

SCOUTING FOR SECRET SERVICE

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Scouting for Secret Service.

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I. A CRY IN THE NIGHT

“**F**RANK!”

A soft voice came from the darkness, quivered for a moment in the dead silence of the night, and faded away softer than it came.

“Frank! Wake up!”

Again the call came, low and soft, but more insistent and this time it produced the required result. There was a slight movement in the opposite bed and a sleepy voice muttered a question with a note of complaint in it.

“Huh? What do you want?”

“Sh-s-sh, don’t talk so loud.”

“That you, George?” Frank asked, stirring uneasily.

“Yes. Listen. D’you hear that noise?” On the instant, a weird cry came from the blackness of the night, echoed across the island and was lost again in the darkness.

“Who-oo! Who-oo! Who-oo!”

It arose with startling suddenness and died faintly away.

“George, what is it?”

“Sh-s-sh! Listen!”

This time a different cry arose, directly in front of the porch on which their beds were placed, stranger, more weird and startling even, than the other. It was like the whinny of a horse, and it quivered and trembled, and then died away like someone sobbing in pain. Coming from the great black maw of the night, small wonder that it terrified these two school boys, on a strange island and alone for the first time in their lives!

“Loo-oo-oo! Loo-oo-oo! Loo-oo-oo!”

When the cry was repeated, both boys sat bolt upright in bed and peered anxiously into the blackness that surrounded them.

There was little consolation for them in the fact (even had they known it) that their sleeping porch commanded an extensive view of the island and lake, for now the wall of darkness that pressed them on all sides was unrelieved by any ray of light and they could only sit in tense silence and strain their eyes in the direction whence the sounds came.

"George! What—what's that?"

Frank's words were barely audible, they were spoken so low.

"That first cry was like an owl's. I don't know what the second was," George answered.

They remained quiet for a few minutes, watching and listening, every muscle tense as they waited for something to happen. Suddenly George whispered again:

"Look, Frank, see those lights?"

Far out on the lake, the night was pierced by a bright ray that flashed and disappeared as suddenly as it came. It flashed again quickly and again the black throat of the night swallowed it. Closer to them and coming from the lake shore near the boathouse, two lights flared swiftly in answer to the first signal.

"George, what *does* it mean?" Frank Lawrence leaned toward his companion and his fingers closed tightly around George's arm.

"You tell me," George answered in a hushed voice, "I woke up bang out of sleep and heard that noise coming from the lake. The owl hooted twice before I called you."

"Did you see the lights before?"

"No, I didn't. They puzzle me more than the cries. Those calls could come from birds, but I can't explain the lights at all."

"A mystery—that's what you like," Frank reminded his friend. "You're always looking for mysteries to solve. Here's one the first night."

George laughed softly and although there was not much mirth in it, it helped to relieve the strain and it put Frank in better humor.

"You might have guessed we'd be in for it the minute we started on this wild trip," George said, stifling his laughter. "Cheer up, Frank, we are here now and we won't let anyone or any thing

scare us away until we start for Yale!"

"Strikes me like part of my uncle's scheme to try our nerves. A kind uncle he is," Frank added, bitterly.

"Hold up! Don't jump at conclusions," George cautioned. "Remember what Brother Alpheus said—and Mr. David."

"I haven't forgotten—but I can't forget, either, what my father said about him."

"We're here now and maybe your uncle will think differently of us before the summer is over. Can't tell—maybe you'll even have a better opinion of him. Listen! What's that!"

They stopped whispering and caught a faint, squeaking noise coming from the lake. The flashlights flared a number of times and from the shore came the sound of feet scraping and shuffling on the shingle.

"Frank!—that squeak? That was an oarlock."

"Yes, and someone is walking on the shore."

"Great guns! Is someone trying to break into the boathouse or tower?"

The noise on the beach continued for several minutes and it was certainly the tramping of a number of men walking carefully. No more lights were flashed and after a while all was quiet again. The boys watched and listened, but no sound broke the silence.

"George, is that a light I see, or am I dreaming?" Frank asked, leaning closer to his companion. "Look there—over the foot of my bed." George obeyed and saw a thin streak of light piercing the gloom. It appeared; then went out, only to appear again.

"That comes from the lookout tower," George said. "You remember it, don't you? It's near this end of the boathouse."

"Yep. But what's happening inside? All of these goings-on in the dead of night make me shiver. I'm beginning to think we've got a big job on our hands. Oh, just the same I wish we were back in our little rooms in your father's house on the hill!"

"You are a great hero," George said good-naturedly. "If I knew more about this house and island, I'd go down and investigate."

"Better stay where you are. Remember, it was dark when we got here last night. You don't know any more about this island than you do about China," Frank cautioned, with a little groan

of disgust. "Besides," he continued, "if those fellows are thieves and they want anything, they'll come up after it."

