CHAPTER V.

A BIG SURPRISE.

Time and weather had warped the boards of the structure till fair-sized cracks gaped here and there. The boys made for one of these, with the object of peering into the place and getting a glance at its occupants. At first they had thought that these were nothing more than a gang of tramps, but the name of the engineer, spoken with a foreign accent, had aroused them to a sense that, whoever was in the old barn, a subject was being discussed that might be of interest to their new friends.

Applying their eyes to two cracks in the timbers, they saw that within the barn four persons were seated. One of these they recognized almost instantly as Jared Applegate. By his side sat a youth of about his own age, flashily dressed, with a general air of cheap smartness
about him. The other two occupants of the place were of a different type. One was heavily built and dark in complexion, almost a light coffee color, in fact. His swarthy face was clean shaven and heavily jowled. Seated next to him on an old hay press was a man as dark as he, but more slender and dapper in appearance. Also he was younger, not more than thirty, while his companion was probably in the neighborhood of fifty, although as powerful and vigorous, so far as the boys could judge, as a man of half his years.

"You say that you have duplicates of Mainwaring's plans, showing exactly the weakest points of the great dam?" the elder man was asking, just as the boys assumed positions of listening.

Jared nodded. He glanced at the more slender of the two foreigners.

"I guess Mr. Estrada has told you all about that," he said.

"Of course, my dear Alverado," the dapper
little man struck in, "you recollect that I spoke to you of Señor Applegate's visit to me at Wash-
ington."

Rob started. The name Estrada, coupled with a mention of Washington, recalled to his mind something that sent a thrill through him taken in connection with the words of the man addressed as Alverado.

Estrada,—José Estrada! That was the name of the ambassador of a South American republic that had several times been mentioned as being opposed to Uncle Sam's plans on the Isthmus. What if—but not wishing to miss a word of what followed, he gave over speculating and applied himself to listening with all his might. Jared gave a short, disagreeable laugh.

"You can just bet I got duplicates of all the plans," he chuckled, "I had an idea that Main-
waring was going to fire me on account of—well, of something, and so I went to work and copied off all of his private papers I could. You see, it was common talk on the Isthmus that the place
was alive with spies, and I figured out that anybody who was interested enough to hire spies must be mighty anxious to get at the real plans of the canal, and willing to pay big for them, too," he added with a greedy look on his face, which for an instant gave him a strong likeness to his father.

Roband Merritt exchanged glances. From even the little that they had heard it was plain enough what was going forward in the barn. There was no doubt now that Jared was bargaining with representatives of a foreign power that had good reason to dislike Uncle Sam; no question but that Mr. Mainwaring's plans, or at least copies of them, were in the hands of an unscrupulous young rascal who was willing to sell them to the highest bidder, without caring for what nefarious purpose they were to be used.

The Boy Scouts' blood fairly boiled as they heard. They had always known Jared to be weak, unprincipled and dishonest, but that he would descend to such rascality as this was almost
beyond belief. Merritt in his anger made a ges-
ture of shaking his fist. It was an unfortunate
move. A bit of board on which one of his feet
rested gave way with a sharp crack under the
sudden shifting of his weight.

Instantly the men in the barn were on the
alert.

"What was that?" cried Estrada sharply.

"Nothing. A rat, I guess; old barns like this
are full of them," rejoined Jared, striving to
appear at ease, but glancing nervously about him.

"A rat, bah!" exclaimed Alverado, puffing out
his fat jowls till he looked like a huge puff adder.

"That was not a rat, amigo, that was a spy. This
barn is not as secret a meeting place as you led
us to believe."

"Come on, Merritt," whispered Rob, "grab up
everything and run for it. They'll be out here
in a minute."

Swiftly they gathered up their paste, brushes
and bills, and crouching low ran toward what had
been a smoke-house. Hardly had they darted
within its dark and odorous interior when the conspirators in the barn came rushing out, looking in every direction. In Alverado's hand something glittered in the sunlight. The two Boy Scouts peering out through a knot-hole had no difficulty in recognizing the object, with an unpleasant thrill, as an automatic revolver.

