MMercer Boys ona Treasure Hunt

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THE MERCER BOYS ON A TREASURE HUNT

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AUTHOR OF

"The Mercer Boys at Woodcrest," "The Mercer Boys' Cruise in the Lassie," "The Mercer Boys' Mystery Case," "The Mercer Boys on the Beach Patrol," "The Mercer Boys in Summer Camp."

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CONTENTS

CHAPTER

PAGE I The Professor's Letter 3 The Story of the Phantom Galleon 13 III A Royal Invitation 20 IV The Professor is Attacked 29 V The Prowler in the Night 41 VI The Scene in the Moonlight 52 VII Sackett's Raid 63 VIII The Search is Begun 72 IX The Ruined Castle 81 X The Rope in the Dungeon 92 XI The Underground Passage 101 XII The Tolling of the Bell 109 XIII A Forced March 119 XIV History Repeats 129 XV The Mountain Sage 139 XVI The Landing Party 150 XVII The Escape 159 XVIII Treasure and Treachery 170 XIX An Old Friend Joins the Party 182 XX The Tar Barrel 191 XXI The Cairn 201 XXII The Den 211 XXIII The Dragon's Last Stroke 219 XXIV Ned Takes a New Overseer 237

THE MERCER BOYS ON A TREASURE HUNT

CHAPTER I THE PROFESSOR'S LETTER

"I'd like to have a crack at that ball," said Don Mercer, with a grin.

His brother Jim returned the grin as he said: "Let's go out on the field and ask the kids to toss us one. They won't mind giving us one swing at it." The two Mercer brothers were standing at the edge of a large vacant lot near the center of their home town one morning late in June. They had been home from Woodcrest Military Institute for a week now on their summer vacation, and this particular day, having nothing more exciting to do, they had wandered around the town, coming at length to a familiar field where they had often played baseball. A number of youngsters were on the ground now, tossing and batting a discolored baseball, and the sight of them had caused the sandy haired, slightly freckled Don to express his wish.

The two boys walked across the field toward the boys and Don said: "Wonder how much further I can hit it now than I could when I played here as a kid?"

"Hard to tell," returned Jim. "But we certainly got quite a bit of practise this spring at Woodcrest."

The small boys looked at them as they drew nearer, but as the Mercer boys were well known the boys felt no alarm or resentment at the approach of the larger lads. Don walked over to the boy who held the bat and held out his hand.

"How about giving me one crack at the ball, Charlie?" he asked.

The boy smiled and extended the bat, a bit of embarrassment in his look. "Sure, Don. Take a couple of them," he invited.

"I guess one will be enough," remarked Don, as he turned to face a boy who held the ball. "Put a good one over, Tommy, will you?" The boy addressed as Tommy grinned boyishly and turned to the youngsters who stood far afield, waiting for flies to be batted to them. "Get way out, you fellows," he cried. "This fellow can hit 'em!"

The two fielders backed away and Tommy threw a fast ball to Don. The latter easily batted it out and one of the youngsters caught it triumphantly. Don handed the bat to Jim, who in turn cracked the ball out along the ground.

"Just one more, fellows," begged Don, taking the bat from his brother's hand. When the ball had been turned over to young Tommy he wound his arm up slowly and then pitched it with considerable force in Don's direction.

"Hit that!" he cried.

It was traveling on a straight line and Don swung the bat around sharply. There was a singing crack as the wood met the ball, and the muddy spheroid sailed in a mounting curve up into the air. It passed high above the fielder's head and made its way straight for the side window of a small house that stood on the edge of the field.

"Oh, boy!" shouted Jim. "Right through the window!"

His statement was correct. With a disconcerting crash the ball smashed the window to pieces.

Don dropped the bat and shoved his hands into his pocket. "Well, I'll be jiggered!" he exclaimed. "How is that for bad luck? Right through Professor Scott's window!"

"I hope the professor wasn't at home, and in that room," said Jim. "Guess we had better go over and see about it."

"Right you are," nodded Don. "Thanks for the hits, kids. Come on, Jim."

Leaving the boys to gather and talk things over in awed tones the two Mercer brothers made their way across the field in the direction of Professor Scott's house. The gentleman mentioned had been their history teacher while they were in grammar school, and they knew him quite well, so they had no great fears as to the outcome. No one had appeared at the window or at the doors, and Jim supposed that the professor was not at home.

"I guess not," Don returned, "or he would surely have appeared by now. But we'll go over and see, and if he isn't we'll leave a note and tell him who did it, and offer to pay for it."

While the Mercer boys are making their way across the field something may be said as to who they were. Both boys, fine, manly chaps, were the sons of a wealthy lumber man of Bridgewater, Maine. They had lived the life of healthy young men whose interests were centered in worthwhile things. Of late they had had some adventurous events in their lives, some of which were related in the first volume of this series, The Mercer Boys' Cruise in the Lassie, when they ran down a marine bandit gang, and later when solving a baffling mystery at the military school, details of which were related in the second volume entitled The Mercer Boys at Woodcrest. Together with their comrade, Terry Mackson, they had faced many perils and adventures, and now they were home to spend, as they thought, a comparatively dull vacation. Just how deeply mistaken they were in their thought will be found later.

They entered the front yard of Professor Scott's house and walked around to the side, where the broken window faced toward the empty lot. There appeared to be no one at home, but when they came opposite to the window Don raised himself slightly on his toes and looked in. Then he dropped down again and looked at Jim in astonishment.

"The professor is at home," he said, in a low tone. "He's sitting there, reading a letter!"

"Reading a letter?" asked Jim, amazed.

"Yes," answered his brother. "Look in."

Jim raised himself and looked in the window. A tall man with bushy white hair and a thick iron gray beard was seated at the desk in what appeared to be a study, busily engaged in reading a letter. Near him, almost at his feet, lay the boys' ball, and fragments of broken glass littered the floor. The professor was apparently deeply absorbed in his letter.

"Well, what do you know about that!" exclaimed Jim, softly. "Doesn't even seem to know that the window is broken! We always knew that he was somewhat absent-minded, but I thought he was more responsible than that!"

Before Don could reply there was a stir in the room and the next minute the professor came to the window and looked down at them. He still held what appeared to be a lengthy letter in his hand, and he recognized them.

"Why, Don and Jim Mercer!" he cried, showing strong white teeth in an engaging smile. "I'm glad to see you home again. Did you come to see me?"

"I came to apologize for breaking your window, and to offer to pay for it, Professor Scott," answered Don. "I was batting out the ball for some boys, and I hit it harder than I expected to. I hope it didn't startle you very much?"

"I jumped a little bit," admitted the professor. "I did notice it!"

"Notice it!" exploded Jim. "I should think that you might have! It certainly made enough noise."

"It did make some. I felt that it was some of the boys playing ball and I was going to throw the ball back to them in a minute." He picked the ball up and handed it to Don. "Throw it back, and then come inside, won't you?"

Don threw the ball back to the small boys, who were watching from the field. "Are you sure we won't be breaking in on you, professor?" he asked.

"Not as much as you did a few minutes ago!" smiled the teacher. "Come around through the back way."

When the boys entered the professor's study he motioned them to chairs and asked them a few questions about their school life and studies. All the time he held the letter in his hand, and when he had finished talking about their school he took the lead in the conversation.

"I guess you boys wonder what is so interesting in this letter that I hardly noticed a ball when it broke through my window," he began. "Well, I remember how interested you boys were in history while in my classes, and I'm glad you came along when you did. This letter is from my son Ned, who lives in Lower California, and it contains one of the most fascinating stories I ever came across!"

Knowing as they did the professor's deep interest in historic and scientific studies and discoveries the boys found themselves interested at once. The teacher went on, after a glance at the letter, "Ned owns a small farm or homestead in Lower California near the mines at San Antonio and Triunfo, where he tests the ores and carries on general scientific studies. He tells me that the ores are refractory and not easy to test, but he enjoys the work and is devoting his whole life to it. I don't think he is quite as much interested in historic things as I am, but knowing how eager I am for relics and information of the past, he has sent me this remarkable piece of news.

"Some time ago, a steam trawler, while fishing in 130 fathoms of water, hauled up a piece of wreckage in its net. Upon examination it appeared to be the bulwark of an ancient Spanish galleon, with parts of the rigging attached. On the sides, plainly distinguishable, were designs in hand-sewn leather. Some of those big, lumbering ships were decorated quite extensively, you know, and this one was distinguished by its hand-sewn leather covering. It was evident that somewhere in the neighborhood a Spanish galleon had gone to the bottom, and it is always a safe conclusion that where there is galleon there is also a treasure. Those ships carried gold, silver and jewels from Old Mexico and Peru to Spain, and this particular ship may have been going home after a trip up the coast of California. That was the type of ship that the brave English seamen of Queen Elizabeth's time whipped so soundly at the time of the Spanish Armada, and there were hundreds of them in service along the shores of the Americas and the Islands.

"The spot was marked in the hope that treasure would be discovered, on the presumption that it was a treasure ship, and shortly afterward active operations were started by a California diving company. But although they searched the shore under water in minute detail they found nothing. The mystery is not that they didn't find any treasure, but that they didn't find any more of the ship. You might think that perhaps that particular piece had been washed there from some point further out, and it is possible, but the piece, when netted, had been buried in the mud, and it looks as though it had been there for centuries, though ships haven't a habit of sinking in sections, one part at one place and another part in a different place. However, they didn't find a thing, and at last the whole undertaking was given up."

"That is too bad," said Jim, who was deeply absorbed in the story. "So it was a false hope from the first."

"How long ago was that?" asked Don.

"That was a little over a year ago," answered the professor. "And that leads me to the second part of my story. Ned had given up all interest in it even before the diving and salvage company had, and he thought no more about it. The piece of wreckage is a treasure in itself and was sent up to San Francisco, where it was subsequently placed in a museum. Realizing that I would be interested in it all he first wrote to me at the time it happened, and I read it and wrote for news, but as the thing died down I forgot it, too. I have planned to run out to San Francisco sometime and see the part myself, and I intend doing so soon.

"Ned told me at the time that there had been some slight changes in the coast line during the last few centuries. A number of creeks that formerly ran into the ocean have closed up and disappeared, some of them filled with shifting sand and soil. I don't know if you were ever aware of the fact or not, but although Lower California has a dry climate and is mostly barren, there are spots where it is tropical and jungle plants and trees grow there in luxurious profusion. Although they have almost no rain, they do have violent storms, and at such times are treated to regular cloudbursts. At those periods the elements raise the old dickens and it was during these spells that some creeks and small rivers closed up.

"Maybe you wonder why I'm particular to tell you all this. I do so because I believe it has a direct bearing on the most amazing part of Ned's letter. I believe it explains the disappearance of the Phantom Galleon!"

"The Phantom Galleon!" cried Don, while Jim stirred in eager interest. "What is that, Professor Scott?"

CHAPTER II THE STORY OF THE PHANTOM GALLEON

"Well," answered the professor, slowly. "Up until a very short time Ned, and others, thought that it was only a legend. He hadn't been in the country very long before he heard it, and he put it down as one of those semi-historic tales that consist of half truth and half fancy. The tale had been handed down for centuries and always by word of mouth, and this is the story:

"On a certain evening, hundreds of years ago, a huge, lumbering Spanish galleon, loaded with treasure, fled along the coast of Lower California, pursued by three English barks. In the long run there was not a chance that the gold ship would get away, for the light English barks were much faster, and it was only a question of time before they hauled down on her and boarded. The way they were situated was this: one ship was in the rear of the Spaniard, one was coming up in front of it, and a third was moving in from the open sea. It was a regular trap, you see, and merely a matter of time.

"But fortunately—or unfortunately, I don't know which—for the galleon, one of those rare tropical storms came up at that moment when capture seemed assured for the gold ship. There was a furious rush of the wind, the sky grew black and lowering, and finally, in one great maelstrom of confusion the three ships and the galleon were blotted out of sight. The storm only lasted for some half hour, which is unusually long for some of them, and when it lifted the galleon was nowhere to be seen. The English barks had had all they could handle and had been so busy holding their own against the elements that they hadn't time to keep up the pursuit, and their conclusion was that the Spaniard had gone to the bottom of the sea. As it was built much higher and was much harder to handle than the lighter ships, the conclusion was justified, and the pursuers drew off and left the shore.

"As I told you, that had happened in the evening, just as dusk was coming down

over the shore and the sea, and the high decked galleon, with its spread of strained canvas and yellow streamers, its lofty rigging and its ornamental work, looked like some strange phantom as it fled down the coast. I don't know who saw it or how many saw it, but to this day the story, half legend as it is, has persisted concerning the phantom galleon. Some fantastic tales still linger about it appearing on dusky nights and sailing swiftly along the shore, but they are idle stories to which no one with intelligence pays any attention. Ned never gave the whole thing much credit until a remarkable circumstance brought it forcefully to his mind.

"Near his little ranch there is a large old estate which belongs to a once noble family of mixed Spanish and Mexican blood, and although they keep pretty much to themselves, out of a lofty sense of pride, they have been rather friendly to Ned, in their stately and exacting way. There was an old man who was head of the place, his daughter, and one or two servants. Lately the old gentleman died, and Ned kindly helped out with the funeral and the management of the ranch affairs until a permanent overseer was brought over from Mexico, and in her gratitude the young senorita allowed him to roam pretty much around the house. I suspect from his letter that he has of late become rather more than friendly with the young lady, but that doesn't make much difference either way. It seems that she had been left with quite a library, reading being an important business in such a lonely place, and some of the volumes were pretty precious, being hand written works of early settlers and priests, who thus left interesting historic records. One of these books attracted Ned's attention strongly.

"It had been written by a priest in the year 1571, and it described the Spanish treasure hunts, some of which were plain plundering expeditions, and this particular book related them in detail. Ned wasn't unusually interested until he came across the part relating to a chase that the galleon had had from three English ships. According to the author they had loaded with something like 100,000 pesos and a fortune in gold and silver bars, to say nothing of jewels, and had sailed for Upper California. But near the shores of Lower California the galleon had been sighted by an English bark, which had instantly given chase. The galleon, which had a good start, fled, but its chances of escape suddenly became less as another English ship appeared before it, and another bore down on it from the open sea. It was growing dark, wrote the priest, and there was some hope that it would slip away in the darkness, but something more to the point stepped in when a tropical storm wrapped the nearby world in temporary darkness. The *Don Fernando*, that was the name of the galleon, slipped into a

nearby creek or small river and ran hard and fast aground, the lofty masts and spars crashing down, a total ruin. The creek seems to have been far enough back for the wreck to have escaped the notice of the English, for they were not molested, and the crew, after assuring themselves that the treasure was safe, tried to make their way inland for help.

"But somehow or other—the writer does not say how—they all perished, and he alone escaped to Mexico, there to write down the story of the flight of the galleon. He affirms positively in his journal that the treasure was not touched, and he planned to raise enough men to go and get it. Whether he did or not no one knows, but if he didn't that treasure is still somewhere in a creek, in the wreck of that galleon, perhaps buried below the level of the sand which has shifted. Ned thinks that it is nearby and that is why he has written to me.

"The tragedy of the thing is this: the priest wrote everything except the name of the creek down which the phantom galleon fled. There are several pages missing from his book, and it breaks off like this: 'The ship with its fortune in gold and precious stones, its coin and bars, is still buried in the sand in a creek called——' and there it unfortunately ends. If the name was only there we could tell something, for it is always probable that someone can be found who will recall the name, no matter how ancient it may be, but as the name is lost, Ned faces a blank wall. He inquired from Senorita Mercedes just where she had obtained that book, but she knew nothing outside of the fact that it had apparently always been in their house."

"That certainly is interesting," said Don, as the professor stopped. "Your son Ned thinks that it is somewhere near his place?"

"Yes, he believes it is somewhere within a radius of a hundred miles. The legend has it that the galleon vanished somewhere right on that very shore, and that would indicate that the galleon ran up some creek very near to his place. If no one ever did get back and take that treasure it is probably in the rotted hold of the treasure ship, buried more or less deeply in the sand, just waiting for some lucky one to discover it. Much of the land near Ned's ranch has never been thoroughly explored, and it may be that it is nearer to him than he has any idea of."

"Has he made any effort to find it?" inquired Jim.

"A somewhat feeble one, yes. He endeavored to enlist the aid of some nearby ranch men, some half breed Mexicans, but although they started with some enthusiasm they soon gave it up. They are the kind who would not mind sharing in the rewards if someone else does the work. So he gave it up, except that he patiently read every other book in Senorita Mercedes' library in the hope of obtaining some clue, but the missing pages were not to be located and he is still no nearer to finding out the name of that creek than he was at first."

"And he never did find out how that book came to be in the library of the Spanish ranch?" asked Don.

"No, but we can hazard a guess as to that. The Mercedes family have lived in Lower California for at least a hundred years, but before that they came from Mexico. It is very possible that the priest had escaped to Mexico and fallen in some way in with this ancient Spanish family, perhaps dying there and leaving the book with them. How the last few leaves of the book came to be missing no one knows. But perhaps you can see the possibilities?"

"What do you mean?" asked Jim.

"I mean that perhaps someone has already read that book, tore out the sheets with the information on them, and has already found that treasure!" was the startling answer.

CHAPTER III A ROYAL INVITATION

They were somewhat dismayed at the professor's reasoning but at length Don shook his head. "I don't see that it is necessarily so," he insisted. "Of course, there is a big chance that such is the reason, but on the other hand it may simply be that the pages have been lost. It can be taken both ways."

"Yes," nodded the professor. "It can. That is why I would never allow myself any false hopes."

"Then you are going out and help Ned look for this treasure?" asked Jim.

"I'm going out more because he wants me to come than for anything else," said Professor Scott. "And as much for the change as for anything else. I've been studying pretty hard of late, and I'm sure a change of air and scenery wouldn't hurt me a bit. I haven't any idea that Ned will ever find that legendary treasure, but the fact that he found evidence that the story of the phantom galleon is true interested me greatly."

