CHAPTER X.

A SCOUT HERO.

At the fire-house they found Rob and Tubby helping to drag out the antiquated apparatus which was the best that Hampton boasted. Glad enough of the aid of the Boy Scouts, the firemen greeted them warmly. They recalled a former occasion when the khaki-clad lads had been of signal service to them.

Accordingly, while some of the men hitched up a pair of bony old nags to the engine, and others got the fire lighted, the hose cart was rushed out and the ropes unraveled.

"Fall in, boys," shouted Rob.

They obeyed his order with military promptitude. The long rope was swiftly seized. Rob was in front, as became the leader of the troop.

"All ready!" came the cry.

"Heave!" shouted Rob.
Like one boy the Eagles bent to the work. Off they scampered down the street, Andy’s bugle calling to clear the way. Men and women on their way to the fire scattered to right and left as the hose cart came lumbering along, drawn by its willing young escort at almost as fast a gait as horses could have dragged it.

"Ray for the Boy Scouts," shrilled a small boy.

The excited crowd took up the cry as the hose cart went roaring by, speeding toward the sinister glow on the sky ahead of them.

A throng rushed behind it, making believe to aid greatly by pushing the lumbering vehicle.

Suddenly a terrible thought flashed across Rob’s mind. The house occupied by the janitor of the school was undergoing extensive repairs and he and his family had been given temporary quarters in some rooms at the top of the school building.

The sudden realization of this sent a thrill
shooting through the boy. What if they were caught in a fiery trap, unable to escape?

"Oh, I hope they are all right," Rob found himself muttering half aloud as at the head of a line of straining boys he galloped along.

"Hey! Here comes the ingine," went up a sudden shout from the crowd behind.

Glancing back Rob saw the engine, the pride of the Vigilants, coming careening down the street. Its whistle wailed in a melancholy fashion and from its stack there streamed sparks in sufficient volume to render timid folks apprehensive that another fire would be started.

"Pull out! Pull out!" cried Rob, as he saw it, "here comes the engine."

But there was no need to tell his followers that. Every boy in the village knew the old Vigilant and had seen it go screeching and lurching to a dozen fires. They rushed the hose cart up on the sidewalk as the engine came swinging nearer. It looked quite inspiring with its flaming stack, hissing jets of steam and thunder of horses'
hoofs. The driver, Ed Blossom, was belaboring his steeds furiously.

Suddenly, out into the middle of the road darted a tiny little girl. In the excitement and confusion no one noticed her at first. She stood there apparently oblivious of the approaching fire engine for one instant. Then, although she saw her doom thundering down on her, she still stood as helplessly as a tiny bird fascinated by a glowing-eyed serpent.

"Out of the way! Run! Run!" shrieked a dozen frenzied voices as several people perceived the child's danger.

"Great Scotland! She'll be killed," cried Merritt.

The engine was almost opposite the hose cart as the Scouts took in the scene, but with one spring Merritt darted right in the path of the heavy machine. It happened so quickly that no one quite knew what had happened until they saw a second figure in the path of the Juggernaut.

To snatch up the child was the work of an
instant; but in that instant, as a groan from the horror-stricken onlookers testified, it looked as if Merritt's doom had been sealed.

Ed Blossom tugged frantically at his horses' bits and swerved them a trifle as he saw what was before him. As Merritt sprang backward with the agility of an acrobat, clasping the child in his arms, Ed succeeded in swinging just a little more. The horses grazed Merritt as they snorted and reared.

Suddenly there came a crash and a loud, tearing, ripping sound and the rear of the fire-engine was seen to collapse on one side. In pulling out to avoid running down Merritt and the little girl, Ed Blossom had quite forgotten, under the stress of the moment, the trees that grew on each side of the road. The hub of the rear wheel had struck one of these and the wheel had been torn off completely. If Ed had not been strapped to his seat he would have been hurled to the road.

