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AMERICA FIRST

Frances Greene
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America First:

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CALLED TO THE COLORS

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Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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Frances Nimmo Greene

America First

CALLED TO THE COLORS

This is the story of a "tenderfoot" – of a pink-cheeked, petted lad, and of his first service as a Boy Scout.

Danny Harding was what his mother's friends termed "wonderfully fortunate," but Danny himself took quite another view of his life's circumstances as he hurried home from school one afternoon, an hour before the regular time for dismissal.

The day was golden with sunshine, but the boy's spirit was dark. There was singing in the air and singing in the tree tops, but in the heart which pounded against his immaculate jacket were silent rage and despair.

The Whippoorwill Patrol had been called to the colors, and he the untried, the untested tenderfoot would have to remain at home in luxurious security, while the huskier, browner, less-sheltered lads answered their country's call. It was beyond the power of a boy's heart to endure – the mortification – the wild despair of it! They would call him a slacker, a *coward*! But, worse still, his country needed him, and he could not answer!

Danny brushed away the tears which threatened to blind him, and stumbled on.

The call had come through a telegram from the Scout Master to the boys while they were yet at school, and the teacher had promptly dismissed them to service. The Whippoowills were to leave immediately upon an expedition to the mountains, but just what duty they were called to perform was not stated in the brief message. All they knew was that they were to leave at once for a certain distant mountain-top, there pitch tents and await orders for serious service.

On receipt of the news the other boys had rushed off noisily with eager joy to don their khaki uniforms and make ready, but Danny had slipped down a by-street – a wounded, a hurt thing, trying to hide his anguish away from mortal sight. He would not be allowed to go – he knew it – for he was the only son of a widowed mother who loved him all too well. He was her all, her idol, and her days had been spent in pampering and shielding him.

Only a week before, the scouts had gone on a hike together and she had refused absolutely to allow Danny to accompany them – the sun would be too hot, he might get poisoned with wild ivy, he would be sure to imbibe fever germs from the mountain spring!

No, thought the miserable boy, she would be doubly fearful, doubly unwilling, now that the Whippoowills were to do serious scout duty on Death Head Mountain.

Danny's soul raged against his soft fate as he stumbled up the side steps of his handsome home and entered his mother's presence.

He did not fly to her arms as he was wont to do, but, instead, flung himself into the first convenient chair with a frown. He could not trust himself to speak.

But even in that moment of stress Danny realized that his mother had not hurried to him for the usual kiss. She was struggling with some sort of bundle, and she only looked up with a quick smile.

The next instant, however, the smile of welcome died out of her face, and she stopped suddenly and regarded him with a startled question in her eyes.

Danny frowned more darkly, and moved uneasily under her searching gaze. He looked away in a vain attempt to hide the tears which had sprung to his eyes.

And then came the unexpected:

"Danny," said his mother, in a voice that sounded new to him, "I received a long-distance phone message from the Scout Master, and – he said he had wired to the school – "

She paused a moment, and then asked: "Didn't you get the message?"

"Yes," said the boy doggedly.

There was a pause, and then his mother deliberately put down the bundle she had been working with, and approached. She came and stood before him, with her back to the table as if for support. Danny did not look up into her face, though he saw her white, jewelled hands grasping the edge of the table, and they were strained and tense.

"My son," she said, "what is the matter with you?"

He was too full to answer.

"Danny," she began again presently and in that new voice, "you won't *do* this way – you *will not!*" And then suddenly a white, jewelled hand was struck fiercely upon the table, and the new voice exclaimed passionately:

"Daniel Harding, if you sit around and cry like a baby when you are called to the service of your country, I'll – I'll *disown* you, sir!"

"Mother!" And Danny sprang to her arms.

There were a few moments of sobbing, laughing confession from Danny, and then his mother explained to him her unexpected change of attitude toward scouting. Danger? – yes, of course she knew that this might involve danger to him, but this call was for no frolic – it was to the service of his country! He *was* her all, everything in the world to her, but the one thing which she could not, would not bear would be to see him turn "slacker" and coward when other mothers' boys – not ten years older than Danny – were already on the firing-line in France!

"Our part in this war is the old fight of '76, Danny" – she said to him – "*nothing less than that!* The Colonists fought to win independence for America. We are fighting now to save that independence won. And if it takes every man in America – every boy in America – if it takes *you*, Danny – there is just one answer for an American to give."

And then the two of them hurriedly finished tying up the

bundle she had put aside. It was his kit for the expedition!