"But if you do go out there you will look around for it, won't you?" inquired Don.

"Oh, yes, Ned will see to that! He has the idea that he will run across it, and nothing stops him once he gets an idea. I'll join in with him and do some tramping around, but while he'll be looking for gold I'll be looking for health. I'm rather more sure of finding what I am after than he is."

"Just the same," murmured Jim. "It is a dandy opportunity, and I wouldn't mind having a shot at it."

"You boys are greatly interested," remarked the professor, looking at them keenly.

"I suppose we are," admitted Don, smiling. "It appeals to us, and I guess it would to any fellow. If you go, professor, we certainly wish you all kinds of luck."

"Thanks," said the professor. "If you went on such a trip, I suppose you'd hunt the treasure with much energy?"

"I guess we would," nodded Jim. "If it was anywhere near I guess we would uncover it."

"I don't doubt it," the professor smiled. He was silent a moment and then he asked: "Now that you boys are home for a vacation, what do you plan to do? Have you anything definite in mind?"

Don shook his head. "We might do a little sailing," he replied. "We have a fine thirty-foot sloop, and we may sail for a ways down the coast. Last summer we did and we had a good time."

"I know about that voyage," the professor returned. "That was the time you ran down those marine bandits, wasn't it? I remember reading about it."

"That was the time," Don answered. "We don't expect to run down any bandits this summer, but we may take a cruise."

"That is fine," said the professor, somewhat absent-mindedly. "So you two boys were interested in what I told you of Ned's letter, eh?"

"We couldn't help being," grinned Jim. "I guess every fellow is interested in treasure hunting."

"I suppose that is true," the professor returned. "Well, that is the contents of the letter which made me so interested that I paid very little attention to the ball as it broke the window."

"I'm sorry about that, professor," said Don. "How much is it, please? I'm very anxious to have it repaired."

"Forget it," said the professor.

But Don insisted, feeling that it would not rightly do to accept the professor's

generous offer to put it in himself, and at length the teacher agreed that Don should pay for the work. He rather admired Don's spirit in insisting upon paying his own way through life, and although he knew that the Mercer brothers had plenty of ready money he allowed Don to pay for the broken glass more as a concession to his spirit of the right thing to do than for any other reason. After Don had turned over the money to the professor the boys took their leave.

"Thanks for that interesting story, Professor Scott," said Jim, as they were leaving.

"Yes, we enjoyed it," added Don.

"You are very welcome," smiled the professor. "I thought you would be interested, and may—be—humph, well, let that pass for now. Good morning, boys."

The boys left the professor and walked slowly down the shady street, discussing the letter and his story. It appealed to them greatly.

"That sure was a strange thing, that finding of the old book relating to the flight of the galleon," mused Don. "Looks like the hand of fate, eh?"

"It surely does," chimed in Jim. "Those fellows took that treasure centuries ago, it lays buried in the sand for years and years, and then a chance discovery points to where it is. Sort of like a dead man's finger pointing at the treasure, isn't it?"

"Somewhat," admitted Don. "I rather feel that if the treasure had been found by someone else Ned Scott would not have come across that book. Now, that is my own way of looking at it. Just as the professor says, someone may have torn the valuable leaves, with the location of the creek on them, out and have found it long ago. But I somehow just can't believe it."

"Nor I," said Jim. "I'd surely like to be along when Ned Scott unearths that old ship and its treasure."

"Provided that he does," smiled Don, as they reached their home. "There isn't any guarantee that he will. It is always possible that the whole thing happened miles down the coast, for if I remember correctly, from my school map, Lower California is a mighty long stretch. Well, all I hope is that he'll tell us if anything turns up. Just as soon as he comes back, if we are home from school, we'll hunt

him up and ask him all about it."

"Surely," agreed Jim. "If he isn't home by the time we are ready to return to school we can see him during some vacation. Well, what do you say, old man? Shall we go down and tinker with the boat?"

"Don't think we have time," decided Don, looking at his watch. "That visit to the professor took up the whole morning, and mother will be waiting dinner."

The boys entered the quiet but homelike little house which was their home and prepared for dinner. When they sat down at the table Mr. Mercer, a kindly and energetic man, was there. He worked in a local office, where he ran his vast lumber business, and was generally home for meals. Margy Mercer was also there, and the family was complete.

"Well, what have you two fellows been doing this morning?" asked Mr. Mercer, as he vigorously attacked a piece of steak.

"Don's been breaking into people's houses!" chuckled Jim. "This was an expensive morning for Don."

Don related what had happened, and finding his family deeply interested in the professor's letter, told them the story of the phantom galleon. Mr. Mercer smiled as he finished.

"I suppose you two wouldn't mind going along on a trip like that, would you?" he asked.

"I should say not!" exclaimed Jim. "We'd go without mother's apple pie for a month to go on that trip!"

"Hum!" said Mr. Mercer. "Score one for mother's pie! I imagine if anything spectacular comes out of the professor's treasure hunt the newspapers will have it."

The two boys went for a brief sail in a small catboat during the afternoon and later worked at the bench in their boathouse, turning out the sides for some bunks which they planned to place in their little sleeping cottage at the end of the yard. They already had three beds in the little place, but lately Jim had hit upon the idea of constructing regular ships' bunks and they were now busy making the

pieces. They stuck to this job until the time of the evening meal, and after that they remained at home, listening to the radio entertainment.

Don, who was sitting near the living room window, idly looking out, suddenly uttered an exclamation and straightened up.

"What's the matter, Don?" asked Jim, quickly.

"Here comes Professor Scott!" Don exclaimed.

"In here?" demanded Jim.

"Yes, he's coming up the walk." And Don got up and went to the door, to open it for the teacher.

"How do you do, Professor Scott," he greeted. "Won't you come in?"

"Yes, thank you," nodded the professor. "Is your father at home?"

"Yes, he surely is," said Don. "Come right on in."

He showed the professor into the living room, where the Mercer family greeted him, and after a few minutes of pleasant talk Mr. Mercer guided him to his study, where they might talk in quietness and alone. Jim looked inquiringly at Don.

"What in the world do you suppose he wants with dad?" he whispered.

"Jiggered if I know," shrugged Don.

In less than half an hours' time the two men returned, both of them smiling, and Mr. Mercer turned off the radio. Then, as they sat down the father looked with mock sternness at his two boys.

"I want your promise to at least make an effort to keep out of trouble while you are with Professor Scott," he said.

"With Professor Scott!" echoed Don, while Jim stared. "Where are we going with Professor Scott?"

"Out to tramp all around the sands of Lower California, I think," Mr. Mercer returned.

"No!" shouted Don, leaping to his feet.

"No? Well, all right. I thought that you wanted to go, but as long as you don't why——"

That was as far as he got. "Of course we want to go," cried Jim. "By George, this is great. What made you decide to take us with you, professor?"

"It's a protective measure," smiled the professor, pleased at their enthusiasm. "I saw how interested you boys were when I told you about it this morning, and I was wondering if you would care to go and if I could persuade your father to allow you to go. You see, I want to go out there for a rest, and I'm afraid Ned will insist upon dragging me all over the country in search of Spanish treasure, so I'm taking you boys along as buffers, to help him in his mad adventuring."

"Well," smiled Mrs. Mercer. "We'll let them go if you'll try to keep them out of trouble, Professor Scott. They have a very bad habit of getting into plenty of it."

"I guess Ned will keep them so busy that they won't have time to get into any scrapes," said the professor.

They sat and talked for another hour, the boys unable to believe their good fortune, the suddenness of which had stunned them. The professor took his leave at last, telling them that he planned to start at the end of the coming week. After he had gone they sat and talked some more, the boys excited at the prospect of their coming trip.

When at last they went up to bed it was not to sleep immediately. They discussed the event for more than an hour.

"Dad and mother say for us to keep out of trouble," chuckled Jim. "We'll try hard to obey orders, but I do hope we have some exciting times."

"Don't you worry," chuckled Don. "I wouldn't be a bit surprised if we did!"

The two boys fell asleep, worn out by the events of the day. It is doubtful if they would have slept so peacefully had they been able to foresee the events which loomed before them.

CHAPTER IV THE PROFESSOR IS ATTACKED

After three days of preparation the boys and the professor were ready to leave for the west coast. They were to go to San Francisco and take a steamer there down to the settlements in Lower California. It was a bright Saturday morning when they waved out of the window to their friends on the station platform.

"Well," remarked Don, as the train moved out of the station. "We are off for new scenes at last."

The journey across the continent was uneventful. They enjoyed it thoroughly, never growing tired of the endless views which unfolded as the train sped westward. The professor, with his varied knowledge of places and people, his understanding of scientific facts and his historic incidents, proved to be a most delightful companion. In a few days they left the train at the great city of the coast and the professor hunted up a hotel.

Professor Scott had never been to California, although he had been in many other cities in the United States, and his interest was as keen as that of the boys. One of his first tasks, after they had been installed in a good hotel, was to hasten to the water front and inquire concerning a steamer to take them down the coast. When he returned he reported his findings to the boys.

"There is a steamer named the *Black Star* that will take us down the day after tomorrow," he said. "I went aboard and arranged for our passage. It isn't a passenger boat, but I didn't have any trouble in persuading the captain to take us as passengers. The boat is a fruit steamer, but they have one or two extra cabins for our use."

They turned in early that night and the next day took an extensive tour of the great city. A great many of the foremost buildings and places of interest were

visited, and they obtained their longed-for view of the piece of wreckage of the Spanish galleon of which Ned Scott had written them. It was a huge piece, worn by the action of the waves, with studded leather on the sides and pieces of rigging still clinging to it. It occupied a prominent place in the city museum.

"If that thing could only talk," the professor remarked, as they walked around it. "What a story it could tell!"

"I guess it would be very helpful to us, in our search," smiled Jim.

When evening came the boys were tired, but strange to relate, the professor was not. His interest in places and men amounted to a passion with him, and he loved to study them at every opportunity. The boys were sitting around in the hotel room and the professor, after walking around restlessly, suddenly faced them.

"Are you boys too tired to do some more walking?" he asked.

"Well, I'm pretty well played out," admitted Don. "But if you'd like us to go with you, anywhere, professor, we'll gladly go."

"Oh, no," replied the professor, hastily. "I just wanted to ask you if you'd care to take a stroll down near the water front. There are some very quaint places down there, and I'd like to visit some of them. But I don't want you boys to go out if you are tired." He reached for his hat and went on: "I'm going down there for a stroll. I'll be back shortly."

"If you want us—" began Jim, but the professor cut him short.

"No, no, not at all. You boys stay here and I'll wander a bit myself. See you later."

"Take care of yourself, professor," called Don, as he went out.

"I will, thanks. Don't worry; I'll be right back."

Once on the street the professor struck off for the water front at a brisk pace. In the hotel room Jim looked inquiringly at Don.

"Do you suppose it is alright for him to go?" he asked.

"I guess so," nodded Don. "He is pretty well able to take care of himself."

The city was wrapped in darkness when the professor began his wandering, a darkness which was broken by the bright lights on the business streets and the more feeble ones on the side streets. The professor headed for the wharves, where the masts of the medley of crafts could be seen rising above the low houses which fronted the bay. Down in this section the savant found some queer crooked streets, lined with rows of box-like houses and cheap eating places. Groups of men and women sat on the doorsteps and fire escapes, children whooped and played in the streets, and scraps of music, jarring one on the other, came from phonographs and radios. Sailors and business men walked back and forth in the narrow streets, and the professor found much to study.

He strode along the docks, examining with interest the multitude of ships there, ranging from huge ocean steamers to small private boats. Liners, tramp ships, battered steam boats, sailing vessels, schooners, yachts, sloops, catboats, yawls and power cruisers lay side by side with tugs and ferries. An army of stevedores worked under blazing arc lights loading and unloading, and the air vibrated with the rattle of machinery, the hoarse cries of the men, and the thump of boxes and crates. So deeply engrossed was the professor in the scenes which he was witnessing that he forgot the passage of time.

He had wandered far down the shore line when he came at last to a street more narrow and crooked than the rest. It was in fact nothing more than an alley, flanked by tall seamen's houses, with restaurants and pool parlors on the ground floors. The professor looked at a sign post and saw that it was named Mullys Slip.

"Mullys Slip, eh?" thought the teacher. "This is the quaintest of them all. I think I'll stroll up it."

Accordingly, he walked up the narrow sidewalk, looking with interest into the stores and eating houses as he passed by, listening to snatches of conversation as he passed groups who sat out taking advantage of the cool air. When he had walked to the end of the Slip he walked back, and seeing a well-lighted eating place near the dock, entered it and sat down at a round table. While he ordered a sandwich and coffee he looked around him.

It was a long, low room, the air of which was nearly obscured by tobacco smoke,

half filled at the time with men who evidently came from the ships. Most of them were eating, the rest were smoking and talking, and a few slept, hanging over the tables. The professor ate his sandwich and sipped his coffee, content and easy in his mind, until, looking across from him into a narrow corner, he found the eyes of two men fixed upon him.

One of the men was a powerful individual with a heavy, unhealthy looking face, whose eyes, set close together, looked slightly crossed. The other was tall and thin, with long and dangling arms. Both of them were dressed in rough black clothing, which gave no real hint as to what business they were engaged in. They might have been sailors or stevedores, and both showed unmistakable signs of hardy, adventurous lives. They had evidently been talking about the professor, for their eyes were bent on him with earnest scrutiny, and when they observed that he had seen them they hastily resumed their conversation.

The professor paid no attention to them at first, but went on eating, looking around with keen eyes and mentally cataloguing the men in the place. But when he once more looked across at his neighbors they were bending the same intent look upon him. Vague doubt began to stir the mind of professor Scott.

"I don't altogether like the looks of those fellows," decided the professor, as he called a waiter and paid his small bill. "By the way they look at me I'd say they were talking about me. All in all, I'm in a pretty rough neighborhood, and perhaps the sooner I get out of it, the better."

He went out of the place at once, casting a single look back of him as he did so, and he was not made to feel any easier as he noted that they were following him with the same steady look. He was not greatly alarmed, for he did not carry much money with him, but feeling that he would be better off on a well-lighted thoroughfare, he made his way back along the dark street. It was now growing late and the lights were being extinguished. He found his road darker than it had been when he had followed it earlier in the evening, and so he hurried on, bent on reaching the business section.

He had covered two blocks when he began to think that he was being followed. It was as much of a feeling as an actual fact, for each time he looked around he was unable to see anyone who looked as though he might be trailing him. He fancied once that he saw a shadow dart quickly into a doorway, but though he looked keenly in that direction he was unable to make sure.

"Humph, I had better get back to the hotel," mused the teacher. "I think I'm beginning to imagine things."

On the block beyond a number of dark alleys opened from the houses, and the professor was compelled to pass them. Either the houses were deserted or there was no one up at the time, for he saw no one as he crossed the corner. Only far ahead of him, on the opposite side of the street, a battered old car was pulled up to the edge of an empty dock, and a man sat looking out over the water at a group of three-masted coal carriers.

Just as the professor was passing a wide alley he thought he heard a step beside him. He turned his head quickly, and then gasped. Two shadows seemed to detach themselves from the passageway and bore down on him. Before he could utter any cry a powerful pair of arms was thrown around him and he was strained close to the body of a big man. At the same time, without loss of a moment, the second man dipped his hands into the professor's trousers pockets and into his inside coat pocket.

Taken completely by surprise the old teacher for a second did not offer any kind of resistance and when he did it was rather feeble, for his arms were pinned close to his sides, and he was fairly standing on his toes. But his feet were free, and he managed to kick the man who held him a smart blow in the shin. A low, growling curse was his reward, and a blow of considerable force followed, landing on his shoulder. By a sudden twist the professor squirmed from the arms of the man who was holding him, and strengthened by his indignation, which was kindling into hot wrath, the savant punched the second man full on the mouth.

The first man, who was none other than the narrow-eyed individual of the restaurant growled in his throat. "I'll bust your head, you old windjammer!" he roared, and swung his fist at the professor. The blow, which landed on the teacher's neck, felled him instantly to the sidewalk.

"Grab him up," ordered the second man, stooping over the professor, who was somewhat dazed. "We'll dump him in the bay."

Both men leaned down to pick up the form of the professor when there was an interruption. The young man who had been sitting in the nondescript automobile had had his attention attracted by the beginning of the struggle, and unnoticed by

any of the principals he had jumped out of the car and was now upon them. Although he did not know one from the other he could see that two were against one, and noting, under the faint light from a nearby lamp-post that the lone fighter was an elderly man, threw himself without hesitation upon the two wharf-men. His active fist jarred against the jaw of the heavyset man.

"Take that, with the compliments of the lone star ranger!" he muttered. "Don't know what it's all about, but that's my share."

His blow infuriated the man, who drove at him with an angry roar, but the professor was scrambling to his feet, and the second man grasped his leader by the arm. He spoke to him in a low tone, and the two, with a slight hesitation, turned and fled up the alley. Convinced that pursuit would be useless, the young man turned to the professor.

"Are you hurt, sir?" he asked, quickly.

In the faint light the professor saw that he was a boy of twenty or thereabouts, tall and somewhat lanky, with red hair and a lean face, on which freckles had taken up a permanent home. The professor shook his head.

"No, thanks to you. Those fellows were going to throw me into the water. Were you in that car?"

"Yes," grinned the boy. "That is my private chariot, called 'Jumpiter,' because of its habit of doing something very much like jumping! Have you been robbed?"

The professor felt through his pockets and nodded. "Yes, a few dollars and a letter has been taken from me. I don't care much about the money, but the letter was from my son Ned, and I valued that somewhat. I would like to thank you sincerely for your timely arrival."

"Don't mention it," begged the young man. "Let's get out of here. I'll drive you to wherever you want to go."