They now saw, too, something that they had been unable to perceive from the back of the barn. This was a big, red touring car drawn up close to the antiquated structure. But they had no time to waste in looking at the car. The movements of the searching party engrossed their attention too deeply.

"Scatter in every direction," they heard Alverado order, "we must find out if anyone has been here listening, or if our ears deceived us."

There was no doubt but that the search was to be a thorough one. Even the chauffeur of the car, which, the boys noticed in a quick, fleeting glance, bore no number, joined in the search. They
rushed about like a pack of bloodhounds in every direction.

"This is getting pretty warm," whispered Rob; "it's plain those chaps are thoroughly alarmed and don't mean to leave a stone unturned to find us."

"Oh, that unlucky board!" groaned Merritt remorsefully. "I'm a fine specimen of a Scout to make such a mistake as that,—at such a critical time, too."

"It was unfortunate; but accidents will happen," rejoined Rob quickly. "But it's no use crying over spilt milk."

"What are we going to do?"

"I'm trying to think."

"Perhaps there is a chance that they will overlook us."

"No danger of that, I'm afraid. From what little I saw of Mister Alverado he appears to be a very painstaking gentleman."

"They're searching the house now."

"Yes, that will take them some time; but you
can depend on it that when they've finished they'll search the outbuildings."

"Yes; and they've left that chauffeur on guard outside, too. Not a chance of our getting out of here."

"Unless there's another door."

"Cracky! Maybe there is. Let's look. But we've got to hurry up. Hark!"

"They're coming out of the house and pointing over here," cried Rob the next instant.

Both boys desperately sought to find some way out of the old smoke-house other than by the door by which they had entered. But no exit offered. Suddenly Rob had an inspiration. The smoke-house was roofed like an inverted V. The roof was covered with shingles. Apparently they were rotten, for in places the light came through. One side of the roof faced toward the abandoned farmhouse; the other faced back upon some fields. Rob thrust his fist with some violence against the shingles on the side of the smoke-house roof that faced the fields. To his joy the
shingles gave way almost like rotten cardboard.

"Hurrah! We've found a way out," he cried exultingly, although he was careful not to raise his voice much above a whisper. He rapidly enlarged the opening till it was big enough to crawl through. Luckily the search party had paused to examine a corn crib that lay between the smoke-house and the farmhouse, so that the boys had a few seconds' grace.

"Now then, through you go!" breathed Rob as soon as he had pitched out the bills.

Merritt scrambled through with Rob close on his heels. The apex of the roof, of course, screened them from view of the party now approaching the old smoke-house. It was a drop of not more than three feet to the ground, for the walls were low, and Rob had, of necessity, punctured the roof near the eaves.

Ahead of them lay a meadow with a patch of woods beyond. Rank brush and tall weeds intervened. But they had to make a dash of some hundred feet across an open space. Somehow,
just how they never knew, they got across it and plunged into the brush, making for the woods beyond.

At the same instant Álverado and the others entered the smoke-house.
CHAPTER VI.

BASEBALL.

"Of course they guessed how we made our escape, Rob."

Merritt spoke as the two lads lay crouched in the thick brush far removed from harm's way.

"Naturally. The fresh breaks in the roof would show them that. But, beyond that, they are none the wiser as to our identity, of which I am heartily glad."

"I can understand that. You don't like the look of things."

"Merritt," Rob spoke very soberly, laying his hand on the other's arm, "it looks to me as if we've stumbled on a monumental plot against Uncle Sam's canal. I don't know much of politics, but I do know enough to realize that there is a certain South American republic that thinks that the Canal Zone was stolen from her by trickery"
and deceit. I'm sorry to say, too, that I've heard that there are interests right here in the States that agree with her—people who think that the opening of the canal will result in enormous losses to freight, and who would like to see the canal completion delayed at all costs."

"I see. You think that the two dark men were representatives of that republic you mentioned."

"I know one of them was," snapped Rob; "he is its representative at Washington."

"Wow! Say, Rob, this is a big thing we've stumbled upon. We must bring it to the attention of the proper authorities."

"That's our duty as Scouts."

"Of course. But what steps do you propose to take?"