It was a newer, bigger ideal of patriotism which Danny Harding took with him into his service on Death Head Mountain. His mother, who loved him all too well, had yet sent him from her with nothing short of her positive orders to do his duty like a man.

The Whippoorwill Patrol had answered the call to service, and the growing dusk found its members arranging their camp for a night's bivouac in a lonely stretch of woods "somewhere" on the crest of the Blue Ridge Mountains.

The Scout Master had not come, but his orders had, and the Whippoorwills were busily engaged in executing them.

"Camp in Mica Cove, conceal your fires, and wait for me," the Scout Master had telegraphed. "You are called to service."

So here they were in Mica Cove, hardily preparing for whatever service to their country it might be theirs to perform, and excitedly guessing at what ominous circumstance had necessitated their sudden calling out.

Of course, everybody knew that old "Death Head" must have come into some added evil repute, and would have to be taken in hand. And that they would shortly be scouting over all its lonely trails nobody had any doubt whatever.

There were eight of them, for the whole patrol was present.

Youngest and happiest of them all was the pink-cheeked, petted tenderfoot, Danny Harding. He was no "slacker," no "coward"! He was here with the others to play a manly part in serving his country, and his mother had sent him from her with a smile!

Besides Danny, there were in the ranks L. C. Whitman, nicknamed "Elsie," Ham and Roger Gayle, Alex Batré, Ed Rowell, and Biddie Burton – as husky and jolly a bunch as could well be got together. All these were older than Danny, and, as all were more or less seasoned to scouting, they were quite disposed to have their fun out of the new recruit.

Danny took their teasing in good spirit, however, for he felt that it was part of his initiation into their envied circle. They were big boys – brown like the woods of which they had become a part, panther-footed, eagle-eyed, efficient. Danny felt that he would be willing to suffer much to become as they.

The tenderfoot watched them all to see just how a scout was supposed to act, but it was to Willard McKenzie, the resourceful leader of the patrol, that his eyes turned oftenest in frank admiration.

McKenzie was the oldest of the bunch – quite seventeen – and five years of scouting had stamped him a man as Nature meant him to be. He knew and could answer every bird-call, could follow a wood-trail unerringly, could find himself in any emergency by the chart of the stars above him. He was the trusted friend of every wild thing about him, and brother to every wind that blew. The tenderfoot watched the graceful movements

of the leader's Indianlike figure, studied his genius for quiet command, and decided promptly to be, one day, a second Willard McKenzie.

In obedience to McKenzie's orders, the boys built their camp-fire within the cove, where it would be hidden on three sides by peaks which towered above, and on the fourth by a dense thicket.

Mr. Gordon, the Scout Master, had not come, nor did they know when to expect him. But they knew enough to obey their leader, and this they were proceeding to do.

It was a simple matter – getting the camp ready – and the boys thoroughly enjoyed it. As they were to sleep on the ground, rolled in their blankets, they had merely to clear the space about them of underbrush and fallen timber, and build the fire for cooking.

Of course they talked of war as they worked, for they were scouts in khaki, preparing for action.

Ed Rowell claimed for cousin one of the American engineers who fought their way out of German captivity with their bare fists. Batré's older brother was right then cleaving his winged way through clouds of battle in the service of the La Fayette Escadrille. Whitman knew a man who knew a man who was in the 167th Infantry Regiment when it made with others that now historic march, knee-deep in French snows.

Danny said nothing, for he was a quiet, thoughtful lad. But he had vividly in mind a handsome fellow of only eighteen who, until America's declaration of war, had Sunday after Sunday carried the golden cross up the aisle of the little Church of

the Holy Innocents to "Onward, Christian Soldiers." Danny had heard his mother say that it was that song which had sent the young crucifer bearing the Red Cross of Mercy right up to the German guns.

But their talk was not all serious. They were brimming over with life, and they laughed and scrapped and worked together with a zest which made even bramble-cutting enjoyable.

It was when the big fire was glowing red and they set about preparing their evening meal that the best part of the fun began. Whoever has not broiled great slices of bacon or toasted cold biscuits on sharpened sticks before a cheery camp-fire, who has not roasted sweet potatoes and green corn in glowing ashes, who has not inhaled the aroma from an old tin coffee-pot, spitting and sputtering on a hot rock, should join the Boy Scouts and hike back to the heart of nature.

Oh, but it was fun! All except the holding in check of savage appetites till the mess should be cooked. Ed Rowell had been detailed to toast the biscuits, and repeatedly threatened to "eat 'em alive" if they didn't brown faster.