When they entered the battered car the professor told the boy the name of the hotel at which he was staying and they rolled away. Then the teacher asked the name of his rescuer.

"Mackson is my name," replied the boy. "Terry Mackson, from Beverley,

Maine."

"Why," exclaimed the professor. "I come from Maine, too. I am a history teacher in Bridgewater!"

"In Bridgewater!" cried Terry as they entered the business section. "Then you must know the Mercer brothers."

"Know them!" laughed the professor. "I have them here with me!"

"Here, with you? Well, I'll be jiggered! They are my very best chums!" said Terry. "Last summer I was in Bridgewater, sailing with them, and we go to Woodcrest together, in fact, we room together. What are they doing here?"

"We are going down to Lower California to visit my son Ned, on his ranch, and make some scientific studies, and perhaps look up a treasure that Ned feels sure that he can find nearby. How did you come to be out here?"

"I didn't have a thing to do this summer," explained Terry. "My mother and sister went to visit friends in New Hampshire, and so I decided to tour the country in my car. I've been out here for the last two days, and I was going to head for Mexico tomorrow."

"How very strange that we should meet," commented the professor. "You must step up and see the boys. They will be glad to see you."

"I won't be a bit sorry to see them," returned Terry, heartily. "They certainly will be surprised."

They drove on until they were almost at the hotel, and then Terry, who had been thinking deeply, suddenly began to chuckle. Then, as the professor looked inquiringly at him, the red-headed boy spoke.

"Professor," he said, "how would you like to help me in a little joke?"

CHAPTER V THE PROWLER IN THE NIGHT

A few minutes later the professor entered the rooms which he and the two boys had engaged together alone. He found Don and Jim reading some magazines which the hotel management furnished.

"Hello, professor," greeted Don. "Safely back, eh?"

"We were beginning to think that you had been lost," smiled Jim, putting down his magazine.

"I was not lost," returned the professor. "But I have had a most extraordinary adventure."

"What was it?" they asked, in chorus.

"I came across a very distressing thing," the teacher continued. "I wonder if you boys will help me? Outside, on a lonely street, I met a young man wandering, and it appears that he has amnesia!"

"Amnesia!" cried Don. "That means loss of memory, doesn't it?"

"Yes," answered the professor, seriously. "He could not remember who he was nor where he came from. I questioned him at length, and while he answers rationally enough, he simply cannot remember a thing past a week ago."

"That surely is tough," murmured Don. "What did you want us to do?"

"I have the young man outside here," replied Professor Scott. "I wondered if you two would help me question him? If we ply him with questions we may be able to suggest something that will make him remember who he is and some details of his past life."

"We'll be glad to help," said Jim, heartily. "Where is he?"

"I'll bring him in," replied the teacher, and he left the room.

"That's mighty hard luck," commented Don. "I hope we can do something to help."

A moment later the professor returned, gently leading someone with him. "Come right in here, young man," he said, loudly and gently. "There are only friends in here, so don't be afraid."

"Thank you sir," a voice replied. "Oh, if you can only do something for me!"

Professor Scott appeared in the room, leading with him a dazed-looking young man with red hair and freckled face, at the sight of whom Don and Jim sprang to their feet with a cry. The boy looked at them dully and swallowed.

"Terry Mackson!" they shouted.

"What!" cried the professor, in amazement, as he pushed the boy down into a large chair. "Do you know this boy?"

"We certainly do!" Don shot out. "This is Terry Mackson, an old chum of ours. We room with him at school."

The professor looked down at Terry, who stared in puzzled wonder at Don. "That is very strange. He doesn't appear to know you."

"Perhaps he has been hit on the head," suggested Jim, coming forward.

"This is fierce," said Don, worry on his face. "Terry, don't you know me?"

"Shoot if you must this old gray head, but I don't remember you, she said," was the unexpected reply, and the corners of his mouth, which had been quivering, expanded. The professor burst into a roar of laughter.

The Mercer boys stood for a moment rooted to the spot, while Terry and the professor laughed in unrestrained glee. After the first moment of disgust their eyes narrowed and two determined chins were thrust forward.

"Jim," said Don, quietly. "Put out the light. I don't want the world to witness the awful thing that is going to happen here!"

"Put it out yourself!" retorted Jim. "I am due for a first class murder, and I'm late now!"

And with that the two brothers threw themselves in mock fury onto the body of their laughing friend and bore him to the floor, where they punched him soundly, finding their task an easy one, for the red-headed boy was weak from laughter. When they had tired themselves they jerked him up and pushed him into the chair, the professor enjoying it all hugely.

"That was positively the most low trick I ever saw," declared Don disgustedly.

"I'd like to have a look at the brain that would think of such a thing," chimed in Jim.

"Oh, boy!" laughed Terry. "If you could ever have seen the kindly, anxious looks in your eyes as you bent over me to help restore my fleeting memory! My friends, I thank you! If ever I do lose my identity I shall request that I be taken to the Mercers, who will surely restore me!"

"Oh, shut up!" said Don, beginning to smile. "We admit that we were completely sold that time. Where in the world did the professor find you?"

"I didn't find him," put in the teacher. "Luckily, he found me." And he related the events of the evening to them.

"You aren't hurt, I hope, professor?" asked Jim, anxiously.

"No, just bruised a bit. I would have been severely wet if it had not been for Terry's timely intervention. It was while on the way over here in Terry's—er—remarkable car that he proposed the trick that was played on you."

"I'm surprised you would go in for such a thing, professor," said Don. "But you can be excused because you don't know Terry. But in the future never do anything that he suggests. If you don't get in trouble you will be sure to lose all respect for yourself, so I advise against it."

"Oh, I don't know," smiled the older man. "I enjoyed that little scene in which

Terry lost his mind!"

"The part we enjoyed," returned Don, grimly, "was the thumping part."

"You say your letter was taken from you, professor?" asked Jim.

"Yes, and I wanted that more than anything else. However, it won't do anyone else any good, so I suppose it is not such a loss, after all."

For the next hour they talked and Terry related his experiences during his trip across the country. He spoke of going on down into Mexico, and the professor listened, his eyes fixed on the newcomer thoughtfully. At last he spoke up.

"Terry," he said. "Why don't you come along with us?"

Terry grinned. "I was hoping you'd say just that," he admitted, frankly. "I have no definite plan in mind, and I would certainly hate to miss any fun that Don and Jim are in. But on the other hand I wouldn't want to put you out any."

"You wouldn't," said the professor, heartily. "Ned has plenty of room for all of us at his ranch. I'm really taking the boys along so that I won't have to tramp all over the country looking for Ned's treasure, and you can come along to help in that line."

After some talk it was agreed that Terry should store his car away until such time as they should want it again. It was late when he left them, agreeing to meet them on the following day and go to the steamer with them. The professor and the Mercers slept soundly that night and the next day were ready to begin their trip down the coast.

Meeting Terry in the morning they all went down to the steamer, a small fruit carrier, and the captain consented to add one to the party. Although the steamer was not scheduled to start until evening the friends went aboard early in the afternoon and settled themselves in their cabin, a good sized room which was plain but clean. After that they wandered over the ship, keeping out of the way of the men who were storing crates, preparatory to their cruise southward to load fruit. The smell of different grades of fruit was a permanent part of the black steamer, and it was by no means unpleasant.

In the evening, just before sailing time, Don and Jim stood out on the deck,

watching the men at work. The professor and Terry were in the cabin. Just before the gangplank was hauled in a heavyset man walked confidently aboard and spoke to the mate. The captain was nowhere about at the time. Although not particularly interested the boys noted that the man had a shifty, watchful look, and that his eyes were set close together. The mate appeared to know him and engaged him in conversation, talking in low tones and looking around sharply while doing so. At the end of their short conversation, during which both men looked at the two boys, the newcomer went forward and they saw no more of him.

The steamer cast off and headed south, swinging out in a wide arc, and the voyage was on. Terry and the professor came on deck at the sound of the last whistle and together they watched the purple coast line fade from sight. Supper followed and they made a hearty meal of it, eating with the captain at a private table in sight of the main mess tables.

The evening was spent in talking in the cabin and in pacing the deck. The night was clear and calm and the sky dotted with a myriad of stars, and the steady throbbing of the huge engines made almost the only sound as they ploughed through the blue waters of the Pacific. Quite early they turned in and soon fell into a deep sleep.

It was Terry who woke up with a sense that all was not right. He was a lighter sleeper than the others, and some slight noise had awakened him. He sat up in his bunk, peering across the room at a shadow which seemed out of place there. Thinking it might be one of his chums stirring he spoke.

"Hello there! Who's prowling around?"

His words, spoken quietly, had an effect that astonished him. Someone moved out of the shadows and for a second into the faint light which streamed in through a port hole. Instantly Terry recognized one of the men who had attacked the professor on the previous night.

The man ran to the door, jerked it open and darted along the narrow hallway that led to the companionway ladder. Terry swung his feet over the edge of his bunk.

"All hands to repel boarders!" he yelled, and without waiting to put on shoes or clothing, dashed out of the door after the fleeing man.

The others woke up instantly, to see Terry streaking down the hall. Terry ran rapidly up the ladder and saw the intruder slipping over the rail. The steamer was close into the shore, and without hesitation the man dropped over into the water and struck out for the shore, just as Terry gained the rail.

While he watched the man swimming for shore the others ran up, followed a moment later by the captain and the mate, a lean-jawed man with a hooked nose and wide mouth. To their excited inquiries Terry explained what had happened.

"No use trying to catch him with a boat," decided the captain, seeing that the man was almost to the shore. "What did he look like?"

Terry described him, and the professor and the boys were astonished to find that it was one of the men who had attacked the professor on the previous night. The captain broke out in an exclamation.

"Sackett!" he cried.

"You know him?" asked the professor.

"Squint Sackett is one of the worst bay bandits we have," said the captain. "He is a noted river pirate, and the police would give a whole lot to lay hands on him. Mr. Abel, how did that man get on board?"

"I don't know, sir," said the mate, promptly.

"You don't know?" asked Jim, in amazement. "Why you let him on board yourself. My brother and I saw you talking to him this afternoon, just before we sailed."

"It's a lie," shouted the mate, darting a bitter glance at him.

"Oh, no it isn't," said Don, coldly. "We saw you. After you and he talked this man Sackett went forward, and you didn't make any effort to stop him."

"I've had my suspicious of you for sometime, Mr. Abel," growled the captain, "and now I know you are crooked. You get off my ship! The first port we come to you sling your pack and get out. I can't prove anything on you, but I won't have any mate of mine having relations with a man like Squint Sackett. D'you understand?"

"I'll break these kids in two!" shouted the mate, advancing. But the captain, who was bigger than the mate, quickly barred the way, his heavy fists raised.

"You touch these boys and I'll bust you over the rail!" he roared. "Get down below and pack up. Tomorrow you're clearing this ship. Now get!"

Muttering angrily to himself the mate obeyed, and when he was gone the captain turned back to the party. "I'd advise you to look out for that mate," he warned. "I'm glad you found out what you did. Did Sackett steal anything from you?"

A hasty examination of the cabin revealed that Sackett had been in the act of going through the professor's inside coat pocket at the time he was surprised by Terry, but nothing had been taken. Putting the whole affair down as an attempt at robbery the captain left them to themselves, assuring them that no further harm would come to them.

"We'll have to keep our eyes open for this Sackett," said Don, as they went back to their bunks. "For the life of me, I can't see why he should take the trouble to come aboard and try to rob us. He must have a mistaken idea that there is a lot of money in this crowd."

"That may be it," agreed the professor, somewhat doubtfully. "But it does seem strange that he should take such pains to follow us."

"Wonder how he knew we were on this particular boat?" mused Jim.

"That's not so hard," Terry explained. "Perhaps he hangs around the docks and saw us come aboard today. But that mate must surely be one of the gang."

"No doubt of it," said Don, yawning sleepily. "Well, he's gone, and we probably won't see anything of him again."

But if Don and the others could have even guessed at the plans which were at that moment being formulated in the evil brain of Squint Sackett they would have had much food for thought. They were destined to see him again, and not in the distant future.

CHAPTER VI THE SCENE IN THE MOONLIGHT

The sail down the beautiful California coast was uneventful. The fruit steamer was a staunch old boat, though somewhat battered, and it kept its course steadily. After the boys and the professor had tired of exploring it from end to end and looking in on the huge engines which drove it with throbbing energy they spent most of their time on the deck watching the passing shore line, enjoying the warmth and brilliant sunshine. The nights, they found, were cold even in that particular time of the year, and they were not sorry to use blankets even in the shelter of their cabins. They became quite friendly with the captain, who told them stories of many exciting voyages and some unusual storms. Nothing further was seen of Sackett and the mate went sullenly ashore at the first port.

No storms broke the monotony of fair weather and quiet sailing, and when at last they entered Magdalena Bay and approached the settlements they were almost sorry to leave the fruit steamer. At ten o'clock one bright morning they climbed into the cutter and were pulled away to the shore, landing at length on the sandy soil of the small town of Quito.

Ned's ranch lay several miles inland, and the only means of travel was a lumbering wagon which went to the mines. Learning that this vehicle was to start out the following morning they hunted up the driver, a Mexican, and arranged to drive with him. A small hotel provided them with a place to put up over night and after a satisfying supper they wandered around the town, seeing the sights. The steamer had gone on its voyage after a brief stop.

The population of the town was very small, and exceedingly sleepy. Terry remarked that they slept all day in order to recruit strength enough to play on guitars at night. The population was composed of Spaniards, Mexicans, and a few Americans, whose interest seemed to be chiefly centered in the inland mines, and a number of halfbreeds. Droves of dogs, whose seemingly endless

variety astonished the boys, roamed the streets.

"Gosh," exclaimed Jim, as they came around a pack of them. "I used to like pups, but I don't know as I do after seeing these. Guess I'll look under my bed when we get back to the hotel and see if there are any there!"

Soft lights gleamed from most of the houses when evening came on, and the sound of guitars was to be heard on every street. There were no lights along the streets, but the night was warm and bright, and the Americans had no difficulty in walking around the town. Quite early they returned to their hotel and after drinking some cold orange drink, went to bed.

Bright and early in the morning they were up, as they had been told that the mine wagon was to leave at six, and after a hearty breakfast went out and loaded their bags on the vehicle. The driver appeared shortly afterward, rolling a cigaret with amazing skill between two fingers. Terry eyed him in admiration.

"By golly!" he muttered. "I don't smoke and don't know as I shall, but if I did I'd give a lot to be able to roll 'em like that! I couldn't roll one that way with both hands."

Later on, when in the course of their journey the Spaniard yawned, Terry pretended to be enthusiastic. Without bothering to take the cigaret out of his mouth the driver yawned heartily, and the cigaret, clinging to his upper lip, simply hung suspended until he closed his lips again. Then he resumed smoking, the operation being none the worse for the act, and Terry again shook his head in envy.

"Wonderful people!" he whispered to Don. "Too lazy to do anything at all! Wonder what happens to a cup of coffee when he yawns!"

"Probably he keeps right on pouring it down and doesn't waste any time," chuckled Jim. "Great labor savers, these people!"

"I guess their hardest work is to keep from doing any work," smiled Professor Scott.

The wagon was a large open affair, with two long boards like benches on the side, and the boys and the teacher sat on the seats with their baggage at their feet. The driver sat slumped forward on the front seat, smoking, yawning and dozing

by turns, muttering in broken exclamations sometimes to the horses and sometimes to himself. Although they tried to talk to him they received only weary shrugs of his narrow shoulders, and they soon gave it up and talked among themselves.

The country through which they were passing led up in a gradual sweep from Magdalena Bay, and they soon drew out of sight of that broad sheet of blue water and plunged on into the more open country. The soil was somewhat sandy, with an almost tropical vegetation, and small brooks spread like silver ribbons toward the sea. As they continued to work further inland the country became more and more open, with rolling plains and afar off darker stretches marked the hills in which the mines were located.

"Ned's place is off in that direction," said the professor, pointing to the southwest. "He tells me that it is in a basin between two small ranges, so we'll probably come across it all at once."

At noontime they halted in the shade of a spreading tree which was more of an overgrown bush, a species that the professor did not know, and in which he speedily became interested. The driver immediately sat in the shade and proceeded to eat his lunch from a black box which he had, paying not the slightest attention to them. The boys, wishing to make some coffee, cut some mesquite bushes which were nearby and kindled a small fire. Jim set the coffee to boil and they ate some sandwiches which they had been wise enough to bring with them.

When the coffee was made Don took some to the Spaniard, who accepted it with a brief nod of his head. Terry poked Jim.

"That means thank you," he said. "Too much trouble to say it!"

Immediately after the noon meal the driver toppled over silently and went to sleep, a movement that afforded Terry much amusement. On this particular occasion, however, the boys could not blame him very much. It was hot, so much so that they were glad to stretch out and nap themselves. At the end of an hour the driver got up suddenly, resumed his seat and clicked his tongue at the two horses. The wagon, with its crew, rumbled on.

It was five o'clock when they topped the final rise and looked down on the Scott ranch. As the wagon rolled down to the place they had a good opportunity to

study it closely. There was the main ranch building, a single story affair, constructed of plain boards that showed up gray and sordid against the declining sun. Two large barns flanked the house and an inclosed field with some scattered patches of grass afforded a ground for a half dozen horses. In back of the ranch was another frame building, which they afterward found out was Ned's laboratory, in which he tested metal from the mines.

Ned Scott was at home when they arrived, in fact, he had seen the wagon top the rise, and came riding out to meet them. They saw him swing carelessly onto the back of a horse and dash up, and Jim, who was used to riding a cavalry horse at school, admired the grace and ease with which he did it. Then, having greeted his father enthusiastically, Ned Scott was introduced to the boys.