A half hysterical woman fell on Merritt's neck and covered him with tearful thanks. Then she
snatched up the child and vanished in the crowd, leaving the Boy Scout free and greatly relieved that her gratitude was to be spared him just at that time.

There was a quick hand-clasp from Rob, "Well done, old man." And then they all turned toward the wreck of the engine. Steam was hissing in clouds from the crippled bit of apparatus. Merritt heard someone say that the pump had been broken. He knew then that the engine was out of commission for that night.

Men had already unhitched the plunging horses and tied them to a tree. But it was soon evident that the engine must lie where it was for the present.

"Can't do nawthin' with her," decided the foreman and Ed Blossom, after a necessarily hurried examination, "but say," continued the foreman, enthusiastically, as if the breakage of the engine was only a secondary consideration, "that rescue of the little gal was as plucky a thing as I ever seen."
And there was no one in that crowd who did not agree with him. But there was no time to linger by the engine. The thing to be done was to push on to the fire. The crowd rushed along and the foreman stopped to say to Rob aside:—

"You boys must help us keep the crowd back while we form a bucket line; it's our only chance to save the place now—and a mighty slim one," he added, as again a red tongue of flame slashed the dark firmament like a scarlet scimitar.

"There goes the last of the old 'cademy!" cried a man as he saw. "In an hour's time there won't be a stick of it left."

Without the engine to pump a stream through the pipes, the hose cart was useless and was abandoned where it rested. Under the foreman's directions the Boy Scouts invaded houses and borrowed and commandeered every bucket, pail or can they could find. Everything that would hold water was rushed to the scene.

There was a creek opposite the blazing Academy, and while the Boy Scouts held back the
crowd the firemen formed a double line and passed the filled utensils rapidly from hand to hand. As fast as they were emptied they came back again to be refilled by those at the creek end of the line. With improvised staves, cut and broken from shrubs, the boys held the crowd back. The method was this: each lad held the ends of two staves, the other ends of which were grasped by his comrades on either side of him. This formed a sort of fence and to the credit of the Hampton citizens be it said they had too much respect for the good work of the Boy Scouts to try and press forward unduly.

The Boy Scouts were on duty now. Alert, watchful, aching to be taking part in the active scene before them, they schooled themselves into doing their best in the—by comparison—humdrum task assigned to them.

The Academy, an aged brick building, was wreathed in flames. From the cupola on top, from which had sounded for so many years the morning summons to study, was spouting vivid
fire. They could see Dr. Ezekiel Jones, the head of the school, and some of the other instructors running about in the brilliantly lighted grounds and saving armfuls of books and papers. The fire appeared to be on the middle floors. At any rate up to this time it had been possible for the men bent on saving what they could to dart in at the big front doors, reappearing with what they had been able to salvage from the flames.

With the pitifully inadequate means at their command, the firemen could do little more than work like fiends at passing buckets. It was necessary to be doing something, but even the stoutest hearted and most hopeful of the onlookers knew that the case was hopeless.

Suddenly there appeared, from no one knew exactly where, a little pale-faced man with sandy whiskers. He wore overalls and was hatless. A woman, a white-faced woman, clung to his arm desperately.

“No, Eben,” she kept screaming, “not you, too! Not you, too!”
"Let me go, Jane!" the pallid little man kept shouting in reply. "It's our baby, we've got to get him out!"

He made a struggle toward the blazing building, but the woman clung to him frenziedly. Now a fireman rushed at him and added his strength to the woman's.

"Great Scotland," gasped Merritt, who stood next to Rob, "it's old Duffy, the janitor, and his wife!"

"What is it?" cried Rob without reply as a fireman hastened past him. "What's the matter?"