Danny, who, with Alex Batré, had been directed to broil the bacon, couldn't for the life of him keep from pinching off a crisp edge now and then to nibble. And yet only yesterday Danny Harding would have turned up his nose at bacon. The stimulating fresh air and the hard work of camp life had begun to get in their good work on him.

On the other side of the fire from Danny, Ham and Roger

Gayle were roasting corn and sweet potatoes in the ashes, and a little beyond, Elsie Whitman was filling the water-cans from a trickling mountain spring – while Biddie Burton was busily engaged in getting under everybody else's feet and teasing whomever he could.

McKenzie, their leader, was momentarily absent, having gone down to the road below the cliff on which they were encamped to see if their fire could be sighted from that point through the screening thicket.

The boys had from the first been instructed by McKenzie to keep their voices lowered. They were there for serious service, he had told them. And the necessity for stealth and the promise of adventure had for a time keyed them up to the highest pitch of excitement.

But when the interest of cooking supper became uppermost – especially when the scent of the bacon and coffee began to fill the air – thoughts of adventure withdrew a little to a distance and whispered merriment became the order of the hour.

As was natural, they turned on the tenderfoot their battery of teasing, and the tenderfoot bore it as best he could.

"Its mother washes 'em," averred Biddie Burton, coming up behind Danny and carefully examining his ears as he knelt at his work.

"Sure she does," laughed Ham across the fire, "and they say that a sore tooth in its little mouth aches everybody in the family connection."

"Look out there, something's burning!" broke in Ed Rowell suddenly. And the next moment Ham and Roger were busy rescuing from the fire the scorching potatoes.

"I declare," scolded Biddie, lounging up, "I could beat you fellows cooking, with both hands tied behind me."

"Why haven't you ever done it, then?" snapped the elder Gayle, sore over his partial failure.

"Why, nobody has ever tied my hands behind me," came in seemingly hurt explanation from Biddie, and the crowd laughed.

McKenzie had directed them not to wait for him, and they did not. Another five minutes found them eating like young wolves around a languishing fire.

Later, when the fire winked lower, and the meal was finished – when the screech-owls began to send their blood-chilling, shivering screams through the forest – they drew closer together and began to talk of weird and haunting things.

"Over yonder, on the real 'Death Head,'" began Roger, bringing the interest down to the spot, "is the haunted tree where –"

"Look out," broke in young Rowell, "a little more of that and friend Danny over here will cut for home and mother."

"I'll do nothing of the kind; I'm not a baby!" exclaimed Danny indignantly. But all the same, his heart was already in his mouth, for Danny had never been distinguished for signal bravery.

"No, you are not 'a baby,'" put in the unquenchable Biddie, "but before we get out of these woods you are going to wish you

were a baby, and a *girl* baby at that!"

Danny did not reply to this. He only sat very still, wishing that Willard McKenzie would return from his prolonged trip, and thinking of the mother who was looking to him to play the man.

The scene lost its glow. The surrounding forest grew darker, taller, and began stealing up closer about them.

"If you cry like a baby – !" Danny's mother was whispering to his sinking heart.

The others had fallen into an argument about the exact location of the haunted tree, but presently Ed Rowell asked impatiently:

"Well, what is it about the place, anyway?"

"Haunted!" exclaimed Ham. "A murderer, hunted with dogs through the mountains, hanged himself on – "

"And the old tree died in the night," assisted his brother. "And it stands there now, naked and stark and dead. At night – "

Danny's heart stood still to hear.

"At night," broke in Whitman, "if you creep up close, you can see the dead man swinging in the wind!"

"*Listen!*" exclaimed Biddie under his breath.

It will have to be recorded that they all jumped violently at the exclamation.

"What?" demanded L. C.

"And hear old Danny being quiet!" finished the teasing scamp.

"You bet you, and he'd better be quiet – " began Roger.

But Whitman interrupted:

"Danny's afraid of ghosts, anyway," he declared, "I tried to leave him in the graveyard once, but he was home in his mama's lap before I started running."

"I'm not any more afraid of ghosts than you are," Danny protested hotly.

"Oh, *aren't* you?"

"No, I'm not!"

"All right, then," the big boy taunted; "I've been to the haunted tree by myself at night – these fellows all know I have – now suppose *you* go."

"Sure, tenderfoot," put in young Rowell; "here's a perfectly good chance to show your nerve."

"He hasn't any," sneered Alex Batré.

But Danny drew back, aghast at the proposition – go alone to a spot like that, and at night!