He was a young man in his early thirties, broadly built, with black hair and eyes and a serious look. For some years he had lived in practically what was solitude, seeing a few white men from the mines and a good many halfbreeds and Mexicans. The sight of three boys somewhat near his own age was welcome, and he looked forward to some interesting days to come.

When greetings had been exchanged the young engineer led the way to the ranch, where the boys alighted from the mine wagon, and paid the driver. The man took the money unemotionally and drove off, having only exchanged a word in Spanish with Ned.

"Well," said Terry, as they watched him drive off. "That man is a treat!"

"How is that?" asked Ned.

"He is so calm," replied Terry, solemnly. "And he is a splendid example. After seeing him I don't think I'll ever be fussed or excited over anything again!"

Ned Scott led them into the ranch building, a rough but comfortable place, with a wide, hospitable living room, a big dining-room, kitchen and a number of small bedrooms, all on the one floor. There was a small loft above for storage purposes, but no real upper floor. After they had stowed their things away and had made themselves comfortable Ned took them around the ranch and showed them the place in detail.

As his chief interest was centered in the mines he did not raise cattle, but he had one man to take care of his horses and generally help about the place. There was

also an Indian cook, who was blackened by the sun and wind until his skin glowed with a dull color. Ned explained that the man who kept the horses and the barns was a mestizo.

"What is that?" asked Don.

"A man of mixed Spanish and Indian blood," explained Ned. "Sometimes he is very funny. The Spanish in him gets very dignified at times and he is almost stately, and at other times he is just plain Indian, not much of anything. However, he has a passion for the horses and he is faithful, and outside of the fact that I have to drive him to work in the barns he is all right. I call him Yappi."

Yappi was seen presently, a tall old man with curiously mixed white and black hair, a skin that was a mottled yellow, and dull black eyes. He bowed to them and passed on, apparently not at all curious. They inspected the barns and looked with considerable interest through Ned's laboratory and the metals from the mines.

Supper was well served by Spanci the cook, and in the evening they sat on the long low porch talking until it was time to turn in. After a good sleep they were up, taking a trip with Ned to the mines. He led them through the tunnels and explained the complete workings to them, showing how the silver and lead was mined. This took up most of the day and they were thoroughly tired when night came.

Ned was not impressed by the loss of his letter. "Those fellows who attacked you have probably thrown it away," he said. "I'll write you another one sometime, dad!"

He asked the boys if they could ride and was delighted to find that they could. Jim, being a cavalry lieutenant at Woodcrest, was somewhat better at it than the others were, but they soon got accustomed to it. On the third day of their visit Ned proposed that they take a moonlight ride that night.

"The moon, as you noticed last night, is beautiful just at this time, and there is a lot more fun riding in the coolness of the night than in the heat of the day," he said. "I think you will thoroughly enjoy it."

After supper they mounted and rode out of the ranch grounds, the professor refusing to accompany them. It was a beautiful night, with a glowing moon and a

sky splashed with stars and they rode for miles across the open country. The air was clear and cool, the mountains dark and mysterious near at hand, and the boys from Maine enjoyed every minute of it. As they were returning Ned spoke up:

"When we get to the top of the next hill I'll show you the ranch of my neighbor, Senorita Mercedes," he said.

His tone was casual, but the boys, remembering what the professor had said about Ned's interest in the senorita, felt that he was himself interested in looking at the place where she lived. He had not mentioned her name since they had been there, and Terry did not know anything about her. Nor had they discussed the treasure as yet, thought the boys, but that would no doubt come soon.

They topped the rise and paused to rest the graceful, lively horses while Ned pointed to a small white ranch which gleamed brightly in the moonlight. The house itself was small, but the outlying barns were large, and Ned explained that the senorita was at present raising cattle.

"Not many of them," he went on. "Just enough to keep her alive and eating regularly. She has three ranchman and an overseer."

Near the ranch some trees and mesquite bushes grew and Don was looking toward this clump fixedly. He thought that he had detected some movement there but was not sure. Ned pulled the rein and turned his horse's head.

"Well, I guess we had better be getting back," he said.

"Wait a minute," called Don, in a low voice. "There are two men coming out of that clump of trees near the ranch and creeping toward the house."

Ned spun around in his saddle and looked closely. Two men were crossing an open space toward the house, taking care to keep as much as possible in the shadows. Gaining the side of the house they crept to a window and one of them reached up and pushed it. Instantly it swung open.

"Are those fellows her ranchmen?" asked Terry.

"I don't think so," said Ned. "That is the library window they just opened. By George, I think they're going in that window!"

"I suppose that's what they are opening it for," nodded Jim.

Ned dug his heels into the flank of his horse. "Then come on," he shouted, as the first man slipped through the window. "We've got to see what is going on in Senorita Mercedes' ranch!"

CHAPTER VII SACKETT'S RAID

They galloped down the long sloping hill rapidly, unobserved by the two men who were entering the Mercedes ranch. The second man had leaped lightly in the window and disappeared from sight. It was evident that they feared no interruptions for they did not even glance out and the party of boys arrived in the yard without having warned the men of their coming.

But once in the yard the ring of the horses' hoofs on the hard packed soil reached the ears of the men inside the house. Two heads appeared swiftly at the window, at the same time that a candle flickered upstairs. The men, seeing the party of boys, jumped from the window with one accord.

"Sackett and Abel!" cried Don, as he jumped from his horse.

All the boys had dismounted, which was precisely the wrong thing to do, for the two men began to run swiftly for a small patch of trees and bushes which stood at the edge of the senorita's property. Ned rushed forward and seized Sackett, who promptly felled him with a blow on the chin, while Abel kept on going and entered the grove several yards ahead of his pursuers. Sackett soon joined him, and before Terry, who was in the lead, could reach him, he had joined Abel, who was already on horseback with a second rein in his hand. Sackett tumbled into the saddle and the two men thundered away across the plains.

"Shall we go after them?" shouted Jim, as the senorita appeared on an upper balcony.

"No," cried Ned. "They have too big a start, and I want to find out what they were doing here."

Somewhat reluctantly the boys turned away, while the two outlaws put greater

distance between themselves and the ranch party. The senorita, recognizing Ned in the moonlight, hurried back to her room and soon appeared at the side door of the ranch house.

"Senor Ned, what is it?" she called, and the boys were attracted by her soft and gentle voice.

Ned and the boys walked to the steps, taking off their hats, and Ned spoke up. "We were riding by at a distance, senorita, and we paused to look down at your ranch. While we were looking these two men that just rode away broke in a side window and entered the house."

Ned then went on to introduce his friends, to whom the senorita bowed with a stately grace. They were quite taken with her beauty and charm, her fine olive skin and her flashing black eyes. She drew their admiration, for she was not the least bit terror stricken by what had happened, but only thoughtful and puzzled.

"In the library you say, Senor Ned?" she puzzled. "But why do you think they should want to go in my library? What is it that is in there?"

She spoke remarkably good English, with only a slight accent. Ned shook his head.

"Senorita, I do not know. May we inspect your library and see if anything is missing?"

"Certainly. Do come right in, and welcome," she replied, and led the way into the small library of the Mercedes ranch.

It was a square room filled with books, in cases reaching to the ceiling. A single table was there, and two comfortable chairs. Upon examination the boys found that a few books, in a section which was filled with ancient, hand-written manuscripts, had been handled by the men.

"It is evident that those fellows were about to steal some of your valuable manuscripts, senorita," remarked Ned, after they had made an examination.

"Yes," nodded the girl. "But I wonder how those men knew that I had any books?"

"I'm very much afraid you are wrong in your ideas," spoke up Don, who had been considering deeply. And Jim nodded, for his ideas were running along the same lines of those of his brother.

"What do you mean, Don?" asked Ned, quickly.

"You remember that your father was attacked in San Francisco by this man Sackett, who took away your letter to him? Well, that letter contained your ideas about the treasure and that ancient book which came from this library. Those men are taking that matter seriously, and they have been here tonight to try and find the other half of that Spanish manuscript and learn the exact location of the wreck!"

"Ah, ha!" cried Senorita Mercedes sharply. "The senor is right!"

"I certainly believe that you are!" cried Ned. "I had never thought of it all in that light, but that is surely the answer. Sackett is a freebooter who will turn his hand to anything that promises profit, and he has done as you say, taken that letter seriously. I wish it had never fallen into his hands. However, with all of his knowledge of the country, and I suppose he has quite a knowledge of the land, he doesn't know where the treasure is, so we are safe on that point."

"Yes," put in Terry. "But we'll have to be on our guard from now on. There is no doubt that gang will push the search with all vigor."

"They seem to have faith in the story," said Ned. "I have unlimited faith in it because I have seen the manuscript, but they are placing their faith in my letter to my father. There is only one weak spot in my claim of thought."

"What is that?" asked Jim.

"That the treasure may have been found and removed since that book was written. The priest who wrote the book was going to raise a party to go back and recover the treasure, but whether he did or not is not known. He may have done so, in which case our efforts and plans are absolutely useless."

"Of course," nodded Don. He turned to the senorita. "Senorita Mercedes, you do not know how that book ever came to be in your house, do you?"

"No," confessed the girl. "As far as I have knowledge, senor, it has quite always

been here. But I can say this, which will perhaps aid you: before my family came here to dwell we lived in Mexico. You see what I mean?"

"I do," nodded Ned. "You mean that this priest may at one time have lodged at your house and have left his book there?"

"He may have even died there, Senor Ned."

"That is very true. I lean to the belief that the treasure was never recovered. Well, there are two parties after it now, so we will have to be on our guard."

Terry, who had walked to the window, spoke up. He had been examining the double windows, which opened like doors, with hinges on each side.

"Do you keep your windows locked at night, senorita?" he asked.

"Of a certainty, senor," she replied.

"I was just wondering," said Terry, slowly. "Because these two fellows just reached up and pushed the window open."

"Impossible, Senor Mackson! You may see that there is a much thick bar across that window."

"Yes, so I notice. But all of the boys will tell you that they simply reached up and pushed the window open, and that they didn't have a thing in their hands when they did it!"

"That's so," exclaimed Ned, a sudden light breaking over him. "Senorita, where is Alaroze, your overseer? How is it that he has not appeared during all of the excitement? The rest of your men are outside; I can see them gathered in the courtyard."

"I do not know," answered the senorita, "I shall call him at once." She stepped to the door and clapped her small hands sharply.

There was a slight pause and then a man entered the room quickly. He was small and chunky, with a brown face and shifty eyes. He was fully dressed in the nondescript outfit of a ranch foreman.

"Senor Alaroze, where have you been?" the senorita asked him in Spanish, which the boys understood slightly. They had studied the language in high school, all except Terry, and they could follow the conversation.

"A thousand pardons, senorita, but I was awakened by the noise and hastened to dress," the Mexican said, softly.

"It took you much time, senor," retorted the senorita, curtly. "Tell me, when you closed up did you lock this library window?"

"Surely, senorita. I take pains to always carry out faithfully the tasks intrusted to me," he replied, his tone becoming haughty.

"The reason we ask you, Senor Alaroze," said Ned, still in Spanish, "is because two rascals have just broken into the house and have searched this library. But the strange part is that they did not even have to break in. They simply reached up and pushed the window and it opened under their touch. That does not look as though they found the window barred, does it?"

"I can only say that I dropped the bar across the window before I retired, senor," replied the overseer, his lips moving uneasily. "Perhaps someone else——"

"Nonsense!" cried Ned, sharply. "The senorita is the only one who sleeps in the house. You and the ranchmen sleep in the bunkhouse. You do not think for a minute that Senorita Mercedes came down and took the bar from the window do you?"

"I regret to say that I do not know what to think, senor," returned the overseer, quietly enough. The other boys watched him closely, puzzled at his calm and speculating as to what thoughts might be in his mind.

"Well, it is very strange," remarked Ned, closing the window and dropping the bar in place. When he spoke there was a trace of gloom in his voice, especially when he addressed the overseer. "Be more careful in the future, Senor Alaroze. You alone have the keeping of Senorita Mercedes and her safety."

"I am worthy of the trust, senor," retorted the overseer, his eyes narrowing.

Ned looked at his watch. "We'll have to be getting back, or dad will begin to be worried. I don't think you will have any more trouble, senorita. If you do, send

one of your men to me and I will come as quickly as possible."

The senorita murmured thanks and accompanied them to the courtyard, where the boys swung onto their mounts. The three ranchmen, seeing that all was well, went back to the bunkhouse, while the overseer, his face hidden in the shadow of the doorway, stood back of the senorita.

She bade them goodbye, thanking them once more. The boys quietly overlooked the fact that she held onto Ned's hand for a moment longer than seemed actually necessary. They rode away, looking back more than once at the gleaming white ranch in the moonlight, until it was lost to sight.

"I'm very much afraid I don't trust that overseer," said Don.

"Well," said Ned. "So far he has been very good in the management of the ranch. I wonder if he can be in league with that Sackett gang?"

"Hard to tell," said Terry. "I don't like the thought of the senorita living alone with that fellow around, and not a woman for miles."

There was a pause, and then: "I don't like it, either," spoke Ned, frankly. "But she claims that she is not afraid. She goes armed all the time and is very determined to be a success at raising cattle and caring for herself. Pride, you know, is something that the Spanish are great for, and I'm afraid she has more than her share. However, sometime——"

He did not finish his thought, but the boys thought that they knew what he had in mind. They arrived at the ranch in silence and relieved the professor's anxiety.

CHAPTER VIII THE SEARCH IS BEGUN

"According to this thing," said Terry, with a grin, "if we find that treasure the dragon will eat us!"

It was on the following day and the entire group was bent over the manuscript which had been written by the long dead priest. The book lay spread out on the library table before them, yellow and fragile, with corners which threatened to fall away to dust at their touch. Rotted cord held it together and had broken in so many places that the ancient book held together by a miracle.

They had read together the thrilling story of the flight from the English barks, of the wreck in the lonely creek, and the description of the treasure up to the point where the missing pages spoiled the worthwhileness of the manuscript.

"That galleon must have been pretty big," Jim had said. "How big is an English bark?"

"A bark is a three-masted, square-rigged vessel. The mizzenmast is fore-and-aft rigged, if I remember my history correctly," the professor replied. "There are still barks left in service, and you can see that they were of a fair size from the fact that they had three masts."

The statement regarding the dragon had drawn Terry's attention. It was a solemn statement to the effect that if anyone who was not a subject of His Sovereign Majesty the King of Spain attempted to lay hands on the treasure the guardian dragon would utterly destroy them.

"I wouldn't pay much attention to that," smiled the professor. "In the first place, the Spaniards stole it from the Indians, and it never did belong to His Sovereign Majesty. We won't worry about the dragon until we have found the treasure."

They had planned to start out on the following day in an effort to find the river up which the galleon had sailed. The professor declined to accompany them.

"You boys go ahead and do the hunting," he said. "I'm a little too old to be riding around the country looking for gold. But when you find it I'll help you dig it out."

"Well, if we don't find it, we'll have a good camping trip, anyway," said Ned, who knew that his father did not place much stock in his ideas regarding the treasure.

It had been agreed that no long trip was to be arranged just yet. Ned planned to explore the coast for several miles to the south at present, and if that failed to show any signs of a river or the wreck to make preparations for a trip of several days. They were to be gone overnight this time and that was all.

So on the following day they were ready to go. Each boy had a packet of provisions and his blanket strapped on the back of his saddle and a light automatic rifle in his hands. The boys had been taught to shoot with a fair degree of accuracy at Woodcrest School and so felt no fear of appearing backward in that respect in Ned Scott's eyes. They all shook hands with the professor, who wished them luck, and then they rode away to the southward in the first step of their hunt for the Spanish treasure.

The day was warm and clear, and before they had been many hours on the open plain they felt the heat keenly. The sun beat down directly on the flat, dry soil, and dancing waves of heat soon showed above the ground, as far as the eye could see. Ned would have turned to the distant mountains except that their search lay along the sea coast and they would gain nothing by seeking the coolness of the higher lands.

"What mountains are those?" Don asked, pointing to the sweeping ranges.

"That central range which you see is the Sierra Gigantea," explained Ned. "In some places it is three and four thousand feet above sea level. The high ranges are north and south, and on this southwestern side the rocks are granitic. There is plenty of sandstone on the other slope, and the range is full of volcanic dykes."

"Looks mighty cool up there," said Terry, mopping his forehead.

"It is. We have all kinds of weather in this country, from burning tropical heat and its characteristic vegetation to the icy cold of the peaks."

In the afternoon they halted under a friendly group of trees and ate a light lunch, stretching out to talk afterward for a brief time. The afternoon was even hotter than the morning, and while they did not feel like sleeping they did enjoy the rest under the trees. They resumed their journey after three o'clock, keeping the calm blue waters of the Pacific in sight all the while.

Several creeks were found, but none of them were wide enough to have ever allowed the passage of a galleon, although they were forced to bear in mind the fact that the passage of centuries might have closed up small rivers or narrowed creeks. Sandstorms rapidly changed the topography of countries, they knew. They followed two large streams for several miles inland and then cut across country again to the sea.

When they stopped for their supper Ned said: "The fact is, we may be looking the wrong way. Perhaps we should have gone north instead of south. The directions in the manuscript were vague, much as though the priest himself did not know just where he was at the time. After all, this whole hunt is a matter of faith, and if we don't ever find anything we'll just put it all down as a good time and a summer vacation."

"Of course," rejoined Don, heartily. "But I feel as you do, that the treasure was never found again. But aren't you neglecting one very good clue?"

"What is that?" asked Ned, quickly.

"You recall that peculiar piece of wreckage that was picked up by the steam trawler? Well, the funny thing was that no other piece of the galleon to which it was a part could be found anywhere nearby. Don't you feel that it was washed out of a nearby creek and settled in the mud in the place where the fishing boat found it?"

"There was no creek anywhere near it," Ned answered.

"Perhaps not, but it could have come from quite some distance. Are we near the place where the piece of wreckage was found?"