"I don't just know yet. We must see Mr. Mainwaring, of course, first. It will be for him to decide. But—horrors, Merritt!—we've forgotten all about Tubby. He's asleep in the rig. Look, Jared and his friends are piling into the
auto. If they go down that road they are sure to discover him. They may do him some injury."

But the next instant both the anxious lads drew a sigh of relief. Instead of taking the by-road, the auto struck off across lots along a barely perceptible and weed-grown track. In a few moments it was out of sight and the coast was clear. Then, and not till then, the two Boy Scouts set out to rejoin Tubby. They found that rotund youth blissfully sleeping, while the old nag cropped grass at the roadside. They awakened their stout comrade and soon took the lees of sleep out of his eyes by relating all that had passed within the last hour. Tubby heartily agreed that the first thing to be done was to put Mr. Mainwaring on his guard.

Naturally there was no more thought of bill posting, and filled with a sense of the duty that lay before them the three Boy Scouts drove rapidly back to Hampton. But there a disappointment awaited them. Mr. Mainwaring had been called away on business. He had gone west and
would not be back for a week or more. So for the present the scene in the barn had to be forgotten, while more immediate matters were attended to. During the ensuing week nothing was seen of Jared, but the Saturday afternoon of the game found him "warming up" on the ball field with the orange and black of the Hampton team on his back.

Rob and Merritt fairly boiled over with indignation as they watched him. But they decided not to say anything to him that might put him on his guard.

"We'll give him all the rope he wants," declared Rob. Later he was bitterly to regret the adoption of this policy.

The grounds began to fill up early. The game aroused widespread interest in that section of Long Island. As the local paper put it, "red-hot ball" was looked for. Enthusiastic young ladies were there by the score, waving flags from the bunches on sale about the field by hawkers. The grand-stand filled early. Rob's team-mates
noticed his eyes frequently straying in that direction.

"Looking for Lucy Mainwaring," whispered Tubby to Merritt with a grin on his round and blooming countenance.

Finally the game was called and soon both teams were on the field. Hiram, captain of the Eagles, won the toss and chose to go to bat first. The game was started. Nelson promptly struck out. He could not help making a wry face as he threw down the willow.

A broad grin was on Jared's face. He went through all sorts of antics, as Andy Bowles came to bat with a look of grim determination on his face.

Jared was good; that was a fact which admitted no blinking, as the Eagles had to acknowledge. Andy was given first base on balls, tried to steal second, was thrown out and retired disgruntled to the bench. The Hampton rooters began to give their war cry. The Eagle supporters replied to it bravely. It was early in
the game to be making any predictions. Rob was third batter. He struck out. Jared’s delight was ill-concealed.

"I’ll shut 'em out," he bragged loudly, not caring who heard. "I’ll show the tin soldiers some pitching."

The Eagle supporters had to admit that things did not look very roseate, but they consoled themselves by recollecting the fact that practically the game had only begun.

Hampton now went to the bat. Merritt occupied the pitcher’s box. He had injured his arm somewhat in practice, but it was agreed, after a consultation, to put him up as first pitcher, holding Rob in reserve till they got the Hampton’s gait. Merritt showed wonderful form. In one, two, three order he struck out Hampton’s batters, including Jared.

Great was the delight of the Eagles and their friends.

"Good boy, Merritt! Good for you! Kr-e-e-e-ee-eeel!" was heard on all sides as the Hamptons
came running out to take their positions in the field.

Merritt felt a glow of pleasure as Rob congratulated him.

"I hope I can keep it up," was all he said.

"I hope so, too; but I'd like to have a chance at Jared," responded Rob.

The Eagles now came to the bat, Rob leading. Rob was not only a good pitcher but a sure batter. Whiz-z came Jared's ball. Rob met it and promptly drove a humming liner into right field. It was a safe base hit.

"Oh, you Eagles!" chanted the crowd; those of them who were not lined up for Hampton, that is.

Rob watched his chance and stole second, to the huge delight of his team supporters. An ugly look was on Jared's face. The next batter, Merritt, received first base on four balls. Cheers and yells greeted this. Jared's countenance grew blacker and blacker. He bit his lip impatiently.

Suddenly Rob played dangerously off second base. The Hampton second baseman was close to
him. It was a daring move. Jared saw it in a flash. The catcher's signal came. He threw the ball to the Hampton short stop on second base.