"Go to it, kid," was suddenly spoken quietly in his ear.

Danny turned to see whose was the kindly voice that advised, and looked into Biddie Burton's eyes.

"Don't let 'em make you take a dare," came in another whisper. "*Go.*" Biddie was not smiling now, and there was a note of serious friendliness in his voice.

It suddenly came to Danny that he would give more to merit that new confidence on Biddie's part than to break down the taunts of the others. And yet he could not. He could no more command his shaking nerves to carry him to that unhallowed, ghostly spot than he could command the unwilling nerves of

another. His will-power had deserted him.

"I *dare* you to go!" badgered L. C.

Danny's spirit flamed for one brief moment. But in the very next his head dropped, and he turned away.

"This is going too far," the wretched little fellow heard Biddie Burton exclaim sharply.

"What is 'going too far'?" a new voice asked out of the darkness, and Willard McKenzie advanced into the group. "What is 'going too far'?" he repeated, glancing from one to another. No answer being volunteered, his keen glance quickly singled out the shamed tenderfoot.

"What have they been up to, Danny?" he asked.

Danny turned and faced him.

"Nothing that makes any difference," he said.

It was generous in him not to "peach," and so Biddie Burton's friendly glance assured him.

The incident passed with that, for McKenzie was full of something repressed, and, seeing it, the boys gathered close about him in eager questioning – all except Danny.

All except Danny! His brief career – his career that only an hour ago had promised so much – had ended, and in disgrace. He had taken a dare! Nothing would ever matter to him again – Danny told his aching heart – the boys despised him, all except Biddie Burton, and, somehow, Biddie's pity was harder to bear than despite.

"I went to the gap and wired Mr. Gordon," McKenzie was

saying now, "and he told me I could put you to it at once. He's had an accident to his car and may not get here for some time."

"What's up?" It was Roger who asked the question.

"Something serious," answered McKenzie, "but Mr. Gordon didn't say what. Have you had supper?"

They replied in concert, eager to receive orders.

"Well," continued McKenzie, "we've got to cover the mountain here, for signs of – anything unusual. You'll have to be careful not to run into trouble yourselves, but you must know your ground. There'll be a good moon if the clouds break."

"Glory be!" Danny heard Elsie Whitman breathe in expectant ecstasy, and he would have given the world to have felt with him that eager joy. But Danny had taken a dare!

The others were chattering now, as eager as Whitman to be off on the trail of adventure.

McKenzie was giving orders:

"Whitman, you can take the north trail, and bear down over the mountain. Ham will strike out down the creek to the left there, and work around to your territory. There's an old cabin hidden by scrub-oaks and rocks about a quarter below the bridge there, Ham. Know it for what it is, but don't you run your long neck into danger."

In spite of his hurt Danny was getting interested. He crept up on the outer edge of the group and listened, wide-eyed, as the other boys eagerly accepted their several commissions.

"Roger and Ed," their leader was continuing, "bear south till

you get below the drop of the cliff, and then separate and work that territory between you" – with a sweeping gesture. "Alex and Biddie – let me see – you two go over the mountain to the right of Elsie – No, there's the Death Head trail – " He paused a moment in thoughtful survey of them, and the boys looked at each other apprehensively. Not one of them was anxious to work the trail of evil name. Suddenly, however, McKenzie's eyes lighted on Danny Harding, and an inspiration seemed to come to him.

"Say," he exclaimed, "I'll give the new recruit a chance at that. Come here, scout." And he laid a kind hand on Danny's shoulder and drew him into the circle.

Somebody on the outskirts of the group laughed.

"Now you are going to do your first service for your country," McKenzie said to the tenderfoot; "but whatever you do, be wary, because – "

Somebody else laughed, and McKenzie looked about sharply. "What's the joke?" he asked.

"Danny's afraid," the mocker explained; "that's where the dead man swings."

Biddie strolled forward. "Alex will be enough to work Elsie's right," he said to McKenzie. "Give me the Death Head trail. You'll need Dan here about the camp."

But Danny raised his head quickly. It is true that his face was dead-white, but his head was up.

"I'll go to the Death Head," he said to McKenzie.

The crowd was dumb-struck.

"But you got white-livered and backed down – " L. C. began, after the first shock of his surprise.

"I wouldn't go when you dared me to," said the tenderfoot, "but this is – different." And he added in his heart: "This is for *my country*."

"But he *is* afraid," put in Roger. "Look at him!"

McKenzie took a long, straight look into Danny's white face and determined eyes, and then turned to Roger.