"Her baby. She's left it in the 'cademy," came the choking answer. The man, whose face was white with helpless horror, hurried on to obey some order, while a shudder of sympathy and fear ran through the crowd. Now came more details as men hastened back and forth. The woman, thinking that her husband had the baby, had rushed from the house at the first alarm. For his part, old Duffy, the janitor, never dream-
ing that the fire would gain such rapid headway, had tried to fight it alone, thinking all the time that his wife had the infant. The true situation had just been discovered and the man was frantic to get back into the place although he was a semi-invalid, known to suffer with heart disease.

The flames were leaping up more savagely every minute. For all the effect that the feeble dribble supplied by the bucket brigade had, they might as well have given up their efforts.

Rob felt his heart give a bound as he watched the janitor and his wife kindly, but firmly, forced back.

His pulses throbbed wildly. He gave one look at the red inferno before him. Then,—

"Here, spread your arms and take my place in line," he snapped out suddenly to Merritt.

The next instant his lithe young figure darted across the flame-lit open space in front of the school. He knew the interior of the old building like a book, and that would aid him in the task
he had steeled himself to perform. He rushed up to the group about the shrieking woman.

“What room is your child in?” he cried, his heart seeming to rise in his throat and choke back the words.

“That one on the south corner,” cried the woman mechanically, staring at him with frightened eyes. “See, the flames are getting nearer to it! Oh, my baby! My baby!”

She gave a terrible scream and sank back. Had they not caught her she would have fallen. When she opened her eyes again there was a roar all about her that was not the roar of the flames.

It was the tremendous, awestricken turmoil of the crowd. They had seen a boyish figure dart from the fainting woman’s side, shake off a dozen detaining hands, and then, wrapping his coat about his head, dash by a back entrance into the burning building.

As he flung open the door and vanished, a great puff of smoke rolled out. The cry of awed admiration for such bravery changed to a groan
of despair,—the terrible voice of massed human beings seeing a lad go to his death. For, as the flames crackled upward more relentlessly than before, it did not seem within the bounds of possibility that anyone could enter the place and emerge alive.
CHAPTER XI.

THE FIRE TEST.

Touched with reckless bravery, foolhardiness in fact, as Rob’s act had appeared to be, yet he had not acted without taking due thought. As always in emergencies, his mind worked with great swiftness. He had no sooner made up his mind that it was his duty, cost what it might, to save that innocent little one’s life, than he had hit upon a plan.

If the child was lodged in the center of the building, he knew full well that long before its life must have been yielded up to the fire demon. But if the quarters of the janitor were, as he believed, in the south corner of the school, then there was still a chance. The mother’s words had put him out of all doubt on this score and Rob instantly determined to face the most daring act of his life.
The rooms at the south side of the building had been used by the Academy boys as a gymnasium before their present quarters were built, so that Rob was thoroughly familiar with the stairways leading to them. So far as he could see it would be possible, by using a side door, to dodge the flames shooting up the center of the building. There was a winding stairway that existed on this side of the structure quite independent of the main flight which, by this time, must have fallen in.

With Rob, to arrive at a decision was to act upon it. As we have seen, he had lost no time in making for the doorway. He had, in fact, a double reason for his haste. For one thing, every second would count, and, for another, he realized that to many in the crowd his act would appear to border on madness, and that an attempt might be made to hold him back.

"The boy's a fool!" yelled someone in the crowd behind Merritt.

Quick as a flash Rob's chum faced around,
indignation shining in his eyes, which had, a second before, been dimmed with tears.

"No, sir; however Rob makes out, he's a hero," he shot back, while a murmur of approbation ran through the crowd.

"Keep your places, boys," he ordered the next instant, for the Scouts, half wild with anxiety and excitement, were beginning to waver and allow the crowd to surge forward. Merritt's words stiffened them. In a moment they were recalled to a sense of that duty of which they had just witnessed such a conspicuous example.

