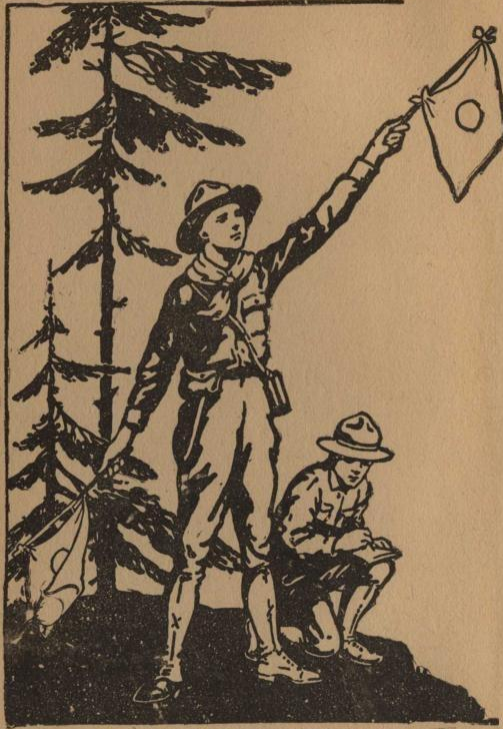


THE BOY SCOUTS TO THE RESCUE

By
GEORGE DURSTON



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CHAPTER I

FROM SHELL CRATER TO FIRST AID

There were three figures lying in the bottom of the great shell crater that yawned close to the German line. It had been made by a French shell, so a great mound of dirt had been cast up on the side next the enemy. One of the bodies in the close group lay in the stiff, distorted attitude in which a sudden and horrible death had frozen him. The second lay quite limp, unseeing, uncaring—the attitude of a man desperately hurt. Only the third, rather small and slender, lay curled up much as a vigilant cat might, trying to give the impression of sleep or death, but with every faculty and nerve like live wires. His eyes were open, and with every ounce of force in him he was listening, plotting and planning.

Under the thick mud the uniforms worn by the different men were indistinguishable. The coating was a thick, slimy, even gray. The figure whose alert, piercing eyes studied his surroundings so carefully shivered steadily. He was chilled to the bone. As it grew darker, he rolled slowly over on his back, and for a while studied the edge of the crater as its rough edges showed dark against the sky. All seemed well. Not a head, not a bayonet, could cut that jagged line without his knowing it. The Huns would not make a sortie now. Exhausted themselves, they were depending on the

exhaustion of the French for a short, unspoken truce of a few hours.

The living figure in the crater rolled over and on hands and knees crept to the body nearest him. He felt over it carefully. The face, drained of blood, was ghastly cold in the steady, fine rain that beat on it; but there was life in that still body. If he could only get help!

He laid the head back on its slimy resting place and crawled carefully to the top of the crater next the French trenches. He must get help! Otherwise the Lieutenant would die. The wet ground gave with him, but he persisted and with a mighty effort raised his face over the edge. Then with a stifled cry he dropped back. Another face, dim and strange in the darkness, was there. It met him eye to eye, not three inches from his face.

The cold, drizzling rain fell steadily into the sodden trench chilling the soldiers who crouched and huddled against the streaming sides of the shelter, if shelter it could be called. The trench was very close to the enemy. An almost constant succession of flares sent up by the Germans lit the racked and tattered landscape. In the fitful light it looked unreal, impossible.

Torn fields, shattered trees, ploughed fields everywhere, with yawning shell craters on every side.

The expanse of ground between the lines was made terrible by the shell craters. Day was ending, and in the dim, yellow half light the uneven, edges of the deep and ragged holes threw narrow, black shadows that seemed to gash the riven

fields. Above, a couple of French airships circled. The German planes had disappeared, and the Frenchmen flew in widening circles above the enemies' lines. The roar of the guns had diminished to an occasional popping, with once in a while a bellowing roar as some iron giant launched its terrible missile. All day the Huns had hammered at the stubborn line; all day the French, with their American allies, had hammered in return. It had commenced, this big battle, at daybreak; all day had it raged without lull or pause, now from the trenches, now frightful conflicts in the open. Now, as though both sides acknowledged exhaustion though not defeat, a lull had come. The men in the trenches, almost delirious with fatigue, dropped in the mud and water and slept. Red Cross bearers came splashing along with their burdens. Men wounded to the death whimpered pitifully and babbled of home, or bore their agony in stony silence. Out somewhere in No-Man's-Land, the terrible stretch lying between the two lines, out there in the gathering darkness, a clear, high tenor voice commenced to sing:

"We're going home, we're going home,
We're going home to-morrow."