"It was found about fifty miles further up the coast," Ned said.

"It is my opinion that somewhere near there the galleon ran up a river. Can we go there tomorrow?"

"Well," said Ned, slowly. "I think if we visit that spot we had better plan to make a much longer stay of it. We ought to spend several days in the vicinity, perhaps a week. Suppose we spend the night here, go home in the morning and outfit for an intensive hunt."

"That would be a good idea," Jim thought.

"I think we should," argued Don. "You plan to run over every inch of the coast north and south, don't you? Then I think we might as well outfit ourselves for a hard and active campaign."

The sun was now going down, turning the hills and distant mountains into things of rare beauty as the multitude of lights danced and gleamed along the crests of the mighty range. The boys cut enough wood to last them through the night, and sat around a glowing little fire, telling Ned of past adventures until they all were sleepy enough to go to bed.

"By golly," said Terry, as he rolled himself up in his blanket. "In the daytime you roast around here and at night you need a blanket. Very unreliable climate, I must say. Jim, will you kindly dust the snow off me when you arise in the morning!"

They were up early in the morning and ate a hearty breakfast, enjoying the glory of another perfect day. Ned calculated that they would strike the ranch again about noontime, and soon they were in the saddle once more, striking north along the sea coast. They had gone along the hard sand at a brisk trot for some ten miles when Jim stopped and pointed to a group of buildings back against a sandy cliff.

"What is that place?" he asked.

"That is a group of tannery buildings," explained Ned as they jogged on toward it. "Years ago, in the days of the sailing ships, when California and Lower California were first opened up, hides were collected inland and dragged to that cliff, where they were thrown down below, still in a raw state. Then, while the ships went on up the coast, a picked crew of sailors remained here, curing the hides and storing them until the ship returned and picked them up."

"I remember reading about it in that fine old book, 'Two Years Before the Mast,'" said Don. "I'm glad of the chance to see one of the tanneries."

When they arrived at the mouldering tannery they dismounted and went inside, examining with interest this last relic of an ancient business. The buildings were made of rough logs, hauled for many miles to the coast, and some scraps of ancient hides still clung to the storage racks. The vats were still there, stained with many colors, and a heavy smell was still noticeable indoors. Outside they found the framework of the stretching racks.

"That certainly is interesting," commented Jim. "You must tell your father, Ned. Perhaps he'll want to come and look at the place."

"We'll tell him," the young engineer nodded, as they resumed their journey.

Ned's calculations were correct, for it was just noontime when they arrived at his ranch. They rode down the incline toward the house, which looked deserted. Ned whistled but there was no response.

"Maybe dad is still in bed," he laughed, as he swung from his horse.

But when they went into the house the professor was not to be found. Nor was the cook around. Ned hurried to the barns and looked for Yappi, but in vain. As he hurried back to the house Don called to him.

"It's all right, Ned," Don said. "There is a note from him on the table. He has gone out looking for plant specimens."

Ned hastened into the room, relief on his brown face, and took up the note. It was a simple message, worded as Don had explained, but as Ned read it his brow darkened.

"Look here," he said, crisply. "Do you know what dad's first name is?"

"I don't," answered Don, and Jim shook his head. Don pointed to the note. "I see he signed it 'Duress Scott.' I never heard of that name before."

"It isn't a name," was the startling answer. "Dad signed it that way to let us know that he signed it under duress, under compulsion! The cook and the overseer are both gone, evidently carried off by the same gang who captured dad!"

"I'll bet everything I've got that it is Sackett again!" groaned Jim. "What are we to do?"

"Just as soon as we can tie up a little grub and fill up with plenty of ammunition we'll start to run those fellows down," said Ned, grimly. "I think it is high time that somebody put an end to Mr. Sackett and Company, and we're going to do it!"

"That's the talk!" cried Terry. "War to the knife! Where is my gun?"

CHAPTER IX THE RUINED CASTLE

The professor enjoyed his day of solitude. Long years of serious study and instructive reading had made him one of the men who prefer being alone to mixing with a noisy crowd. Not that the professor was the least bit snobbish or unsociable, but he loved the quietness of inner thought and the companionship of a book.

After the boys had disappeared over the hill he returned to the living room and sat in a sunny window looking out over the rolling country which extended for miles back of Ned's ranch, away to the purple mountains in the distance. A feeling of warm contentment came over the elderly man, for an hour or more he simply dreamed there, enjoying the comfort of Ned's best armchair.

After that he read for a long time, until the cook announced that dinner was ready. He ate alone, well served by the silent Indian and then went back to smoke his pipe and dream in the window once more. When afternoon came on he imitated the actions of the cook and Yappi, who both went to sleep, the cook in a bunk off the kitchen and Yappi beside the barn, his battered hat over his eyes. The professor sought the dull colored sofa in the living room and slept until the sun began to go down.

He awoke much refreshed and drank copiously, realizing for the first time in his long life just how good water could be. Another lone meal followed and he spent the evening with another book, sitting under the oil lamp until it was nearly time to go to bed. Then, enchanted with the fine moonlight, the professor went out on the front porch to smoke a final pipe before retiring.

The whole landscape was flooded by the brilliant slice of moon which hung far over in the sky, and the professor drank in its beauty. The cook had finally cleared up everything in the kitchen and gone out to the small bunkhouse, to listen for a time to the guitar which Yappi was playing and then finally to coax the old mestizo into playing a game of cards with him, over which they droned half asleep, seriously intent. When Professor Scott had finished his pipe he knocked out the ashes, yawned and with a final look around, went to his room.

This was in the back of the long, low building, facing the plains and mountains. He opened the window and finding that there was enough light from the moon, extinguished the lamp which he had lighted and took off his necktie. His eyes wandered dreamily over the landscape. Then he suddenly stopped unbuttoning his collar, his eyes narrowed, and he became all attention.

On the top of a sand dune a man was standing and looking toward the ranch. It was only for an instant and then the man disappeared, slipping down the other side noiselessly. He had on a cape and a sombrero, and the professor was puzzled. He wondered if Yappi or the cook had left the place, and after a moment of thought he went back to the front porch and looked around. There was no light in the bunkhouse now. But when he started to go out there he saw the cook walking toward the kitchen door and the ranchman coming out of the barn.

His first impulse was to speak to Yappi, but thinking it useless to alarm the man he returned to the house and to his room. It was not either of the men whom he had seen, but some stranger who was carefully looking down on the ranch. It was possible that it was only some chance wayfarer who had topped the rise and was examining the ranch, but the professor knew that Sackett was in the neighborhood and that it would be well to keep his eyes open. For an hour he looked steadily out of the window, but he saw nothing more to alarm him, and at last, after making a tour through the house and locking every door and window, including the window in his bedroom, he went to bed and soon fell asleep.

When morning came he was awakened by the sound of the cook trying the back door, and he hastily opened it for the Indian. The cook answered his cheery morning greeting unemotionally. The Indian had never known Ned to lock the doors, and he wondered why the older man did it, but no sign of his thoughts appeared on his shiny dark face and he set about getting breakfast ready. The professor dressed and then sat down to his morning meal, after a hasty look around to see that all was well.

Yappi had already attended to the horses when the professor went out to take a

walk around the ranch, and the mestizo was busy in the barn. After enjoying the clear morning outside the professor went back to the house and once more resumed his reading, sitting in the window through which the sun came brightly. From where he was sitting he could see Yappi at work on a saddle, mending a flap on it, sitting on the low doorstep of the bunkhouse.

The professor had read for perhaps a half hour and was in the act of turning a page when he happened to look up and out at the old mestizo. The man had ceased his stitching and was looking back of the house, the saddle hanging loosely in his hand. And to the professor's vast astonishment, he suddenly tossed the saddle over his shoulder and with the agility of a cat rolled himself without rising into the doorway of the bunkhouse.

Struck with amazement at the man's actions the teacher put down his book and got up, striding for the front door. But even before he reached it he heard the back door pushed open and he turned. His worst fears were realized when he found Sackett standing on the threshold, a rifle in his hand, and Abel just back of him. Both men were smiling in triumph, but keeping a wary eye on the house just the same.

"Ah," said Sackett, grinning broadly. "We didn't know you was going out the front door, governor! Or maybe you was goin' to let us in?"

"What do you want here?" asked the professor, stiffly.

Sackett looked all around. "We ain't sure, yet. We want you, for one thing. Keep your gun on him, Abel. Where's Manuel?"

"Watching the front door," growled the former mate.

The two men stepped into the house and the professor saw that he was trapped. He had no idea what the men wanted with him, although his heart sank a little he resolved to face them unflinchingly. Out of the corner of his eye he saw the cook glide out of the back door.

"You two men get out of this house!" the professor snapped.

Sackett laughed and walked boldly through the rooms, while Abel kept his rifle pointed in the professor's direction. After he had looked through every room the leader came back.

- "Nobody else in the place, just like Manuel said," he reported. He faced the old savant. "Where did those boys go to?"
- "Off on a camping trip," answered the professor, calmly.
- "Sure they didn't go looking for that treasure?" inquired the outlaw, thrusting his face close to Mr. Scott's.
- "Do you mean to say that you believe that story?" sniffed the professor, scornfully.
- "I believe it, and so do you," replied the chief.
- "A fairy story," said the professor, contemptuously. "My boy has long since found out that there isn't anything to it."
- "You and your boy know more about that treasure than you feel like telling," retorted Sackett. "You're coming with us and stay with us until you tell us what you do know."
- "I guess I'll stay with you a long time," said the professor, humorously. "Because I don't know anything about it."
- "Stow the talk and come on," growled the mate. "Want them boys to come back again?"
- "Yes, we had better get moving," agreed the leader of the gang. He walked to the desk and took out a piece of paper and a pen, which he dipped in the ink. "You write a note saying you have gone for a little exploring trip," he directed the professor.
- "I won't write a line!" said the professor, stubbornly.
- "You write quickly or I'll punch your head!" growled the outlaw, raising his heavy fist.

Convinced that he would gain nothing by arguing with these men the professor took the pen and wrote a short note. He hesitated a moment and then signed it "Duress Scott."

"Hey!" cried Sackett, suspiciously. "What's that you're putting?"

"You want me to sign my name, don't you?" asked the teacher, blandly.

"That isn't your name," argued the man.

"Oh, it isn't, eh?" said the professor. "Very well, I'll sign it just plain Dad, and then Ned will know that something is wrong."

The leader thought a moment. "Never mind," he growled. "That will do as it is. Now come along, and mind, no funny business, or it will be the worse for you."

The professor accompanied them out of the house, jealously guarded by the two men, and in the back yard Manuel, a short and stolid Mexican, was waiting for them with a horse from Ned's own stock. In silence the professor mounted and the cavalcade moved out of the ranch grounds, the professor looking around for the cook and Yappi. Neither of them were in sight.

"Miserable cowards!" muttered the professor, between his set teeth.

They headed for the mountains, the Mexican in front and the professor riding just ahead of Sackett and Abel, who kept watchful eyes on him. They travelled in silence during the morning and stopped at noon to eat and rest, after which they pushed on, in a direction southwest of the mines. Manuel, it seemed, was the lookout and rode ahead to see to it that they did not unexpectedly run across some party from the mines or from other scattered ranches. They had passed to the north of the Senorita Mercedes ranch and there was no help from that quarter. And when at last they entered the trees at the foot of the central range they had not been seen by anyone.

There Manuel waited for the party and they rode on in a compact body, ascending the long slopes, skirting abrupt cliffs and rising high above sea level. The woods were of a semi-tropical nature, with thick trees and bright green leaves, surrounded by dense bushes of undergrowth. It was cool above the level of the plain and they made good time, coming out onto a flat plateau late in the afternoon. Before them was a wall of vegetation, and to the professor's astonishment they rode straight to it, pushed their way through and came unexpectedly upon the ruins of a small castle.

The building was small and now nothing more than a tumbled heap of ruins.

Looking at it closely the professor was inclined to think that it had never been completed at all, but had been abandoned before the roof had been put on. Creepers grew in reckless profusion all over the stones and a bright green snake glided across a door sill with a slight hiss. The men sprang from their horses and the professor got down slowly, waiting the next move.

Guided by his captors he was led across the first floor of the place, evidently the effort of some Spanish nobleman to plant a small empire of his own in a new country, and ushered into a single room toward the back of the castle. This room had a ceiling to it and he could see at once that it was the headquarters of the gang. A stove, made out of bricks held together by clay, stood in one corner and several strings of red peppers, dried with heat and age, hung from strings over the stove. A rough table, two chairs and a bench, and a long box made up the furniture of the place. Besides the door, which was constructed of heavy wood, there was a single window in the place, which was barred, though it had no glass in it. The forest grew close to the back of the place.

"Now look here," commanded the leader, as soon as they were all in the room. "Are you going to talk, or do we have to starve it out of you?"

"If you mean I am to tell you anything about that treasure, I guess you'll have to starve me," returned the professor, with spirit. "I tell you I don't know a thing about it."

Sackett turned to Abel. "No use arguing with this man now, I can see that. Maybe when he gets hungry he'll sing another tune. Put him in the dungeon."

Without wasting a word on the matter Abel drove the professor before him to a small door which opened in one side of the room. This door, when opened, disclosed a turning flight of narrow stairs, and down this the professor went, guided by the light from a lantern which Manuel had lighted and handed to the mate. After turning around and around they came suddenly to a narrow cell, in front of which swung a heavy wooden half door, the upper part of which was composed of iron bars. Abel opened the door by pulling it toward him and then pushed the professor inside.

"Stay there until you get hungry," he said, grimly. "When you feel like talking just yell for the captain."

He closed the door with a sharp slam, snapped a padlock in place, and taking the

light with him, remounted the stairs. The professor stood still, watching the light flash and twinkle on the white stone steps until it was gone and he was in the darkness alone.

CHAPTER X THE ROPE IN THE DUNGEON

The light was gone at last and with it the professor's hope. He was totally alone in the inky darkness, a prisoner in a cell whose size he was not certain of, down under the ruins of a castle in the woods. Far above him he could hear the slam of another door and the faint footsteps of the two men. Then there was complete silence and the teacher turned away from the barred door.

"A truly ancient castle," grumbled the professor. "The dungeon completed before the rest of the house!"

He wondered, as he moved cautiously around if anyone had ever been a prisoner in this cold and wet-smelling cell. He found his way around without difficulty, running his hands along the wall and extending his feet carefully. There was not a single object in the place, and he felt that they had not expected to have him there, for there was no bed or chair in the place.

"Unless," thought the savant, as he continued to feel his way around. "They wouldn't be decent enough to give me a chair or bed, anyway. No use in expecting mercy from villains like these, I suppose."

The walls were perfectly smooth, composed of sandstone, as was the entire castle. Ned had told his father that the opposite slope of the mountain was almost wholly composed of this particular type of stone, and the original owner and builder had no doubt had it quarried and dragged to the spot, using Indians who had been taken captive by the Spaniards. Such was the professor's belief and it was reasonable. Even in his anxiety to escape from these men he found himself taking an interest in the place and resolved that if these men were ever cleaned out of it he would explore it thoroughly.

The floor was also of stone, wet and slippery, and for all the professor knew, the

dwelling place of spiders and other crawling things. He hated to sit down on it, but there was no other place and he was very tired from his long ride and the excitement of it all, so he felt around the floor with shrinking hand and finally found a spot near the door which seemed to be drier than the rest of the floor. Pretty much exhausted the history professor sank to the floor and rested his back against the cold wall.

He was in some doubt as to what to do. He felt that Ned would catch on to his meaning when he read the word "duress" and the boys would surely make a vigorous effort to find him, but how long that would be or what would happen in the meantime he had no idea. The men upstairs were convinced that he knew something about the treasure, that he possessed some information which he was withholding, and they would do their best to get it out of him. They would try to starve him first, and in that fact he found a ray of hope, for it would take them several days to find out that he did not intend to say anything, and then they would adopt a more severe program. In that time Ned and the boys from Maine would have time to find him, and they would naturally look near the mountains. It was possible that they might think he had been carried off to sea, but surely the cook or Yappi would tell them the true facts of the case, provided they hadn't been so frightened that they hadn't even seen in which direction the cavalcade had gone.

But if the men decided to change their plans and try to pump information from him he would have a bigger problem on his hands. These men were by no means gentle, they were men who were willing and able to sweat hard to earn money and especially dishonest money, and they would not be likely to stop at anything cruel or inhuman. They were miles away from any source of help and the woods would effectually hide any story which might shock the outside world if it were known. Sackett and the mate must know that the boys would soon be on the trail, and he was inclined to think that they would resort before very long to methods other than peaceful.

"If that is the case," thought Professor Scott, jumping to his feet, "I'm just wasting time by sitting here. There seems to be no way of getting out of the place, but it may be that there is some flaw that will ultimately prove my biggest help."

So once more he began to feel his way along the wall and then stopped as a new thought came to him. A few days before Ned had given him a cigar lighter, a somewhat unreliable engine that lighted once in a great while, but which always gave off a bright flash when the little wheel was turned by the thumb. It was in his vest pocket and he reached for it. He had not had any matches with him and had secretly lamented the fact, but now his main difficulty was in a fair way to be overcome.

He took the little case from his pocket and spun the wheel. A sputtering little flash was the answer, which lighted up the cell for a split second and gave him his bearings. It was evident that the cigar lighter had no intentions whatsoever of lighting for any length of time, but it at least gave forth a flash that threw the heavy stones into a sort of bluish picture for an instant. Working it constantly the old gentleman moved around the dungeon, exploring the walls and floor, until something in one corner arrested his attention.

