repacking the apparatus he turned to look down at the threatened danger. Already the fire had gained great headway. Would the doctor be able to bring help in time? A heavy stand of magnificent timber lay directly in the path of the flames. It was one of the choicest holdings of the Durant company.

The boy looked down at the Durant cutting on the other side. If he could at once warn the men at work there they might reach the fire in time. He would try. Carefully noting the direction with his pocket compass he headed straight for the cutting.

That trip down the mountain is a nightmare to Hal to this day. Slipping, sliding down the steep upper slope, bruised by falls on rocky ledges, crawling under and over fallen timber, struggling through seemingly impassable windfalls, his shirt torn, his hat lost, his face and hands bleeding from numerous scratches he struggled on, running whenever the way was sufficiently open, stumbling, falling but doggedly holding to the course set by the little compass in his hand.

It seemed an eternity before the sound of voices mingled with ringing blows of axes and the crashing of trees told him that he was almost there. A few minutes later he staggered out among the astonished loggers. His message was soon told, and almost before he had regained his wind the fire gangs were organized and with axes and shovels, the latter kept at hand for just such emergencies, were on their way to the scene of trouble.

Hal begged to go along, but the boss refused to let him. "You've done your part, my boy," he said kindly. "You can be of no help there and might be in danger. Rest here a bit and then you trot along

down to camp and tell Cookie to fix you up and give you something to eat. Son, you may not know it, but you're all in."

Hal did know it. Now that the excitement was over he began to realize for the first time how utterly weary he was. He was weak and trembling. He felt the smart of his bruises and the ache of strained muscles. The boss was right. His place was in the rear, not on the firing line.

A long rest at the Durant camp and the friendly ministrations of Cookie made him feel more like himself. Late in the afternoon he hobbled into Woodcraft. The camp was nearly deserted, for all of the older boys were on the fire line. Walter was the first to see him, and hastened to congratulate him, for the whole camp knew by this time who had sent the warning. Then others crowded around to shake hands and insist on hearing his story from his own lips. This Hal told, omitting, however, to mention his terrific cross country struggle, explaining his bruises as the result of a tumble over a ledge.

As soon as Walter got a chance he drew Hal to one side. "Say," he began eagerly, "the game warden and a deputy started for the haunted cabin early this morning."

"What for? To get the 'hant'?" asked Hal.

"Exactly!" replied Walter. "And the 'hant' is Red Pete! Big Jim figured it all out when he picked us up on the lake the other afternoon. You know they couldn't find Pete up at Lonesome Pond. He probably got wise that Jim would be on his trail after that shootin' while we were in camp there, and promptly vamoosed. When we told Jim about the cabin's being locked and the path to the spring he tumbled in a minute. That was the safest place in the woods for Pete, and he was probably right in the cabin when we tried the doors. Jim went up there the next day and did a little scouting. He found a blind trail down to the lake a lot shorter than the trail we took. Pete was probably afraid that we'd tell about the locked cabin and some one would get wise, so as soon as we were out of sight he made a quick sneak down to the lake ahead of us and slashed the canoe in the hope that we'd sink and get drowned. Jim sent word to the warden, and now I guess there'll be something doing at the haunted cabin!"

"How did you find out all this?" asked Hal.

"Jim told me this morning. He was going in with the warden, but when your message came he had to go fight fire. He told me just before he started."

"Gee!" exclaimed Hal. "Some excitement to-day! Do the other fellows know?"

"No. Jim said I could tell you, but that we're to keep it to ourselves."

Just after sundown the fire fighters returned, weary but triumphant. The fire had been gotten under control before serious damage had been done, but this would have been impossible but for the timely arrival of the Durant gang, who were trained fire fighters, and who had reached the scene first. The boss had told the doctor of how he received the warning.

The latter's first action on reaching camp was to issue orders for the preparation of a huge camp-fire to be started after evening mess. When this was lighted and the whole camp gathered round Dr. Merriam stepped into the circle for what the boys supposed was one of his usual camp-fire talks. He began by a brief review of Scout principles and the need of coolness and clear thinking in the face of

sudden emergency, and then briefly and forcefully he sketched Hal's exploit of the day, ending by expressing his personal indebtedness to the boy who had, by using his head and supplementing this by a courageous act, saved property of great value. "It would not be inappropriate if there should be some expression of the camp's feeling at this time," concluded the doctor with a twinkle in his eyes.

In a flash Woodhull was on his feet. "The Woodcraft yell for the Seneca who has made good!" he shouted, and beating time with both arms he led the long rolling "Whoop-yi-yi-yi! Whoop-yi-yi-yi! Whoop-yi-yi-yi! Harrison!"

Then despite his efforts to escape Hal was pushed to the center beside the big chief while the four tribes circled the fire in the mad dance of triumph.

But the thing that was sweetest of all to the tired boy was the discovery that the Senecas had been credited fifty points for his feat. At last he had done something to wipe out the old score. His cup was full.

Source:

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