"Will daylight never come?" George muttered. "I can't stand these unsolved mysteries."

"Ugh, you and your mysteries. I thought you liked 'em."

"I do, if I get a chance to unravel them."

"It's cold!" was Frank's reply as he slid down under the bedclothes. "B-r-r, I'm shivering."

"Scared," George said soothingly. "You're all worked up about your uncle. You rest quietly in bed and I'll go down and investigate. Where's the flashlight?"

He threw aside the bedclothes and leaped out of bed. With a quick movement, Frank sprang up and stood beside his friend.

"If you go, I'll go with you. Here is the flashlight. I had it under my pillow. Don't light it until we get inside."

"All right, come along."

They proceeded cautiously along the dark porch and entered the bedroom. George switched on the flashlight and shaded it with his hand and they passed through the room, into the hall and stopped at the head of the stairs. Switching off the light, they stood in the darkness and listened, but no sound came from any part of the house.

"Are you satisfied now?" Frank asked.

"Yes, come back to bed. No use going downstairs, we might fall into the cellar."

They retraced their steps and locked the bedroom door behind them, and tumbled into bed.

"All is quiet in No Man's Land," George mumbled, burying his head in his pillow. "I wonder what next."

"You never can tell. See, that light has gone and I trust the night-prowlers have gone with it."

"You have expressed my fondest hopes."

For a long time they lay quiet and neither spoke. A gentle breeze whispered through the pines and from the lake came a swishing, gurgling noise made by the rippling waves as they lapped the shore. Overhead, the great, black curtain of night was rolling back from the heavens. Some stars appeared, flashed feebly for a few minutes and then faded from view as quickly

as they came. In the east a few faint bars of silver streaked the heavens and gradually spread over the sky. A robin awoke with a start and his clear cries resounded through the woods. These were the first signs of day.

George had fallen asleep, but Frank had too much to think about and he could not compose himself. He sat up in bed and wrapped the blankets around his body. Packing the pillows against the head of the bed, he lay back watching for the slightest signs of life and listening for any sounds that would betray the presence of the intruders.

Frank sat quiet and thoughtful, while the silver bars in the east spread over the entire sky and gradually gave way before the rose dawn that leaped from behind the towering mountains on the far horizon. From the lake, a thin, filmy mist was lifting and it slowly and lazily floated upward, until it was driven away by the advancing sunbeams. From the mist-filled dawn crept the outlines of the lookout tower, the boathouse, the dark pine-bordered woods, the white sand on the shore; and at last the blue waters of the lake could be seen. With a great bound the sun leaped up into the heavens and the clear day walked once more upon the earth.

Startled from his reverie by a noise on the shore, Frank looked in that direction and a sharp cry was caught just on his lips. He leaned toward his companion in the opposite bed, grasped him by the shoulder and shook him vigorously.

"George, George! Wake up, quick!"

"Wha-what's the matter?"

"Not so loud! Look out there." Frank's trembling finger pointed at the object that proved so startling.

George sat up in bed and his gaze sought the point indicated. Between the lookout tower and the boathouse, a large rock rose above the sand, its top flat and wide, like a platform. Upon this the boys saw a queer-looking man standing, and the gray light of the morning made him appear like a creature from another world. He wore no hat or coat and plainly there was a hump between his shoulders. He remained immovable for a short time, then leaped from the rock and disappeared behind the lookout tower.

"George! Do you think—is that my uncle?"

Frank's voice faltered as he struggled to suppress his rising anger. From childhood the very mention of this uncle had been enough to stir up in him strong feelings of dislike and distrust. That he should catch his first glimpse of this uncle after a night of fright which he believed was part and parcel of an underhand plan, made him disgusted.

"Frank," his companion whispered earnestly, "I don't believe that man's your uncle."

"After what Jim Morton told us on the train?" Frank asked.

"I don't believe Jim Morton, and you know it."

"He seemed all right to me. Besides, why should he lie about these things?"

"Yes, and why should Mr. David lie? He told us that Mr. Lawrence went west."

"My uncle could easily deceive Mr. David."

"Of course, but it would be mighty queer if he invited us here and then tried to scare us the first night with such silly tricks. Anyhow," George continued, yawning and stretching leisurely, "there's something wrong about this night's work. If your dear uncle is back of all this, we'll let him know from the beginning that we're not cowards and he can't scare us away."

He carefully wrapped the bedclothes around his shoulders.

"Forget it, Frankie boy. Go to sleep, it's daylight and I don't think the night-prowlers will bother us any more."

With a sigh, George settled himself comfortably and was soon breathing quietly in sleep. Frank's bitterest thoughts came flocking upon him to keep him from rest. He tossed about for a while, then settled down and lay staring at the ceiling, as he tried to fit into some kind of complete picture the events of the past two weeks which had landed him in this bed at this hour of the night.