There was a crevice there, running from the floor to the ceiling and in that crack was a moulded rope. The rope ended near the floor, and hung straight down from a round hole in the ceiling above him. He took hold of the rope, to find it wet and slippery but fairly strong. The men had evidently not seen it and he knew why. Anyone who stood in the room and threw the beams of a lantern around would cast the light in a confused way into the corners and so miss seeing the rope, which was deep in the cranny, and indeed the professor would not have seen it himself if he had not been standing right at the crevice. Probably the men had never gone over the walls inch by inch, and unless one did that the hidden rope would surely escape their eye. But now that he had the rope, what was he to do with it?

He pulled on the rope and his answering came with a suddenness that startled him into stepping back hastily. Far above his head a bell pealed out sharply, shattering the silence of the mountain fastness with disconcerting vigor. Nervously he dropped the lighter and then picked it up, his brow wet with a nervous perspiration.

"Great heavens!" murmured the professor. "I must stop that, or I'll have them down on me."

Upstairs there was a moment of silence and then a sudden commotion. A chair fell over and he heard running footsteps. Apparently the upper door was opened, for he could hear the words of the men.

"What is ringing that bell?" he heard Sackett roar.

"You got me, captain," replied Abel, while rapid chattering in Mexican reached the ears of the professor. "That bell is just up there in the tower and nobody can ring it. There must be ghosts in this place, I tell you!"

"Keep shut about your ghosts!" snarled the leader. "What's that Mexican saying?"

"He's howling prayers because he's scared," the mate said.

Understanding came over the professor all at once. One tall tower had struck his attention as they had approached the ruined castle and it was evident that this tower had in it a large bell, placed there when the castle was first built. The rope which the professor had pulled led directly to this bell, a circumstance of which the men upstairs knew nothing, and he found that fate had provided him with a weapon to work against them with telling force. Realizing in the long run what this would mean the teacher once more took hold of the rope.

"Somebody is ringing that bell," said Sackett, his tone ugly and uncertain. "Ain't there no way to get up in that tower and stop it?"

"No," answered Abel. "The tower has no steps and it's no use anyway. I tell you a spirit is ringing that bell! I knew I hadn't ought to have come in on a game like this."

"Oh, shut up," growled Sackett. "It isn't ringing anymore."

But at that moment the bell rang out, and this time the professor used it effectively. With long sweeping strokes he tolled it, so that the melancholy sounds sounded out and over the country for miles. It was a solemn and fearful sound, and the men above were thoroughly awed and frightened by it.

"Go see if that professor has escaped from his cell," ordered Sackett, as the professor paused in his labors. "He may be out and doing this somehow."

The professor thanked his lucky stars that he had overheard this bit of conversation and gave the bell a final toll. Then he quickly resumed his place near the door, holding onto the bars and peering anxiously out as the mate came down the stairs with the lantern.

The man flashed the light full in the face of the professor, who blinked and threw up his hand to cover his eyes. At the same time he eagerly questioned the mate.

"Why is that bell ringing? What does it mean? Why is there a bell here?" he cried.

The mate looked troubled but attempted to pass it off. "You mind your own business," he said, in a surly tone. At the same time he pressed close to the door and flashed the light into the dungeon, looking intently at the corners. Without another word he went back up the winding stairs, and before he closed the door the professor heard him say: "The old man is all right. He hasn't been out of the cell and he couldn't ring the bell. I tell you—"

That was as much as Professor Scott heard but it was enough to satisfy him. His best plan was now to mystify the men in the hope of terrifying them so that they would leave the place and take him somewhere else. Whether that would in the end be a better move or not he did not know, but it was at least better than waiting and wasting time, and it would serve to bring Ned and the boys to the spot. There was no doubt that the sound could be heard far from the mountain, and he had no doubt that it would be of great value to him.

Feeling that it would do him no good to keep on tolling the bell he gave up the task for the time being, planning to ring it wildly in the very middle of the night. The men would no doubt be asleep and he could ring it out in such a way as to bring them to their feet with fast beating hearts, convinced that the place was haunted by a spirit that rang the bell. If they persisted in staying even after that he would keep ringing the bell at intervals, taking care not to break the rope, which, fortunately for him had originally been tarred and so was preserved.

With that thought in mind the professor pulled his coat more closely around him, curled himself up on the hard floor and went to sleep. His sleep was fitful and restless, and after two hours of it he had the impression that something nearby was scratching. Awakening at last he sat up, wide awake in an instant, to find that the steady scratching sound was no dream, but an actual fact, and seemed to come from the wall beside him.

CHAPTER XI THE UNDERGROUND PASSAGE

The scratching sound continued to come as the professor listened, and he got up and bent his head close to the wall. It sounded to him as though someone was scraping the rock wall on the other side of his cell, and he was puzzled over the circumstance. There was a measure of hope in the sound, perhaps the boys had arrived and were trying to break through to him. But as he continued to think it over he realized that it could not be so. The dungeon was deep in the earth and it would be impossible for them to get down on a level with his cell. The only other thing he could think of was that there was a prisoner in a cell next to his.

It might easily be possible that Sackett, in some of his other dishonest games, had taken someone else prisoner and the man was trying to break through to him. In that case it behooved the professor to try and help whoever was coming through the wall of his dungeon. He took the cigar lighter from his pocket, made it flash and then looked at his watch by its brief blue flame. It was now one o'clock in the morning.

Continuing to make flashes the teacher watched the wall and after a time found the rock upon which the unknown man was working. It was a large block in the very center of the south wall, and under the soft blows of the man on the other side it was already slightly loose. The professor could see it move. He took out a knife which he had and began to pick at the edges on his side, chipping carefully and as noiselessly as possible. It was evident that the person on the other side knew that he was helping for the scraping stopped abruptly but after a moment it was resumed.

They worked on in silence, the professor listening for sounds from upstairs, but none came. The men were evidently asleep or they had left the place altogether, for he heard no movement and he was not interrupted in his labors. He found that the soft and rotted material between the stones was easy to dislodge, and his

mysterious helper was pushing as he worked, so that the huge stone was beginning to move toward the cell of the professor. Only a fraction of an inch at a time, but it was enough to give the teacher hope, and finally it was far enough out to allow him to get the tips of his fingers under the rough edge of the stone.

By working it back and forth the professor at length got it loose. It came out with a rush, nearly bending him double with the unexpected weight. At the same time a light flared in his eyes and he hastily deposited the stone on the floor of his dungeon. When this was completed he straightened up and confronted his companion.

It was Yappi, the mestizo. He held a torch of pitch wood in his one hand and a keen knife in the other. He had evidently worked hard at the stone, for his hands were dirty and so was his mouth and forehead, showing that he had stopped more than once to wipe them with his dirty hands. The professor was glad to see the man but more than astonished at what he saw back of him. The ranchman was standing in a vaulted underground passage, which ran back a distance that the professor could not make out.

"Yappi!" cried the professor, in a low voice. "How did you get here?"

"I followed you, senor," said the old man, simply. "It was somewhat hard work, for my feet are not so swift to run as they once were. But when I knew that they had carried you off to this castle I laughed inside, for I knew this castle very well."

In one sense Yappi was a mystery. He was an ordinary mixture of Spanish and Indian, and yet not ordinary in other ways. He possessed a dignity and his English was perfect. Ned Scott could never learn where he got it. Except for rare periods when he became sulky or falsely sensitive he was always steady and reliable. The professor had greatly misjudged him when he had thought him a coward, and later on apologized, an apology which was very graciously accepted.

"What is this underground passage?" whispered the professor eagerly, forgetting his situation in his interest.

"It is as old as the castle, senor, and I have known of it since I was a child. Many times I have played around these ruins. But come, we waste time and must be going."

The opening that the removal of the stone had made was not a big one and the professor had a hard struggle to get out, in fact Yappi was compelled to haul him through bodily. Of a necessity the professor squirmed out and landed on his face, grumbling at the man who had made him resort to so clumsy a method of action. Once in the passage he looked around, finding that it was made of stone and arched overhead, the entire height being about seven feet. Consequently they were not compelled to bend over, and they hurried through the passage in comfort, the ranchman in the lead.

"What was this passage ever made for?" the professor asked.

"I do not know, senor. It may be that once that room was not a dungeon, or it may be—but who knows? Only I happened to know of the passage and knew that they would put you in that cell, so I have been at work for some hours on the stone."

"I certainly appreciate your hard work, Yappi," said the professor.

The mestizo made no reply. The professor noted that the passage was sloping upward somewhat, and before long he felt cool fresh air on his cheek. Near the entrance Yappi extinguished the torch by grinding it under his heel and they proceeded in the darkness, until the mestizo stopped and grasped his arm, pointing silently ahead.

The end of the passage was before them, and lounging there, a rifle in his hands, was the mate Abel. They could make out the lines of his body plainly as he stood near a mound, totally unconscious that he was within five feet of a secret tunnel. The professor could see that the mouth of the secret passage was screened in some dense bushes and that it curved right up from the ground. But in spite of all their brilliant work Abel suspected something, and for the time being at least they were halted.

They held a council of war right there, speaking in whispers. It was evident that the mate had heard something or had the feeling that all was not well, for he stood on his guard, the rifle held slightly forward. Yappi was for rushing him and fighting it out, but the professor opposed it firmly. The man was armed and Yappi was not, and the ranchman was old and none too strong. Beside all that, the professor had another thought.

He asked the old man if he had heard the bell tolling and the mestizo replied that

he had. Professor Scott then went on to tell him how it was done, and to propose that he steal back and ring the bell, thus puzzling the men and taking Abel away from his most inconvenient post. The mestizo gravely approved of his plan and together they retraced their steps until they came to the hole in the wall.

Knowing where the bell rope was even in the darkness the professor insisted upon being the one to go back into the dungeon, so with Yappi's help he once more pushed and puffed his way through the hole. He landed on the other side pretty well mussed up.

"Confound these fellows," he growled inwardly. "I've lost several pounds squirming in and out of these holes!"

He had regained his feet and was tiptoeing toward the bell rope when a warning hiss from Yappi reached him. He turned toward the hole.

"What is it, Yappi?" he whispered.

"Come back! Light coming!"

Surely enough, at that moment a light flashed on the winding steps and began to descend. The professor made a wild dive for the hole and then stopped with a groan. It would take him several moments to worm his way back into the passage, and already it was too late for that. Sackett was coming down the stairs with the lantern, and he was now in plain sight around the last turn.

For an instant the professor remained rooted to the spot as though paralyzed. The leader of the gang was approaching the door, holding the lantern before him, his eyes squinted more than usual as he tried to see into the cell. Yappi had disappeared somewhere, and the professor felt suddenly alone and miserable.

Sackett looked in the dungeon and his eyes fell on the block which had been removed. With a snarling oath he saw the hole in the wall and turned red and angry eyes on the professor. But the old teacher had decided on his course of action.

Without fully realizing why he did it the professor stepped to the bell rope and pulled it with all his strength. The bell in the tower pealed out with a terrific clash, sending the tocsin booming out over the mountain side. Sackett saw the move and a great light swept over him.

"So!" he shouted, above the clanging of the bell. "You're the one who is ringing that bell!"

Swinging the handle of the lantern over his arm he dived viciously into his pocket for the key to the padlock. As he did so there was the sound of running footsteps over his head and Abel's voice reached them.

"That bell is ringing again, Sackett!" the mate cried, his voice showing his alarm.

"Yes, and here is the bird that is ringing it!" roared the leader. "Get down here right away, Abel! Where is Manuel?"

"He ran away, scared to death," replied the mate.

"Get down here and help me choke this old one," commanded Sackett, thrusting the key into the padlock.

But Abel called down once more, and there was a new note in his voice. "Never mind him, Squint! Get up here as fast as you can! Here come a whole rescue party, with all them blasted kids in it!"

The professor gave the bell one last pull of triumph and then let the rope go. Sackett hesitated for a moment, muttering savagely to himself and holding onto the padlock and key. Then he turned and ran up the steps, dashing the lantern against the wall in his hurry, causing the glass to break and go tinkling down the stone steps.

CHAPTER XII THE TOLLING OF THE BELL

The four boys hastily armed themselves to go and find the professor. Ned packed some provisions in a knapsack and slung it behind his saddle, not knowing just how long they might be on their hunt. The other boys watered their horses and Ned's and waited around for him to get ready.

Just before leaving Ned made a final look around, greatly puzzled at the absence of Yappi and the cook. "Must have taken them prisoner, too," was his conclusion, as he joined the others. It was a somewhat grim cavalcade that swung out of the ranch yard.

There were two possibilities, the sea and the mountains. One guess was as good as the other, but Ned chose the mountains and they headed that way. They had gone but a scant mile when Don pulled up.

"Who is this coming?" he asked, pointing to a lone figure which was running over a nearby hill.

"Looks like the cook," said Ned. It was Spanci and he drew nearer, evidently recognizing them. When he came up he was slightly out of breath but able to talk.

"Spanci, where have they taken my father?" asked Ned, in Spanish.

"They have taken him to the mountains, senor, but do not fear, Yappi is with him, trailing them." The cook then went on to tell of the raid and of Yappi's stealthy trailing and his own effort. "I ran to the ranch of the Senorita Mercedes, senor, and she has sent her overseer and two men out to the mountain to aid your father."

Ned thanked the old Indian for his devotion and the cook went on back to the

ranch, to await the turn of events. Ned was greatly relieved to hear that Yappi was on the trail, and he knew that the old mestizo would stick to it and help his father no matter what turned up. It was with a much more cheerful heart that the party rode on toward the mountains.

"No doubt they will stop and hold dad somewhere for a day or two," argued Ned. "We should run across them shortly, and if it is possible Yappi will leave some kind of a guiding sign."

"The best part of it is that we know now that they didn't go toward the sea," put in Terry and Ned nodded.

They stopped briefly late in the afternoon to eat and rest the horses and in the early evening reached the edge of the mountain range. Once within the shadows of the mighty trees they were at a loss as to how to go. Had the party gone north or south? It was a big decision to make, for if they proceeded far in one direction and found that they were wrong they would have to retrace and lose valuable time. Just as the last shadows of the day were stealing across the sky they stopped for a council of war.

"There is nothing to indicate which way they would be likely to go," said Jim.

"Wouldn't they be most likely to go south, to get away into a wilder country?" asked Terry.

"Maybe," said Ned. "But the northern part of the range is the wildest. So we can't tell. They may have even gone right on over, to the waste of wilderness on the other side."

"Whichever way we guess we may be dead wrong," murmured Don.

"Yes, and we can't afford to be wrong," Ned answered. "Look here, we'll have to split the party."

"Split the party?" echoed the others.

"Yes. Don and I will go south, and Jim and Terry north and over the top. In that way we should be able to cover a lot of territory. I propose that we make this spot our meeting place, and that we all assemble here at seven o'clock tomorrow morning to compare notes. Let's have a signal of three shots. That will mean to

either come back to the meeting place, or ride toward the shots."

"Better make it the signal to ride toward the shots," advised Don. "We'll repeat the shooting and keep it up until the other party joins us. But if one party picks up Professor Scott it had better ride back here with him and fire the shots from here, because we all know just where this place is and can find it easily."

"That's right," agreed Ned. "Of course, we are splitting our party and lessening our strength."

"I don't see that we can help that," Jim argued. "If we were looking for something that didn't require every minute we could keep together and take our time. But there is no knowing what the outfit will do to the professor. Besides, two of us should be able to handle those fellows, even if there are three of them."

"We should be able to depend on a surprise attack," said Terry.

"Yes," agreed Ned. "What is that?"

The others looked at him questioningly. Ned listened intently. "I thought I heard the sound of a bell tolling," he said.

"Where would there be a bell around here?" asked Don.

"I don't think that there is a bell nearer than the mines. I guess I must have imagined it, that is all. Well, it is growing dark. Shall we separate now?"

"Guess we might as well," the others agreed.

With mutual goodbyes and agreeing to meet again at the grove in which they were at present stopped, the four boys split into two groups and went in opposite directions. Terry and Jim rode north and up the mountain, and Ned and Don began to make their way south, moving up the mountain on a gradual slant.

"Funny about that bell," Ned said, as they rode slowly forward. "I could have sworn to it that I heard a bell ringing."

"What kind of a bell?" asked Don.

"Sounded like a church bell, and it seemed to be tolling. But I guess it was some

other sounds that I mistook. Certainly there is no church anywhere around here."

"Doesn't look as though there is," grinned Don.

The sun had now set on the other side of the giant range and they were in total darkness. Knowing that it would be useless to push on very rapidly during the night they planned to put up a temporary camp on some ridge and wait there until daylight came. That would give them a few hours to look around before returning to their meeting place to compare notes.

"Guess we might as well camp and eat," Ned suggested, and they found a spot that was dry and sheltered, where they speedily kindled a small fire and made some coffee. Sandwiches went with it and then they settled down beside the fire, talking quietly and keeping both ears and eyes open for any strange sound. It was early when they turned in and slept soundly.

How long they had been asleep was a matter of conjecture, but they were shocked into a state of wakefulness by the furious tolling of a bell. It was near at hand, and they leaped to their feet with rapidly beating hearts. Alone there on the mountain fastness the sound was awe-inspiring and unpleasantly thrilling, and both boys felt chills running up and down their backs. The bell which was ringing so mysteriously was not more than a hundred feet from them.

"My goodness, what in the name of glory is that!" gasped Ned, as the horses moved restlessly back and forth.

"Your bell," cried Don, snatching up his rifle. "We were camped almost on top of it!"

Ned secured his weapon. "Never mind the horses, let's see what is up," he shouted. They started on a run in the direction of the sound of the bell, breaking recklessly through the undergrowth. In less than a hundred yards they emerged into a clearing and came upon the ruins of a castle, in the tower of which the bell was tolling madly.

A man stood in a doorway, a faint light behind him. He had seen them coming and shouted something to someone within. The bell ceased to toll and the boys pressed on, straight for the figure in the doorway. It was joined by another and Ned raised a shout.

"Sackett!" he cried. "I guess we'll find dad now!"