"All the gamer of him," he said, "to go in spite of being afraid – that's the stuff that Pershing is looking for. And Mr. Gordon says that a boy who 'isn't afraid of anything' hasn't sense enough to be trusted with a commission. "Kid," he continued, turning to Danny, "you find out all that there is to be known about the Death Head vicinity before you show up in camp again."

"All right," said Danny.

There was a gasp of surprise among them at the tenderfoot's final acceptance of the commission, but not one of them – not even Biddie – believed that he would be able to carry it through. And the sensitive, high-strung Danny went out from among them burdened with the feeling that they did not look for him to succeed.

McKenzie walked a little way with him – big-brother fashion, with an arm over his shoulder – and gave him careful directions as to how to proceed. There would be a moon if the clouds broke, his leader warned him, and he was to keep to the shadows.

"I'll be leaving camp myself," said McKenzie, "and will not

show up again for a couple of hours. You will probably get back before the rest of us, so just roll up in your blanket and lie close under that ledge yonder – you will be perfectly safe there." A little farther up the mountain trail and McKenzie paused.

"Never mind about the dead man, scout," he admonished finally, "but keep your eye peeled for the live one, and – 'the best of luck!'"

"The best of luck!" That was what the men at the front said to a fellow when he was going over the top of the shielding trench into the dangerous unknown.

At the familiar phrase in parting, Danny drew a quick, deep breath. Yes, he was going "over the top" – and he was going *alone!*

Then McKenzie slipped quietly back, and Danny started forward up the long, dark trail alone. The ghost of a moon showed dimly through the black cloud-rack, now and again, and fitfully relieved the enveloping darkness.

Only once did Danny look back. That was when he came to the first turn in the mountain trail which his leader had carefully explained to him. Beyond that turn, and it would be good-by to the last cheering, reassuring gleam of their camp-fire, to the last faint sound of comforting voices.

Danny paused and looked back. Only two remained in the bright circle toward which his rapidly chilling spirit was reaching back. He recognized at once the tall, slim form of McKenzie, but – Yes, that chunky one was Biddie Burton. The two of them

were standing close together, talking earnestly. And now Danny caught, by a sudden leap of the firelight, the fact that they were looking toward him. Biddie was nodding.

It was so bright, so safe back there where they had laughed and feasted and wrangled together. Then suddenly Danny thought of the young crucifer in the little Church of the Holy Innocents.

"Onward, Christian Soldiers!"

The next moment Danny was groping, feeling his trembling way, but that way was *onward*. The heart in his breast beat an alarm to every nerve in his body, but he kept his face toward the dim, dark trail. A lump rose in his throat and threatened to choke him. He gulped it down, and crept forward.

McKenzie had told him that a scout must keep his head. That was the hardest part. A fellow could force himself to go blindly to a haunted spot at night, but to think, to plan, to watch as he went – !

But he was a scout, and a scout must "be prepared." Danny forced himself to think as he went. He was not following that gruesome trail in response to Whitman's dare – he was scouting old Death Head in the service of his country.

Danny found that he could follow McKenzie's directions better than he had hoped. Now that his eyes were thoroughly accustomed to the dark, he could descry the blacker landmarks for which his leader had prepared him. After the turn in the mountain trail, an abrupt and jagged cliff ahead beckoned the way. The shadow of the cliff won, Danny waited for another

appearance of the pale, cold moon by the help of whose light he hoped to locate the three giant pines – his next objective. From the pines, McKenzie had told him, old Death Head could be sighted plainly enough, for from that point it was silhouetted, black and unmistakable, against the sky, and its summit was marked by the stark, white, blasted tree of evil fame.

"That's where the dead man swings!" echoed in Danny's memory. And for a moment it seemed that he *must* give up and fly back to safety. But something said: "I'll disown you, sir!" And Danny again turned his face in the direction of his duty.

The moon looked out of the drifting clouds. Danny located the three giant pines in the distance, and for one blessed moment saw a reasonably clear path, skirting along the mountainside.

Darkness again! But Danny took the skirting path to the pine giants.

Once he nearly lost his nerve altogether, for suddenly there was behind him a sound as if some human foot had stumbled. The tenderfoot dropped warily to the long grass at one side of the path, and listened. A long, long time he listened, but not another sound did he hear. At length he told himself that the step was that of some wild creature which he had disturbed.

Then forward again! Creeping, panther-footed.

Danny reached the pines at last – and sure enough, old Death Head rose all too plainly before him. He saw, or thought he saw, a tall white something on its summit.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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