The instant Rob crossed the threshold of that door he found himself surrounded by smoke. But he bent low, and throwing his coat more closely above his head, he crouched on all fours so as to get below the level of the acrid fumes that made his eyes smart cruelly. Suddenly he stumbled over something, and as he saw in the dim light what it was he gave a glad gasp. It was a bucket of water, left on the stairway after the regular Saturday scrubbing.
Rob was a Scout who knew, from careful study of his Manual, just what to do in emergencies. He recalled now that in case of being compelled to enter a smoky, blazing building, it was recommended to bind a wet cloth over mouth and nostrils in such a way as to act as a respirator. Instantly he saturated his handkerchief in the water and bound it on his face in the manner advocated.

Then he began what was to prove a terrible climb. The school was three stories in height, the lower two floors containing study rooms and offices and the top floor lumber rooms and the apartments occupied temporarily by the janitor.

Breathing with more ease now that he had bound up his face, Rob fought his way upward. It was as murky as a pit, and it seemed that the stairs were interminable. Suddenly he stumbled and fell headlong. He had gained the first landing. Through a door opening upon it jets of flame, like serpents' tongues, were beginning to shoot. Rob staggered toward the door and slammed it to. He knew that this was abso-
lutely necessary, for in the case of the stair-
case being in flames when it came time for him
to retrace his steps his retreat would be cut off.

But that was a thought he did not dare to
dwell upon. Steeling himself anew he pushed
stubbornly on to the next flight.

"It's lucky I know this place as well as I
do," he thought, as he gamely kept up the fight
against what appeared almost overwhelming
odds.

As he climbed higher it grew hotter. The
place was like the interior of a volcano. Beyond
the wall of the stairway Rob could hear the flames
roaring like the beat of the surf on a rocky coast.
It almost seemed as if the fire demon possessed
an articulate voice and was howling his rage
and defiance at the boy who had dared to face
his terrors. But, hot as it was growing, Rob
yet found some small grain of comfort in the
fact that the smoke was not so thick.

He breathed more freely even if his throat
was becoming dry as dust and whistled in an
odd way as he climbed higher. At last he reached the summit of the second flight.

He paused irresolutely on the landing. Several doors opened off it. Now that he was actually there, Rob was confused for an instant. He was not quite so sure of his bearings as he had thought he would be. But the roar of the flames below and about him warned him to lose not a second of precious time in procrastination.

He plunged into the door nearest at hand. Within he found himself in a room which was evidently a dining room. Supper was ready spread on the table. A lamp illumined the scene. How odd it seemed to be gazing at this peaceful domestic setting, while below and to one side of him, devouring flames were roaring and leaping. Save for a strong smell of smoke and a slight bluish haze, the room might have been a thousand miles away from the flaming building in which it was located.

Suddenly, as the boy stood there looking swiftly
about him, there came a crash that shook the whole place like an earthquake.

“A floor’s fallen!” gasped Rob. “Pray heaven it’s not taken any part of that stairway with it!”

Brave as he was, the young scout turned pale and actually shook for an instant like a leaf. He knew full well that if that stairway, or any part of it, was gone, he was doomed to die as irrevocably as if a death sentence had been pronounced upon him. All at once, from a room opening off the dining room came a wailing cry.

“Muvver! Muvver, I’se fwrightened!”

Rob’s heart gave a quick bound and he galvanized into instant action, a great contrast to his temporary state of stupefaction!

“All right, youngster. Don’t cry, I’m coming,” he called out, plunging forward.

Inside the room was a small crib, with a child about three years old lying on it clasping a doll in her arms.

“Who’s oo?” she demanded in some alarm, as
Rob, with his handkerchief tied over his face, advanced.

"Me? Why—why, I’m a fireman," exclaimed Rob; and then, with an inspiration, "Let’s play that the place is on fire and I’m going to save you."

The child clapped her hands and her eyes shone. Rob picked her out of her crib and carried her tenderly out of the room.

"Now I’m going to cover your face just like real firemen do," he said, as they emerged on the landing and the hot breath of the furnace below was spewed up at them.

"Is dat in de game," inquired the child doubtfully, "an’ will oo cover dolly’s, too?"

