

Our Boys and Girls BY AUNT BECKY

The Secret of the Silver Lake

By Henry Frith, Author of "Under Bayard's Banner," "For King and Queen," etc.

CHAPTER II.—Continued.

As the men advanced the old woman went to meet them. Some other women came out from their huts or shelter, and guarded Amy. "We are in a terrible fix," said Ernie; "do you think we shall be killed, Amy?"

"Oh, Ernie, no: don't talk like that! The man—Scout, isn't he?—will help us. You are in more danger than I am—they will keep me here. So you must try and run away, bring help, and save me. Do you understand?"

"Yes; but—" "Hush! here they come. Make friends with Scout and he will get you away."

"I will give him my watch," said Stephen—"he is a good man, I think. Oh, here are the horrid creatures."

Stephen was not far wrong. The men were not nice; indeed none of the people were exactly the ladies and gentlemen whom one would invite to a Christmas-tree party or to tea in the nursery. Ernie was quite frightened at them. Let me tell you what the chief was like, and you will know how unpleasant he and his tribe must have looked.

He was called Rangitiva, which means in his language Chief. The man was very brown, very tall and strong. His face was tattooed with curious marks, which Stephen afterwards heard had a meaning, and indicated rank or lineage. The Rangitiva wore a head-dress of feathers. A long mat of flax, like a cloak, covered with feathers and of different colors, was his costume. In his hand he carried a club of wood, shaped something like a violin and carved. This is the terrible weapon known as the meré, and is fatal in a Maori's hand.

This terribly stern and savage-looking personage stopped in the middle of the open space, and turning to the young people said—"Paheka! Waraki!" (which means strangers, Europeans). "E Hiné Ekoro!" (girl and young man); and then a number of other sentences were addressed to the old woman very rapidly. She answered as quickly, and the Scout whispered to Stephen, "They are talking about your sister."

"What are they saying?" asked the lad. "Hush!" whispered the Scout; "they mean to treat her well; but the old Mother yonder thinks that you and the other should be tortured!"

Stephen's heart sank, a terrible thrill made his blood run cold. "Torture! oh, no! They would not! I do no harm! What will they do? Kill us!"

"Not at once. They will perhaps tie you down in the swamp yonder, and let the mosquitoes sting you to death—or—Hush!" he cried. "Wait; let me listen again!"

The chief was speaking in a loud voice. He said—addressing the old woman—"O Mother, thou art right! A beautiful girl of the strangers has come amongst us from the Great Atua to give us back our land and treasures. Treat her well. She is of Ruapehu. (Ruapehu is a volcano—the abode of deities). The Paheka men are dogs—let them die, or enjoy the torture. The Koriri (Council) shall decide. These are my words."

The Scout whispered to Amy that she was safe, but when Ernest asked him what the chief had said, he only shook his head and the lads lost heart. Oh, fancy being killed by these savage men, who delighted in pain and torturing! It was well that the poor lads did not understand what fate was in store for them, unless something unexpected happened, for it was terrible.

The Scout was evidently anxious, and tried to devise a plan by which the lads could escape. "Where would you go if you got away?" he asked. "To our uncle Manton, on the Wanganui," replied Ernest, forgetting that he was talking to a man who was half native, half American; though, fortunately, the American half was the stronger.

"Manton? What, the stranger-soldier who came to find the 'Silver Lake'—the Marumaro (Moon Lake)—your uncle? I have seen him."

movement was made at the sound of a kind of gong. It was really a wooden tambourine, not the Chinese kind of gong; and at the sound all the warriors collected in the wide open space. They had been preparing themselves for this dance, for they were daubed and painted. The boys followed them to the side of the camp, hoping to get away, but they were hunted back and guarded while the war dance went on. The Scout whispered that these warriors were going to attack another tribe soon.

But when the dance commenced it was so peculiar as to be impossible to describe. It was almost funny, but terrible, to see all the painted warriors, a great number, sit down in lines and suddenly jump up and then begin kicking up their legs and jumping like so many dozens of "Jim Crows." They leaped into the air, whirling their clubs about, and seemed to have killed hundreds of imaginary enemies. All this time they screamed and yelled. Then the jumpers sang a song, after some head-man, line by line, and got very excited.

Then Stephen and Ernest were seized and carried back into the camp, where "Scout," as they called the man, had remained. The chief was much excited, and when the lads were brought before him, he said something which the interpreter told the boys meant that they should be tied to stakes and tortured.

"Oh, Scout, help us!" cried Stephen. "What must we do?" "Have you your fire-eating trick ready?" asked the Scout. "Yes. I can manage it presently. Tell them something; save us if you can, please, please do!"

Then the man said to the chief, "O Rangitiva, beware how you hurt these sons of the Pahekas! They can bring fire from their mouths and burn the Maori and his camp!" "It is false," replied the chief. "If the Paheka can bring fire from his mouth, let him show it, or he shall suffer the torture by fire himself!"