His answer was a shot from Sackett's revolver, and they threw themselves flat on the ground, to send two high shots whistling through the narrow doorway. Had Sackett and Abel known that they were alone the two outlaws would not have run, but they were unable to make out anything accurate against the black trees and thought that a full party had arrived. The two men did not linger, but made their way out over the ruins of the first floor and escaped the boys hearing them take to their horses.

"They didn't take dad with them," cried Ned, leaping to his feet. "He must be in the house yet."

They entered the castle, to find a candle in a bottle giving light to the single good room which remained of the ruins. Seeing the door in the side of the wall Ned and Don made for it, the former taking up the candle as they did so. They had no more fear of the bandits and they fairly ran down the stairs, to find Professor Scott waiting at the barred door.

"Dad!" cried Ned in delight. "So you are really here?"

"Oh, yes, and I thought I'd be here for sometime," smiled Mr. Scott. "You boys arrived just in time. How did you like my bell concert?"

"If it hadn't been for that we might never have found you," said Ned. He broke the padlock with the butt of his gun, and then stepped hastily back. "What is that?"

A dark figure was worming through the hole in the wall of the dungeon. "Don't be afraid," the professor said cheerfully. "It is Yappi, who is joining the party."

The padlock was broken off, the door opened and Ned and his father embraced warmly. He shook Don by the hand and after hasty explanations had been made they followed Yappi up the stairs. The mestizo had refused to accept any thanks and took the lead in getting them out of the place.

They made a hasty search but found nothing of importance. The men had escaped on their mounts, and it was useless to think of following them. Yappi took them to the mouth of the underground passage and showed them how to drop down in it, and they walked along it back to the dungeon and then once

more went back to the courtyard before the castle.

"The rascals either took my horse or loosed it," said the professor. "I guess I'll have to walk home."

"No, no, senor," said Yappi, quietly. "I have provide for that. Two horses in yonder bush."

And he went to the thicket indicated and led out two horses. They praised his foresight lavishly but he was indifferent to their praises. Ned then proposed that they go back to the meeting place.

Accordingly they mounted and went down the mountain to the place where they had left Terry and Jim. It was decided to wait until morning for the other two, rather than fire off their guns to attract them.

"They should be here at seven in the morning, and it won't be long before it is that time," Don said. "So we might as well wait."

So they waited, sleeping by turns, waking at last to greet a fine warm day. Seven o'clock came and passed and no sign of the others was to be seen. When a half hour had passed they began to fire their guns at intervals, but there was nothing but silence after the echoes had broken in different places over the mountain sides.

Refusing to be worried over it they ate breakfast and again fired their guns, riding out from their camp for a few miles in either direction. But when ten o'clock in the morning came they once more assembled in the camp and faced the bitter facts.

"Well," said Ned, in despair. "Now those fellows are gone. They must have become lost."

"Either that," said Don, gravely. "Or they have fallen into the hands of Sackett!"

CHAPTER XIII A FORCED MARCH

Terry and Jim had made their way northward and up the mountain. It was growing dark and they wished to cover as much ground as possible before the night would make their task difficult. They planned to seek some high point and camp there, watching the mountain sides for a sign of a fire or light of any kind. With this in mind they pushed steadily on, winding up the sloping side of the range.

When darkness finally came on they pitched camp, a process that consisted of very little else than getting off their horses and building a fire. There was a chill in the air which made them glad of the small fire, and they ate a hearty supper beside it, discussing the business at hand.

"If we find that nothing has been discovered," said Jim, "we'll have to beat up the mountain in deadly earnest in the morning. We're satisfied that they didn't go toward the sea, but we must take care that they haven't skipped out of these mountains."

"Right you are," agreed the red-headed boy, as he poured out coffee, "but there must be a million hiding places in these mountains, and we'll have to draw mighty fine lines. I suppose there is no use of going any further tonight?"

"I hardly think so," rejoined Jim, thoughtfully. "We don't know the country and we may run into some trouble. We are on a knoll here and should be able to see any light that would show on the mountain."

"Suppose someone should see our fire?" asked Terry, practically.

"There isn't much danger of that," said Jim. "The fire is small and we are up pretty high. When we go to sleep the fire will die down and probably go out. We

can comb a few miles of the woods before we go back to meet Don and Ned."

After the meal was over the boys cleaned up around their camp site and stood for some time on the crest of the rise looking down into the blackness of the forest below them. There was no sign of life in the dense trees and no light was to be seen. Jim and Terry once more seriously considered the possibility of making a night search and then finally decided against it.

"I certainly am sleepy," yawned Terry, as they made their way back to the fire.

"Well, as soon as we gather some wood we'll turn in," suggested Jim. "I don't know that it is necessary to keep the fire going all night, but we will have wood at hand for the first thing in the morning so that we can build a fire without wasting any time."

With their knives and their hands the two boys gathered enough wood to last them for several hours and then gave a final look at the horses. Then each of them took his blanket from the pile of equipment, stacked his gun alongside, loosened shoes and neckties and rolled up in the blankets.

"If either one of us wakes up he can put wood on the fire," said Terry, as he settled himself in the blanket.

"Yes, but don't wake up purposely," advised Jim.

They went to sleep without any trouble, being pretty well tired from the day's journey. The air was cool and fresh and they were healthy young men, so they slept soundly. Terry was perhaps the lighter sleeper of the two, and it was he who shook Jim into wakefulness after they had been asleep for a few hours.

"What is up?" asked Jim, awaking swiftly, his brain working perfectly.

"Listen and see if you don't hear a bell ringing!" whispered Terry.

Jim listened, and in spite of himself he felt his flesh quiver. The mountain was dark, the wind fitful, and the fire was a dull red. From off in the distance the sound of a bell was heard, a bell that clashed and rang without rhythm. The sound was far away and very faint, and when the wind blew with a slight increase in force they lost the sound.

"That's funny," murmured Jim, propped on his elbow.

"What do you suppose it is?" whispered Terry.

"I haven't the least idea. I don't know where there could be a bell around here. It might be possible that there is a village nearby and for some reason or other they are ringing the town bell."

"Maybe. Shall we go down, follow the sound, and see what it is?"

"I don't see why we should," Jim argued. "It might simply be a wild goose chase. The sound is coming from the south, and maybe Ned and Don will investigate. I guess we had better stay where we are."

"I guess you are right," Terry agreed, throwing some wood on the fire. "Back to sleep we go."

Jim followed Terry's advice. The red-headed boy dozed and woke up, staring at the sky and moving restlessly. The sound of the bell had stopped and he closed his eyes and once more dozed off. He had slept lightly for perhaps an hour when he woke up, his senses alert.

There had been a sound near the camp. The horses were moving restlessly and Terry raised himself on his elbow and looked into the shadows. The fire had burned low again and he could not see far. He debated whether to wake Jim or not, and then decided not to.

"Getting jumpy," he thought. "I must go to sleep."

But at that moment two shadows moved quickly from the tall trees and toward the fire. With a warning shout to Jim, Terry rolled out of his blanket and reached for the nearby guns.

"Leave your hands off them guns!" snarled Sackett, as Jim kicked his way clear of his coverings.

Terry looked once at the two outlaws and the guns which they had in their hands and decided to give in. Jim scrambled to his feet and stood beside him, dismayed at the turn events had taken.

- "A couple of bad pennies turned up," muttered Terry, inwardly angry at the new developments.
- "All those kids weren't together," said Abel, aside to Sackett.
- "I see they weren't. Well, we'll take these youngsters along," replied the leader, taking their guns from the tree where they were leaning.
- "What do you want with us?" Jim demanded.
- "You'll find out soon enough," retorted Sackett.
- "You meddling kids made us lose the old man so we'll just take you along for a little ride."
- "Ned and Don must have rescued the professor," said Jim to Terry.
- "You never mind what happened!" growled Abel, in such a manner that they knew their guess was correct. "Get your horses and come on!"
- "Where are you taking us?" asked Terry.
- "Mind your own business," snapped Sackett. "Gather up your junk and hurry up about it."
- "I see," nodded Terry. "I'm going somewhere and it isn't any of my business where! And Jimmy, my boy, all this nice equipment that Ned gave us is just junk!"
- "Quit your talking," commanded Abel. "We have no time to lose."

In silence the two boys gathered up the blankets and the camping kits, strapped them on the horse under the watchful eye of the mate, and then mounted. Sackett whistled and Manuel appeared, leading three horses. The outlaws sprang into the saddle and Abel took the lead, the other two hemming in the boys from the rear. Abel turned his horse's head down the mountain and toward the sea.

"Too doggone bad we didn't keep a sharper lookout," Terry grumbled.

Jim shrugged his shoulders. "Perhaps, but I don't know. These fellows were

running from Don and Ned, and their falling in on us was an accident. We'll have to keep our eyes open and see if we can give them the slip."

The horses picked their way down the mountain expertly, and they had worked several miles to the southward before they rode out on the open plain. Daylight was now not far off, and they went on in silence, both parties keenly awake to the slightest movement of the other. When daylight did break over the plain they were miles from the mountain and almost to the sea. There had been no chance to make a break and Terry and Jim resigned themselves to their fate.

No halt was made to eat, and the boys found that they were very hungry and somewhat tired. What little sleep they had had was only enough to refresh them sufficiently to keep going, and they would have liked to lay down and enjoy a full, untroubled sleep. But they knew that if they were ever to escape from Sackett and his men they must be on the alert every minute.

They rode steadily onward, the men apparently indifferent to the thought of breakfast and the boys grimly uncomplaining. Jim was more used to a horse than Terry and did not mind the ride, but the red-headed boy was growing restless. From time to time the men looked back at the distant mountains, but as they were now many miles below the vicinity of the ruined castle there was nothing to be feared from the other party. The sea was now very near and Jim thought he recognized the country.

"If I'm not mistaken we rode over this country yesterday," he said aside to Terry.

Before them at a distance of less than a mile, was a high bluff, and when they rode to the edge of this bluff the boys saw a familiar sight. Directly below them was the tannery which they had stopped to inspect on the day before. It was at this point that the Mexican slipped out and took the lead, showing them a steep and winding path that ran down beside the cliff and led to the beach below. Down this the party made its way, the nimble horses bracing their feet expertly, and after some twenty minutes of steady descending they emerged at length onto the hard sand of the beach.

Manuel still kept the lead, riding up to the tannery, and at one of the smaller sheds he alighted from his horse, an example which was followed by the others. The boys were not sorry to follow suit and when they had done so Manuel took the horses and lodged them out of sight in the main building.

"Say," demanded Terry. "Haven't you fellows any stomachs? I'm starved!"

Sackett opened the door to the smaller building with a grin on his ugly face. "We're all hungry," he said. "Abel, cook up some grub."

"Not while them kids are here," said the mate, promptly. "Let them do the cooking."

"I'm too hungry to say 'no' just now," said Jim, promptly. "Somebody get me wood and I'll make breakfast."

Abel brought wood while Manuel went up the bluff and disappeared. Sackett sat on a ledge near the door, keeping a watchful eye on the boys. Jim cooked an excellent breakfast and the men enjoyed it. Manuel had come back and reported briefly.

"Ship's coming in," he said in Spanish, but the boys understood him.

Just as the meal was over the Mexican looked out of the door and got up. "The boat is in," he said to Sackett.

The leader arose quickly and motioned to the boys. "Come on, you boys, we're moving. Abel, bring up in the rear."

"Where are we going?" Jim asked.

"You'll find out when you get on board," retorted Sackett, as he marched them out of the shack.

"Evidently on a ship," murmured Terry.

He was right. Off the shore a battered old schooner with two masts was tossing gently to and fro and near them on the beach a long boat was hauled up, with its crew of six waiting. The men touched their caps when Sackett approached.

"Get in the boat," ordered Sackett, and the boys climbed in, taking their places in the stern seats. The outlaws followed, all but Manuel, who stood on the shore.

"Get the horses back to the hide-out," Sackett said to the Mexican. "We'll be back soon." To the boat's crew, who had taken their places at the oars he said,

"Row us alongside."

The crew pulled with a will and the boat moved from the shore, out onto the blue waters of the Pacific. After a row of a half mile they ranged alongside of the schooner, which had the name *Galloway* painted on the stern. Jim and Terry were ordered up the side ladder, where they dropped over the rail to the deck. Sackett and Abel, followed by the crew, speedily joined them.

"Put on sail," ordered Sackett of the ship's captain, as that officer approached. He turned to the boys, a grin of evil delight on his face. "You kids wanted to know where you are going, eh? Well, we're taking you to Mexico, to keep you prisoners on a nice, deserted ranch until it suits us to let you go!"

CHAPTER XIV HISTORY REPEATS

For a moment after Sackett made his startling statement the two boys could only stand and stare at him. At last Jim spoke up.

"You are taking us to Mexico?" he cried.

"Exactly!" mocked the outlaw. "We can't afford to have you two boys hanging around while we are looking for that treasure. So we are going to put you in cold storage for a time!"

"Mexico isn't exactly cold storage," murmured Terry. "Bum joker, this Sackett man!"

"You'll find out it ain't a joke," said Sackett, as the sails were run into place. "It'll be a long time before you boys get home again."

"You'll run into a lot of trouble over this," Jim warned.

"Trouble is something I'm used to," Sackett grinned. He turned to the villainous-looking captain of the schooner. "Captain Jake Ryan, keep your eyes on these boys and put them ashore where I tell you. I'm going ashore at Peso myself, so I make you responsible for them."

"You needn't be afraid they'll get away from me," the captain growled, looking them over keenly. "They're nothing but kids!"

"Yes, but they're pretty slippery ones," warned Sackett. "Come down in the cabin with me."

The two men, followed by Abel, left the boys and walked off. Jim looked at Terry and the latter shrugged his shoulders.

"Looks like we're in for it now," the red-headed boy remarked.

"I'm afraid we are," Jim replied, in a low voice. "But we must get away. If we are carried to Mexico there is no telling when we will ever get home again."

"True enough, but I don't recommend starting anything with this crew," said Terry.

The crew was indeed a rough looking outfit, apparently picked up in many ports and composed of rascals of every sort. They wore no uniforms and were seemingly expert in their trade, by which sign the boys took it that they had spent most of their life on board sailing vessels. They represented different nationalities and were a hardy and bold set of men, who would not stop at any kind of trade so long as it promised them gain of some sort.

"I'll bet the police of many a town would like to see these fellows," was Jim's estimate of them.

The ship was rapidly leaving that portion of the coast where Jim and Terry had come aboard and was heading south. That meant that they intended to round off the tip of Lower California and run up the shore of Mexico, probably in one of the wildest portions of the tropical country. The boys looked once or twice over the side, but they knew it would be foolish to jump over, since they would be shot or overtaken by a boat before reaching the shore. There was nothing left for them to do, therefore, but to make the best of the situation.

They wandered over the deck of the schooner, forgetting in their interest that they were captives. Jim and Terry had done enough sailing to know something about sailing ships, and this ancient schooner interested them greatly. It had evidently been in active service for years, for it was battered and beaten by many storms and its decks were worn deeply in spots. The vast expanse of sails overhead, close hauled in the wind, drew their eyes in admiration, even though the sails were dirty and patched. The crew worked busily around the rigging, coiling ropes and stowing loose equipment, paying no attention to the boys, much as though taking prisoners was an every-day affair with them. The boys noted that two of the men worked apart from the main crew and looked to be men of a better stamp than the rank and file.

After a short run down the coast a tiny village appeared on the coast and once opposite it Sackett and the mate appeared on deck. The town was that of Peso

and the captain of the *Galloway* ordered the boat over the side. Sackett and Abel entered the boat and then looked up to where Jim and Terry leaned over the rail.

"Goodbye, boys," mocked the bay pirate. "If we run across the other members of your party we'll give them your regards, shall we?"

Jim only glowered, but Terry raised his slouched camping hat. "Why Mr. Sackett!" he exclaimed sweetly. "How very lovely of you! If I were only nearer to you I would kiss your sweet face for that kind thought!"

The crew of the *Galloway* broke into broad grins and the captain chuckled. Sackett's face grew red and he half rose from his seat in the long boat. But Abel pulled him down again.

"Quit fooling with those kids and let's go," he said, and Sackett sat down, after saying something fiery through his set teeth. The sailors pulled on their oars and the long boat shot through the water to the shore. When the two men had been set on shore the boat returned, and the schooner continued on its way.

Up to that time the air had been clear and the water untroubled, but a change gradually developed.

A slight haze sprang up over the water and the air became thicker. Little choppy waves began to form, and before long the schooner was beginning to rock with increasing force.

In the bow there was a commotion. A lookout in the crow's nest had called something down, and the captain came hurrying on deck. The boys soon discovered a large black schooner to the west of them, some four miles off, and the sight of it appeared to alarm the crew. Acting under orders from the captain they crowded on more sail and began to run before the wind. It was a move that was not particularly wise under the increasing strength of the rising wind, and the two boys were puzzled.

"Terry," said Jim, as he stood in the stern watching the schooner in the distance. "These fellows are running away from that ship!"

Terry looked with increasing interest and found that Jim was right. The schooner behind them was also crowding on sail, heeling over in the wind but running toward them in a direct line. The crew of the *Galloway* was now fully on the

alert and obeying the shouted orders of the skipper. The two men who had attracted the attention of the boys by their difference in looks compared to the rest of the motley crew, looked eagerly toward the oncoming schooner until they were literally driven to work by Captain Ryan.

As may be imagined the boys watched the chase with an interest that was painful. The outcome of it meant everything to them. They had no idea who could be on the pursuing schooner, but whoever it was would be sure to release them if they overhauled the *Galloway*. When the crew of the schooner ran out a small cannon Terry whistled in surprise.

"This is no comedy," he remarked. "These fellows mean business."

The sky to the south had turned an ominous black and the wind was now shrieking through the shrouds of the schooner. Cursing aloud Ryan ordered sail taken in, and the crew sprang aloft, running along the ropes in a way that took away the breath of the watching boys. The oncoming schooner was also forced to take in canvas but it did not give up the chase. The waves, an hour ago, so calm and peaceful, were now mountain high, raging and boiling along the sides of the laboring ship.