"Yes, it’s all part of the game," Rob reassured her. "Now then, there we are."

He enveloped the child in his coat which he had already removed and started for the landing. Suddenly he stopped, and from under the coat came a muffled but inquisitive voice:

"Is ’oo cwyin’, Mister Fireman?"
No, Rob was not crying; but he had just seen something that made his breath come heavingly and his heart almost stop beating. Below him he could see a dull red glow, growing momentarily brighter. No need was there for him to speculate on what that meant.

The stairway was on fire. His one means of escape from the blazing building was cut off.

For an instant Rob's head swam dizzily. He felt sick and shaky. Was he to die there in that inferno of flames? A cry was forced wildly from his cracked lips.

"Not like this! Oh, not like this!" he begged, raising his eyes upward.
CHAPTER XII.

IN PERIL OF HIS LIFE.

In the meantime, outside the building suspense had reached almost the breaking point. The Scouts still stood steady and staunch, but their faces were white and drawn. When the crash that announced the falling floor came, a man, wrought beyond the bearing point, cried out:

"There goes his last chance, poor kid!"

"Shut up, can't you," breathed a fierce, tense voice in his ear the next instant. "Don't you see his father and mother back there?"

It was only too true. Attracted by the excitement, Rob's father and mother had driven to the scene in their car. They reached it just in time to hear of Rob's heroic act. Now, white-faced and trembling, they sat hand in hand wretchedly waiting for news. As time passed and the flames rose higher without a sign of the daring lad,
their hearts almost ceased to beat. Seconds seemed hours, minutes eternity.

Then suddenly came a fearful cry. On the roof there had appeared the figure of Rob with a bundle which the crowd readily guessed to be the janitor's child clasped tightly in his arms. The flames, leaping from the cupola, illumined his form brightly and showed his pale, tense face. Thwarted in his effort to descend by the stairway, Rob had managed to reach the roof through a scuttle.

"He's done it! Hurrah! The boy's saved the baby!" went up an ear-splitting cry from the unthinking in the crowd.

The others knew only too well that the reason that Rob had appeared on the roof betokened the terrible fact that his escape had been cut off. He was making a last desperate stand, with the flames drawing closer, and threatening to burst through the roof at any moment.

Every eye in that crowd was fixed on the solitary figure on the roof.
"Ladders! Get ladders," yelled the foreman, hoping against hope that one could be found tall enough to reach to that height.

Rob came forward to the cornice, and looked over as if gauging the height. They saw him shake his head. Then he looked behind him. Alas, there, too, all hope of escape was cut off. Between himself and an iron fire-escape at the back of the building, tongues of flame were now shooting through the roof.

"He's shouting something. Keep still, for heaven's sake!" came Merritt's voice suddenly.

A death-like silence followed. Then above the roar and crackle came a faint sound. It was Rob calling out some commands.

"A rope!—shoot it up here," was all they could distinguish.

Merritt darted forward and stood below the walls.

"Louder, Rob! Louder!" he besought.

"A rope! Bow—arrow—shoot it up!" came Rob's voice, audible to few, but his chum Merritt
was the only one that understood. He was back among the Scouts in a flash. He seized Paul Perkins by the shoulder.

"Paul, your house is nearest. Run! Run as you never ran before and get your archery bow and lots of arrows."

Paul didn't stop to ask the meaning of this strange command, but darted off at top speed, the crowd opening for him.

"Ropes! Ropes and lots of string!" shouted Merritt next, appealing to the throng. Those who were closest realized that a plan to save Rob—although what it was they couldn't imagine—was to be tried. Neighbors of the Academy ran off at once and in a few minutes the Scouts were busy, under Merritt's directions, knotting ropes together to form one long line.

When this had been done, Merritt measured with his eye the height of the Academy walls. Then he set them to work knotting light twine together in as long a line as they could make.
By this time Paul was back with the bow and arrow that the Scouts used at archery practice.