Clear and sweet the voice sounded. Another flare went up; then a German gun commenced to drop shells in the direction of the voice. It was as though they would gladly waste a dozen shells on the chance of stilling that sweet singer. The voice went on, growing gradually weaker, but lifting true, sweet notes until there came a little break and—stillness. A last venomous shot whined toward the spot where the singer lay, his young voice hushed forever.

The darkness deepened, and the flares, increasing in number, gave the place an unreal, ghastly light, like some gigantic and unending nightmare. Something that could not be possible, *must* not be possible, but which was to go on and on and on endlessly, relentlessly.

At last it was black night.

A sergeant made his way along the trench, slipping and sliding through the mud and ooze. He gave commands in muffled whispers, and a number of the exhausted men turned and followed him when he returned to the outlet of the trench. Lying so close to the border of No-Man's-Land, across which it was possible for an occasional spy to invade their trench, the greatest care was taken in every possible way to discover and check such invasion. When there was no firing to cover the sound, the men talked in whispers when they talked at all, which was seldom. The bitter business of war had seemed to strip from them all desire to talk.

They were moving stealthily along when a slight figure bounded into the trench and slid and tumbled to the bottom. He hurried back and forth the length of the trench, then plunged like a human ferret into the small, twisted tunnel that led down and down twenty feet or more underground to the rest house, a scooped-out chamber of clay where there was actual safety unless—unless the tunnel caved! Looking in on the group of wounded and exhausted men who occupied the space, he spoke a name. No one answered. The men paid no attention. They were wholly wrapped up in their own misery. He climbed once more

into the trench, then, glancing round to see if he was observed, he scrambled lightly up the side and in another moment was over the top and, flat on the ground, was wriggling a cautious, snake-like way across the horrors of No-Man's-Land.

His heart beat heavily; it seemed as though it could be heard twenty feet away. He was bent on a fearful and almost impossible errand; an errand that might cost him his life. And life was sweet to the boy who proceeded to work his way across the terrible stretch of No-Man's-Land.

He had no reason for going, no plan; simply something told him the direction to take in his strange quest. Every time a flare burst against the murky sky he dropped flat on his face and, assuming some strained, distorted position, lay motionless until the light died out once more. This happened every two minutes or so. It took endless patience to work his way forward. He was impelled to hurry, to take the chance of continuing his course even under the bright light of the flares. But he knew that it would be death to him and possible death to the one he sought. As he wormed his way forward he turned slowly to the right. Stronger and stronger he felt the strange certainty that never failed to tell him that he was right. He was approaching the person whom he sought.

The feeling of coming success buoyed him and gave him courage. He scarcely dared to breathe. Slower and slower he crawled, worming his way along, over and around the horrors in his path. The moments seemed like hours, the hours like days. Finally he came to a huge shell crater. He

approached its edge and looked over as a flare, brighter than usual, lit the desolation of No-Man's-Land. And as he looked, a face, mud covered, bruised yet familiar, looked into his. So close were the two faces that they nearly touched. Just for an instant the face in the deep ditch drew back; then two voices, whispering in a low tone, said, "Hello!"

The fellow in the crater sagged wearily against the steep incline of the side of the pit. He looked at the other and sighed a sigh of unutterable relief.

"Gee, I thought you would never come!" he said in a low tone.

"Keep still!" whispered the other, taking the boy below him by the collar and scarcely breathing the words aloud. "Are you hurt?"

"Not a scratch!"

"Well, take a hand and come along out. This is no place for us; and you have some tall explaining to do to the General!"

"We have to take the Lieutenant with us," said the boy in the crater.

"What Lieutenant?" demanded the other.

"Lieutenant Bogardus. The General sent me after him. That's why I am here."

"What ails him?" demanded the boy on the ledge.

"All shot up," said the other. "Darned if I know how badly. He is unconscious but was alive the last time I felt of him."