The Scout told this to the boys, and then Stephen, who had been making ready some string, which he had prepared for his conjuring tricks, and some tow, pulled some of the tow and spread it out. The natives who had gathered round looked at this, and the American man, Scout, at Stephen's request, made them examine it. Meantime Ernest crept away with the prepared string, and secretly lighted it at the fire. Then he wrapped the lighted string in the piece of tow, and handed it to Stephen unseen.

After putting some tow in his mouth and pretending to eat it, Stephen called for a leaf. A large leaf was procured by the Scout, who was then requested by the young conjurer to fan his ears, or to blow into them. This he did, and then the natives soon saw smoke beginning to issue from Stephen's nose!

Then sparks came out when he opened his mouth, which seemed full of fire. The chief was perfectly spell-bound, and when Stephen came towards him and his warriors, they stepped back in fear, and the chief cried—"It is enough; the Paheka is a son of the Atua of Ruapehu—the volcano)—he is welcome!"

"Don't be too sure of that," whispered the kind scout. "He is frightened now. After his supper it may be different. Be ready to go when I give the signal, and travel south, that way," he continued, pointing to a bright star. "Mind my signal. I will cool like the pigeon four times. I will take care of missy."

The natives were all frightened, and would not approach Stephen, who waited for the signal. The piping of the kiwi and the cry of the bittern were often heard as the feasting went on, but the signal did not come yet. Just as the boys were in despair they heard the soft clear notes of the wood-pigeon four times repeated.

"This is the time, Ernie! Come! Quick!"

CHAPTER III.—THE ESCAPE TO THE BUSH—AN ALARM.

Ernest did not hesitate a moment; but it was one thing to be told to come quickly, and another to go away quickly. The natives were all feasting around the fire, and had not attempted to molest the lads after the fire-eating trick, which had convinced the chief that Stephen was a very powerful and mysterious person. They fancied, indeed, that he could bring the fire from the volcano—the burning mountain Ruapehu—and did not interfere with the prisoners. The Scout also had done all he could to influence them; so when they were feasting around the fire on the fish and birds they had caught—thinking, perhaps, of eating Ernest some day—the Scout crept away, and gave the signal to the

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boys, as agreed upon. Stephen sprang to his feet, and stood listening. "Come, Ernie; Scout is over there."

He pointed to the south side of the open space, and began to crawl along the ground out of the glare of the fire. Ernie followed him; but they had to pass some guards, who were evidently on the watch to prevent any escape. The natives, armed with spears and clubs, were ready to kill anyone who tried to leave the encampment. What could the lads do? They could not pass the men on guard; they could not burrow in the ground, nor fly like birds in the air!

"Stephen," whispered Ernest, "we cannot get away. Look at those men. We cannot pass!" "We must!" replied Stephen. "It is our only chance. If we do not get off now, these wretches may kill us, and make us into 'long pig' for dinner. Wait a moment. Have you any matches?"

"Yes, why?" asked Ernest. "You will see. These fellows are afraid of fire. I will strike a match on one man's arm, and he will soon run off. He may kill us, after all—but we'll try our fortune."

"Oh, Stephen! can't we bring Amy with us? Do wait!" "She is guarded and in no danger. Besides, Scout will protect her; we can't. If we get away we may help her: if we remain here we cannot do any good whatever. So give me your matches."

Ernest handed his brother the box and then Stephen said, "Listen, Ernie—I am older than you: you must rush past when I strike the match, and leave me to take my chance. Scout will help you if anything happens to me. Mind, now, when I strike the match, one, two, three, jump up and go!"

"But, King, I can't leave you!" "Nonsense! it is our only chance. I confess I am in a horrible fright. But there is Scout cooling again. Now be ready."

Stephen then rose to his feet, and Ernest came crawling on his hands and knees behind him, like a huge dog, in the gloomy shade. As the lads expected, the native stopped Stephen, putting his spear across his chest, but did not attempt to molest him. The lad tried to pass, but the man was firm. Then Stephen, trembling, but brave, took two matches and waved them in the air, saying, in a warning tone, "One, two, three!" Before he had finished counting he pulled the matches along the spear, which crackled and sparkled.

"There!" shouted Stephen, and in a moment both matches ignited with a flash. The natives dropped the weapon and jumped back. Stephen waved the burning matches in the fellow's face. Ernest jumped up and struck another match, as he thought, but it proved to be a fuse which sparkled beautifully. This Ernest twirled about like a Catherine wheel with such effect that the guard darted into the bush with terror. Then Stephen and his brother rushed away, and in a moment found the Scout awaiting them.

"Splendid!" he exclaimed. "Now, my lads, off with you. Make for that star. There is a track here; keep to it. Don't wander, mind, or take any short cuts. Here are some food and water, and my revolver. Be careful; I will join you if I can. Make for the hills yonder and wait one day. If I am not there by sunrise day after to-morrow, go on across the hills southwards, and you will reach a British settlement. Now run!"

"But we cannot take your revolver, Scout."

"Yes, you must. You may want it. There is open ground beyond the hills where is a very mysterious path, right into the mountain. Don't follow it. It is destruction. Now good-bye."

(To be continued.)

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