"Give it here," ordered Merritt tersely if ungrammatically.

What he was going to try was a repetition of the trick that had rescued some of the Eagle Patrol when they were imprisoned on the top of Ruby Glow in the Adirondacks on their memorable treasure hunt.

With a hand that was far from steady, Merritt knotted the end of the light string to an arrow. Then, placing the arrow in position, he drew the bow. It was plain enough to the dullest-witted now what he meant to do. His plan was to shoot the arrow, with the string attached, up on the roof where Rob could seize it. This done, it would be possible for the latter—if he had time—to haul up the rope, knot it to a chimney and slide down. It was a daring, desperate plan, but none other offered, and the fact that Rob had suggested it showed that his nerve was not likely
to fail him in what might be aptly described as a supreme test.

Amid a dead silence Merritt let the arrow fly. It shot through the air, but instead of reaching the roof it struck the wall and rebounded. A cry went up from the watching crowd as it fell, having failed to accomplish its purpose. If Rob’s face changed as he stood up there on the edge of the fire-illumined roof, it was not visible to those below him, keen as his disappointment must have been.

But Merritt was almost sobbing as he picked up the arrow and fitted it afresh for another trial. As he drew the bow with every ounce of strength he possessed, his lips moved in prayer that his next effort might be successful. At any moment now, the foreman of the fire-fighters told him, the roof might collapse, carrying with it the brave boy and his childish burden.

On the outskirts of the crowd, too, a white-faced man and woman were imploring Divine Providence to nerve Merritt’s arm and aim. For
one instant the bowstring was drawn taut till it seemed that the bow must snap under the terrific pressure.

Then suddenly the string fell slack, the arrow whizzed through the air and a mighty cheer split the sky as it winged true and swift to the roof top, falling almost at Rob’s feet. Hand over hand he drew in the string, and at last he had hauled up enough rope to knot one end fast about some ornamental stone work at a corner of the building.

While doing this he had laid the child down. Now he was seen to pick her up again, and holding her in his arms for an instant he appeared to consider. To slide down that rope he must have at least one arm free. How was he going to do it? The crowd almost forebore to breathe as they sensed what the boy on the roof was puzzling over.

It was Rob’s scout training that solved the problem—one of life and death for him—as the same training is doing all over the world for
The Arrow whizzed through the air ****, falling almost at Rob's feet.—Page 128.
lads in every grade of life to-day. He was seen to give the child some emphatic instructions and then throw her over his left shoulder much as he might have done with a bag of meal. In this position the child's head hung down between his shoulders. Her legs were across his chest.

Seizing the baby's left arm so that it came over his right shoulder, Rob extended his left hand between its knees and grasped the little one's wrist firmly. In this position she was held perfectly securely in what all Boy Scouts know as "The Fireman's Lift," one of the most useful accomplishments a Boy Scout can master.

This done, the most difficult, dangerous part of Rob's task came. He had to slide down that rope with his burden on his shoulder with only his right arm and his legs to depend on for a grip. But it had to be done. Without hesitation he swung himself from the coping and gripped the rope.

For one terrible instant he shot down for a foot or so before he succeeded in checking his
downward plunge. But his knees gripped the rope and his right arm stood the strain, although he felt as if it must snap.

How he reached the ground Rob never knew. Those last terrible moments on the roof had come very near to breaking his nerve. He was conscious of a sudden flare of light and a crash as his feet touched the ground. It crossed his mind hazily that part of the roof must have fallen in—perhaps the part on which he had been standing. Then came a rush of feet, shouts, cries, and arms flung about him, and through it all Rob could hear his mother's glad cry of relief after the awful tension she had endured. He tried to say something and failed, and then everything raced round and round him at breakneck speed.

“He's fainting!” he was conscious that somebody was shouting, and he could hear himself, only it seemed like somebody else, saying:

“No, I'm all right,” and then everything grew blank to the Boy Scout who had won, through “Being Prepared” for a great emergency.