The boy on top turned cautiously around and slid, feet first, into the slippery, oozy pit. He followed to the side of the unconscious man, and as the next flare illumined the sky he ran a hand delicately over the tattered body. He shook his head.

"Not much hope, I should say," he whispered.

"It doesn't matter," declared the other; "we have got to get him back to our lines."

"All right!" said the other.

Together they lifted and pulled the limp body to the level of the ground, and then as carefully as they could they lifted it and, stumbling and swaying and falling, they made their way back. They could not wait for caution; the flares went up unheeded. A sharpshooter near the enemy's line discovered the strange, shambling group and commenced peppering at it as each flare brought them into view. The bullets whined over and around them. One cut its way through the sleeve of one boy, but did not touch the skin beneath. They felt no fear. The man whom they were carrying was thin and rather small, but his limp body weighed cruelly on their young muscles. With set teeth and streaming faces they kept on in their flight. At last when their breath cut them like knives and their knees almost refused to support them, they reached the safety of their own line and, laying their burden down on the edge of the trench, they slipped down and in a moment were

surrounded by helpers. The wounded man was hustled into the nearest shelter and given first aid, while a quick little corporal scrambled off and was back almost at once with stretcher bearers and a canvas litter. The two boys accompanied the wounded man back to the First Aid Station, an underground, roughly boarded chamber where desperate looking men worked silently at their task of keeping life in the tattered forms brought in to them.

While they labored over the still form just brought in, the boys dropped wearily down on the wet ground outside the first aid room, and looked at each other.

A pale glow from the first aid room below them shone upward on their white faces. They were caked with mud and grime but even through that mask a marvelous resemblance could be seen. Feature for feature, line for line, they were alike. Even their gestures were alike. As they sat staring at each other, they looked like some queer, repeated design; a double boy smirked and hollow-eyed.

They stared steadily at each other, then the boy on the ledge cleared his throat and spoke, still in the guardedly low tone that gets to be a habit with the men in the trenches.

"Well, Porky, old sport," he said, affectionately patting the other's soggy knee, "you gave me a nice little old jolt this time for fair! How in the name of time did you get out there in that shell crater? Gosh, if it wasn't for my hunches I dunno where you would be when you pull off these stunts!"

"What's the matter with *my* hunches?" demanded the boy called Porky. "I don't see but what I have about as many as

you have. I was waitin' for you. Knew you would hunt me up if I gave you time."

"Gave me *time!*" exclaimed the boy addressed. "Gave me *time!* I hustled out there as soon as I commenced to feel you wanted me. Honest, I don't see how people who are not twins ever get along. But I tell you they are laying for you at headquarters. The General is mad; just plain honest-to-goodness mad at you. I don't see why you had to pull off this and get us in all wrong." He leaned forward and whispered. "There is something doing up there—something big; and I think we are in on it. I don't know just how, but I heard enough to let me know that much. Perhaps you have queered it by cutting up this caper. Honest, Porky, what possessed you?"

"Possessed me?" exploded Porky. "Possessed me! Why, all I did was what I was *told* to do!"

"According to the General, you were sent on an errand that should have taken you half an hour. Instead you stay all day and I have to come dig you out of a shell crater about fifty feet from the German line. That's a peach of a way to do!"

"Say, hold up a minute!" said Porky. "Just you hold on! Of course I was sent on an errand! Know what it was? I was told to go get Lieutenant Bogardus and fetch him over to the General's headquarters. Well, I'm bringing him, ain't I? I have got him this far, anyhow. I am doing the best I can. I wish you could have seen me chasing that loon all over the place. I'm all in! I tell you, Beany, I have had some time! It makes me sore, too. I might have brought in a prisoner all

by myself if I hadn't had to fool with the Lieutenant. Go down and see what they are doing, will you, please? I'm dog tired, and I've got to get a move on and report to the General as soon as I know whether Bogardus can go along up there with me. I bet he can't; and I was told to bring him back with me!"

He leaned back and shut his eyes while Beany slid down to the first aid room. A glance showed him the condition of the unfortunate Lieutenant, and he hurried back to his brother.

"He won't go anywhere with you *this* evening," he said with the unconcern of those who are used to terrible scenes and fearful wounds.

"Let's get on, then," said his brother, rising stiffly and moving off in the darkness.