But Jared's chagrin at the way his pitching was being "knocked about" unsteadied his aim. He threw wild. The ball passed above the short stop's outstretched finger tips. Rob darted off for third base like a jack rabbit.

The right fielder got the ball and shot it to third base, but, although the ball and Rob seemed to arrive simultaneously, Rob was hugging the bag contentedly in the nick of time. This was a quick, stirring bit of play and brought yells from the crowd, among whom criticisms of Jared were freely expressed. He grew pale with rage and chagrin.

Paul Perkins now came to bat. The dreamy lad struck out. His apparent unconcern made the crowd laugh. They laughed even more when Tubby, having struck out also, calmly picked up a bit of pie he had been munching when he came.
to bat and marched to his seat contentedly chewing it.

At this stage of the game two were out, Merritt was on second and Rob on third.

Now came the turn of Ernest Thompson, a big-eyed, serious-looking lad, one of the first recruits to the Eagle standard and a first-class scout. Jared was now on the broad grin. Thompson looked easy.

"Look out, baby-face," chuckled Jared, poising himself.

An in-curve shot from his hand. Ernest gazed at it in an uninterested manner and allowed it to go by.

"Strike one!" came the sonorous voice of the umpire, who was Sim Giles, the postmaster.

"Oh-h-h-h-h!" yelled the crowd.

The next ball was of the same character. This time Ernest struck at the ball. He missed and the crowd yelled again. Jared began to regain self-confidence.

"Strike two," was the cry.
The third ball was high.

"Ball one," declared Sim.

Then came an out-curve. But it was too far out. Jared was a rather ragged pitcher.

"Ball two," called Sim.

Suddenly Jared threw to third base. But, quick as he was, he didn't catch Rob off.

"How's that?" yelled Higgins, the Hampton third baseman, as he touched Rob.

The umpire merely waved his hand in what he deemed a professional manner.

"A thousand years late," chuckled Rob to Higgins.

Jared heard him and flashed him an ugly look. Hatred gleamed in his eyes. Rob watched him narrowly and again stole off third.

Bang!—came a swift straight ball at the dreamy Ernest. But he was not in "a trance," as Jared had scornfully thought. Crack!—went a hot grounder to short stop. Merritt stood fast at second, but Rob, like an arrow from a bow, shot off for home. The short stop fired in the
sphere to the catcher as quickly as he could. But before the ball got there, Rob, his legs working like pistons, had passed the home plate.

What a roar went up then! Flags waved and cheers resounded among the Eagle sympathizers.

As the cheering died away the catcher, Hollis Powers, walked into the diamond to confer with Jared, who showed by his passionate gestures that he was mad clear through.

"Look out or they'll knock you out of the box," yelled some one.

This did not tend to improve Jared's temper. But, nevertheless, he struck out the next batter, Simon Jeffords, which helped in part to restore his balance. The Eagles then retired to the field.

"How do you feel, Merritt?" was eagerly asked by his comrades before he took the pitcher's box.

"All right, so far. You'll know soon enough when my wing gets sore," was the reply.

Apparently Rob was not destined to pitch that day. Merritt struck out the first two batters,
fielded a hot liner and threw out Jared before he got to first base. Jared was certainly piling up his list of grievances against the Boy Scouts. To add to his ill-feeling he had recognized Fred Mainwaring, nodded to the latter and received the cut direct. The fact that Lucy Mainwaring was a witness to this snub did not improve matters.

“Good boy, Merritt!” yelled the Eagle supporters in a frenzy of delight.

The third inning commenced with the Eagles at the bat. But now Jared appeared to have on his throwing clothes. The Scout batters couldn’t hammer his pitching at all.

In fact, all that occurred while they succeeded each other at the bat was a monotonous succession of calls from the umpire:

“Strike one. Strike two. You’re out.”

The Hampton villagers began to pluck up heart. They gave Jared warm support and cheers for his really excellent work and that of his teammates. To the somewhat blank astonishment of
the Eagles, they had not been able to find Jared’s pitching at all in this inning. It began to look as if they were by no means to have things their own way.