The other followed, and without further conversation they wound their way through the ruined streets of a devastated village where unsightly heaps of stones and mortar marked the site of pleasant homes. Stumbling along over the shell-ploughed, uneven ground, they walked for perhaps a mile until they turned into what had been a magnificent private estate. Nothing but cracked and crumbling posts were left of the splendid gateway. They passed onward through the ruins of a wonderful old park where they were twice stopped by vigilant sentries who demanded the countersign and turned a flashlight on their muddy faces. Turning and twisting, they followed the path up to the ruined castle which stood on a little rise of ground.

At the door, a high carved portal hanging and swaying on one hinge, they were stopped by another soldier, who recognized them, saluted, and stepped aside. They were not delayed again. Through what had once been a magnificent entrance hall they went, turned down one passage after another, sometimes finding themselves in unroofed and utterly wrecked portions of the great building. At last they were in a narrow, covered hallway, at the end of which was a door.

The hall was quite dark; they could just see to make their way along. As they approached the door at the end, the form of a man stooping against the panels slipped aside and seemed to disappear into space. There was no turn, no further passage down which he could have gone. One moment he was outlined against the white surface; the next he had vanished.

The boys stopped involuntarily and turned to each other.

"Did you see that?" said Porky. "Or am I getting batty?"

"Where did he go!" said Beany quickly for answer.

They slowly approached the door. There was a little L in the passage at the end but no outlet, no doorway. The walls, heavily faced with ancient oak, had no opening.

"What was he doing?" said Porky.

"Listening, I should say," said his brother.

They looked the door over carefully, and listened with keen ears pressed against it. Not a murmur could be heard

through its heavy surface. It was queer. Behind that door was the council room and private office of General Pershing. No one without proper credentials was ever allowed to enter the passageway leading to it. Yet both boys had seen the stooping figure, and both boys had seen it apparently vanish into space.

"Come on in," said Porky at last. "I have got to make my report."

"You go on," said Beany. "I don't have to report anything, and I want to look into this a little. It looks mighty queer to me. Where do you suppose that guy went?"

"Search me!" said Porky. "I know where *this* guy will go if I don't get on something dry and have a chance for a little sleep. Go ahead, prowl around and see what you can find."

He knocked, using a peculiar shuffling rap on the white panel. The door was instantly opened by a soldier and Porky stepped into the presence of the Commanding General.

CHAPTER II

THE PANEL IN THE WALL

A pair of piercing yet kindly eyes were fixed on Porky as he came to attention and awaited permission to approach the huge table at which sat General Pershing and several members of his staff. Porky was conscious of something serious in the air. The faces that looked up as he entered were serious, and some of them frowning. Colonel Bright threw him a glance, then continued his restless tramp up and down the further end of the large apartment. Only General Pershing seemed wholly at ease. He beckoned the boy. Porky came and stood opposite the General, the width of the table between them.

"Your report," said the General.

Porky breathed more freely. He was to be given a chance to explain his tardy arrival, at least, before being reprimanded.

"I report, sir, that I brought Lieutenant Bogardus as far as the First Aid Station in trench D," he said. "He is unconscious and could not come here. They think he will not die."

"He is unconscious," repeated the General, while Colonel Bright stopped his steady stride and stared at the boy.

"Yes, sir," said Beany.

"Did you find him at the wireless station?" asked the General.

"No, sir," said Porky.

"Where then?" snapped the officer with seeming impatience.

"In a shell crater, sir, just outside the German lines," said the boy.

The General started to his feet, then settled back in his chair.

"Make your report," he said quietly. "Make it unofficially, in your own way. I can follow it better."

"Yes, sir," said Porky, saluting again. He was so tired that he swayed, and involuntarily he caught at the edge of the table. The keen eyes watching him noticed.

"A chair!" he demanded, and some one shoved a seat toward Porky, who gratefully sank into it. He passed a weary, shaking hand across his brow.

"It is a pity to make you tell your story now," said the General kindly. "I am sorry. When you have finished you shall have a rest for a few days. But time means everything just now."

"I don't mind, sir," said Porky. Some one offered him a cup of hot tea and he drank it greedily. It revived him.

"I'm awfully obliged, General, sir," he said gratefully. "I guess I can tell the story clearer if I tell it sort of plain and fast."

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