"History repeats itself!" exclaimed Jim, suddenly.

"What do you mean?" blinked Terry.

"Why, it's just like the story of the galleon! We are being pursued by an enemy and a storm is surely going to close over us! See the point?"

"Yes, I do. Confound this storm, anyway! If it wasn't for it I believe those fellows in back would overtake us!" cried Terry.

"I never saw a storm come up so rapidly," said Jim.

In that part of the Pacific storms rise with incredible swiftness and it was such a storm, half cyclonic, as now burst over the pursued and the pursuer. In a twinkling of an eye the ship to the rear vanished from sight as the *Galloway* staggered into a yawning trough. The boys had all they could do to hang on as the deck slanted under their feet, and they were soaked to the waist by the wash that flooded the deck. A single slashing flash of lightening flared in the sky.

"Do you think we had better go below, so as not to be washed overboard?" shouted Terry above the whine of the wind.

"Nothing doing!" roared Jim, his voice sounding like a whisper above the crash of the waves. "I wouldn't miss this for anything!"

So they hung on to the rear mast and the ropes, keenly alive to the picture of action which was going on before them. They could see the men busy at the sails, pulling ropes, furling, lashing fast and jumping as the skipper signalled his commands. They had been forgotten in the excitement of the storm, and so were free to watch what was going on. They knew that the pursuing schooner would never haul down on them now.

The captain was at the wheel helping the helmsman, and between the two of them they could scarcely control the wild plunging of the schooner. The boys watched with fascination as wave after wave reared up before the schooner, to curl and break over the bow and come thundering over the deck in a mad swirl. At such times they were wet to the waist but they did not mind that, so interested were they in the events of the moment. Their hands ached from holding onto ropes but they stuck to their perilous post.

"They are running in too close to the shore!" shouted Terry in Jim's ear.

"They should know the coast well enough to do it," Jim returned.

He had scarcely spoken when there was a slight scraping and grinding sound and the men at the wheel spun the helm rapidly. The *Galloway* swung further away from the shore, listing dangerously as it did so. One of the crew ran down the companionway and reappeared soon afterward, making his way to the captain.

"She scraped a ledge that time," called Jim and Terry nodded.

It was now so black that the boys could scarcely see before them. The captain spoke rapidly with the man, who was the mate, and the officer quickly singled one or two men from the crew and then made his way over the bounding lurching deck to the boys. Placing his wet mouth near their ears he shouted: "Get on the pumps! We're leaking!"

Without loss of time the boys followed him across the deck to where the pumps were located. Two men had already seized the handle of one pump and were bending their backs to the task, pumping up and down with all their strength. At a signal from the mate the two boys took hold of the handle of a second pump and fell to the urgent task.

A thick stream of water shot out of the end of the pump and they knew that the lower part of the schooner was filling rapidly with water. It seemed to them that there was no use in pumping, but they realized that it was their only chance. No life-boat could live in those seas and it was a case of keep the ship from going down under their feet under the added weight of the water that was pouring into the hold, where a seam had been opened up by the ledge over which they had scraped. So they worked with a will, moving the handle up and down, until their backs, totally unused to the work, ached with the tiring strain of it. A continual stream of water rushed from the mouth of the pump with every stroke.

They were soon gasping for breath and both of them longed for the moment when two other men would relieve them. The two on the other pump kept at it grimly, somewhat more used to the work, moving automatically, unmindful of the stinging waves that slapped them from each side. The schooner pitched and rolled and bucked, now on top of a wave and now sinking deep into a trough.

To their unspeakable relief they saw two more men approach with the mate to take over their task. The captain had realized that they would not last long at the cruel task, and had sent relief. The men were coming toward them, were almost to them.

There was a sharp grinding sound and the schooner crashed hard aground. Every man who was standing went over like a stick of wood. Down came the rigging in a tumbled, confused mass, the forward mast snapped off sharp, the bow seemed to crumple like paper. Terry and Jim were torn from the pump handle and hurled through the air, to land like playthings in a smother of foam and swirling water. All became black in an instant, there was a sucking sound and the schooner settled down in the water with a shudder.

CHAPTER XV THE MOUNTAIN SAGE

Don's grave statement to the effect that Jim and Terry might have fallen into the hands of Sackett was received with a gloomy degree of conviction by the others. They knew that the outlaws had fled somewhere across the mountains, and it was very likely that they had run across the trail of the two boys in their flight. The professor spoke up.

"We must lose no time in following them," he declared, with spirit.

"The rest of us will follow them," said Ned. "You had better go back to the ranch, dad."

"Why should I go back?" demanded the professor.

"You must be tired. You had a long ride yesterday and didn't sleep much last night. You and Yappi go back to the ranch and we'll push on after Jim and Terry."

"I'm going with you," declared the professor, stoutly. "I'm no child! Don't you think I have any interest in finding the boys and running this gang down? I would be mighty restless back on the ranch. So let's start."

After some further discussion they struck off in the direction last taken by the missing boys and rode up the mountain, keeping a careful lookout as they did so. They spread out in fan fashion, keeping close enough together so as to call back and forth. It was sometime in the afternoon when Yappi called out and the others closed in and joined him.

The mestizo was off his horse, standing close to the ashes of a fire which had evidently been out for some hours. They were all of the opinion that Terry and Jim had built the fire and had spent the night beside it.

"The question is now where they went from here," mused the professor.

Ned was searching the nearby bushes and he set up a shout. "There were others here last night, too," he announced.

Upon inspection they found the bushes beaten down by the hoofs of horses, but at first Don was not convinced. "This is probably where they tied up their own horses," he said.

"Other horse over here," replied the mestizo, gravely.

On the other side of the clearing they found the traces of other horses. There had been two parties, or else one spot marked the location of the missing boys' horses and the other that of the second party. The professor was sure that Sackett and his men had come down on them in the night while they slept. And later all doubt was laid aside when Ned found a big foot print in the soft sand.

"Neither Jim nor Terry made that," he said, with conviction.

The others agreed with him, and by careful tracing they found that the party had gone down the mountain toward the sea. They followed the trail for at least a half mile and then lost it on some rocky ground, but they were satisfied that they were on the right track.

"They are heading for the sea," Ned said. "Perhaps they have some kind of a boat down there. Well, we might as well get right on the trail."

"Looks like a bad storm coming up," cried Don.

The sun had long since been lost in a slow gloom which had come in from the sea, and the air was hot and still. Heavy black clouds were rolling in from the south, and there was an almost ominous stillness in the air. Far away they heard the low rolling of thunder off at sea.

"It may be a bad one," admitted Ned, as he studied the sky. "We don't have many storms in this region, but when we do get one it generally amounts to something. Well, we'll push on until we have to stop."

They had gone perhaps a mile along the mountain, working down toward the sea, when the leaves of the trees began to stir with increasing force. Secretly,

Ned was worried, for he knew the strength of some of the storms his country was subject to, and he would have welcomed some sort of shelter. Just as he was beginning to think it best that they find shelter in the lee of some big rock Yappi called to him in Spanish. The ranchman had sighted an Indian hut just before them in the woods.

They rode up to the place, to find a withered old Yuqui Indian sitting on a crude bench at his door. He was engaged at the task of weaving a basket, and he looked up unemotionally as they drew up before his door. The hut back of him was a simple round affair, made of rough wood held together with a clay filling, which showed between the logs. Two windows, neatly glassed with glass which had been procured in some town nearby, and a single door alone broke the monotonous expanse of rough wood. A single chimney protruded from the top of the hut.

At a nod from Ned Yappi addressed the Indian in his native dialect, but it turned out that the Yuqui was very familiar with Spanish. Yappi told him that they wished shelter during the oncoming storm, and the old man, without showing pleasure or displeasure on his lined old face, replied that what he had they were welcome to. No sooner had he finished his statement than the rain began to descend in torrents.

The white men slipped from their horses quickly, Yappi took the bridles and led the horses to the shelter of a nearby leanto which the Indian had, and the whole party entered the hut. The Indian slipped in before them and was heaping wood on the small fire which burned in his fireplace, and as the flames shot up they had time to look around the hut. It was an interesting place.

There was a woven mat on the floor, a bed in one corner, and a rough table and chair in the center of the room. On the wall was hung a splendid bow and a sheaf of arrows, several baskets such as the one which the Yuqui had been weaving, and an Indian headdress. That portion of the floor which was not covered with a mat was neatly carpeted with leaves. The fireplace was constructed of hard clay. The entire hut was neat and orderly.

"The strangers are welcome," said the Indian, as he sat beside the fire.

Ned thanked him gravely and for a few moments nothing more was said. They sat and listened to the fury of the storm outside. The wind hissed and slapped

against the windows and the sides of the hut, the wind moaned overhead and the sky had become inky black. Don was worried.

"I hope Jim and Terry aren't anywhere exposed in this storm," he said.

"I don't think so," Ned hastened to assure him. "Those fellows know the sign as well as we do, and they must have dug for shelter. The fellows are all right, and we'll hit the trail as soon as we can."

The Indian was looking at them earnestly, and the professor, who could speak Spanish quite well, took it upon himself to tell him the circumstances. The old man listened intently and then nodded.

"I am a sage," he said proudly. "I tell you that you shall find them. Yengi is my name."

The visitors were silent, not knowing how to take this abrupt declaration. Yappi talked rapidly with the sage and seemed impressed.

"Yengi is a wise man," he told Ned. "What he says is true. Long has he dwelt in these mountains, and his ancestors dwelt here before he did."

The Indian sage nodded and addressed the whole party. "He speaks truth. For many generations my people have lived in this land. But not here in this mountain. I live here alone. My people lived far to the south, on a broad plain, until the people in beautiful clothes came. Those were the Spanish. They drove some of our people into slavery and killed others, and because we were few in number we were compelled to flee to the mountains and hide like wild beasts. My fathers told me."

The fire had died down, the storm still beat outside, and the white men were silent as they listened to the simple but tragic story of the Indian sage. They knew that his tale was only too true, for they had read many times of such things, the professor being well versed in the history of the Spanish conquest of the southern part of America. It was a moving experience to hear it now from the lips of a descendent of the persecuted race that suffered so many centuries ago. Ned, the professor and Yappi understood perfectly what the sage was saying, and Don knew enough of Spanish to follow him without trouble.

The professor was smoking his pipe, so the sage reached into a niche beside the

fireplace, took out a long crude Indian pipe and gravely lighted it. He smoked awhile in silence and then went on: "But my fathers had revenge."

No one said anything and he puffed once or twice and then went on: "The English were our saviors. They chased the Spanish from our coasts. But I spoke to you about the revenge that my fathers took. One day in the long ago there was a storm and a Spanish ship fled from the English and was wrecked somewhere on the coast. I do not know where, but the men from the ship came straggling past our hidden village in the fastness of the mountain. My fathers saw them and ambushed them, slaying all of them, allowing only a priest to go free. He had been kind to some Indians once and his life was spared. He had with him a book and he was led to the sea coast, where he took ship to Mexico and was never seen more."

Yengi looked up as there was a stir among his hearers, and he was astonished to see them regarding him eagerly. He took his pipe out of his mouth in astonishment.

"These men that your fathers killed came from a wrecked ship?" asked the professor eagerly.

"Yes, so they told my fathers. Why does that excite you so?"

Ned told the sage that they knew the story of the wrecked galleon and that there was supposed to be much treasure in the wrecked ship. The Indian was sure that the men must have come from that very ship, but beyond that he was not helpful.

"I do not know where the ship could be," he told them. "The men, with the exception of the priest with the book, were all killed. They never went back, but the priest may have returned for the gold."

"As long as the priest had a book, that must surely have been the crew," said Don.

But the professor shook his head. "The book which the priest had may have been his own Bible, or some other book. It couldn't have been the written story of the wreck, for you must remember that it was written after the storm and wreck and after the men were killed."

"I see," nodded Don, somewhat cast down. "But you have no doubt that it was

the galleon's crew, have you?"

"Oh, none at all," returned the professor. "The story is too closely allied to the one we know to be at all doubtful. It seems to me that if we can get the Indian here to take us to the spot where the crew was killed that would be somewhere near where the galleon struck. At least, we would be in the immediate neighborhood, and not all at sea, as we are now."

"But how about losing time in the hunt for the boys?" suggested Ned.

"We can get some idea of the location and then push on after the boys," said the professor. He turned to the Yuqui and asked him if he would lead them to the spot where the men from the ship were killed.

"I have seen the place," nodded the Indian. "I will show it to you."

"If we find the treasure through your help we will give you a share of it," promised Ned.

The Indian waved his hand impatiently. "Gold is cursed," he said, sternly. "Yengi has wisdom, which is more than gold. I wish none of it."

The party was impatient to start out but when night came on the storm had abated but little and they accepted the Indian's invitation to stay with him all night. They ate together and sat around the fire talking, the Indian telling them many more stories of his race in their glory, himself astonished at the learning of the professor. He found it hard to believe that the professor had learned so much from books.

At last they lay down and wrapped themselves in their blankets, Don breathing a prayer for the safety of his brother and his chum before they fell asleep. It had been agreed that they would leave early in the morning to look at the spot where the old Indian village had stood and from there they would push on to the sea in the search for the missing boys. Yengi, who knew the country much better than even Yappi did, was to go with them and lend his valuable aid. With many varied conjectures in their minds as to what the morrow would bring forth the whole party soon became quiet in sleep, the professor very nearly exhausted by the events of the past two days.

CHAPTER XVI THE LANDING PARTY

When the morning dawned the party was not slow to spring into action, but quick as they were their host was up before them. He was preparing breakfast at the fire and greeted them with quiet dignity. Before eating Ned and Don looked outside, to find a day somewhat better than the one before it had been, but still showing the effects of the storm. Sullen gray clouds passed overhead, impelled by the wind which was driving forward steadily, and the ground was still muddy from the rain which had fallen heavily. They were certain to escape the exhausting heat which had lately hindered them, and thankful for this circumstance the boys went in and enjoyed Yengi's breakfast.

The horses were saddled and without loss of time the company set out. The Indian closed his door but did not lock it, saying that no one would be likely to enter his place during his absence. They struck off to the south, following the sage and Yappi, who rode well to the front.

The horses found the going a little difficult, as the ground was slippery, and the men soaked their trouser legs as they scraped past bushes and small shrubs. This condition of affairs did not last long, for they soon rode down out of the mountains and reached the level plain. Here the going was much better and they went off at a brisk trot, heading for a furrowed section of uplands which they could see some miles before them.

During the journey they kept a sharp look-out for their missing companions, but no sign was seen of any living being as they went on. One or two large jack-rabbits crossed their path and Yappi brought one down, stowing it in a bag behind his saddle for some future meal. The act was opportune, for they had now run out of provisions and would have to depend in the future on whatever they brought down with their guns.

Don was in a curious state of mind as they travelled on. He was anxious about Jim and Terry, and the thought that he might be going further away from them with each mile was not a pleasing one. But they had no definite clue as to the whereabouts of the others, and one direction was as good as another. All of them felt that they had made for the coast, but just where on the coast they had no idea. It was simply a matter of keeping going, and watching carefully for the slightest sign which would send them in the right direction.

Before noon they arrived at the place where the old Indian village had been and where the Spanish crew, probably from the galleon, had been killed. The village had stood in a slight basin, hidden in a convenient roll of the sheltering foothills, and there was now but little to tell that there had ever been a village there. All trace of the huts which had once been there was lost, but several places in the hills, hollowed out of the volcanic dykes, showed that someone had once lived there. Some low mounds marked the burial places of the ancient Indians.

The sage pointed to the south. "From that direction the men came," he said, his dull eyes kindling as he thought of the glory of his former race. "The village in which my fathers lived was originally there, but they lived here in order to flee into the mountains when the Spaniards came. It was here that the crew of the great ship were killed, and afterward my people scattered, leaving a few of my race in the hills and the mountains."

They looked around the spot with interest and discussed the possibilities. Some miles east of them lay the sea, and Ned argued that the creek up which the galleon had sailed could not be far off. He would have liked to have set out for it at once, but realizing that the task of finding the missing boys was of far greater importance he smothered his desire, resolved to return some day and strike off from that spot.

"The Spaniards were evidently heading for the mountains at the time that they fell into the hands of the Indians," the professor said.

"Why should they head for the mountains?" Don asked. "Wouldn't they have been more likely to have kept to the shore, in the hope of being picked up by another ship?"

"I don't think so," replied the professor. "They may have intended to make their way over the mountains to Mexico, or they may have feared the Indians with

good cause, for their cruelties made the Indians eager to lay hands on them. Probably they feared the very thing that did befall them."

"Well, now that we have at least marked the portion of the country where the crew appeared, let's get on," suggested Ned. "In all my searching I fell short of this region by a good twenty-five miles, and this will help me get my bearings. Evidently the spot of the wreck is still some miles to the south, but I think we should be able to come across it when we have more leisure to look around."

"What is your thought?" inquired Professor Scott. "Shall we strike down to the coast?"

"I think so," nodded Ned. "Then we can beat up the coast toward the ranch, keeping our eyes open for the boys. Surely they didn't go any further south than this."

"Possibly not," Don put in. "We can't tell, but I feel we should go to the shore and see if we can pick up anything there."

They now said goodbye to the sage, who did not feel inclined to go any further with them. He was used to solitude and did not care to mix in with their problems and adventures, and he refused any pay for his hospitality or information. He once more expressed his belief that they would be fortunate in their search and then gravely turned his horse's head back to his mountains, seemingly no longer interested in what went on. With feelings of warmest gratitude for him the party from the ranch went on their journey toward the coast.

The coast was reached in the afternoon and they began to head north, watching both land and sea for any trace of the missing boys. Hunger at last caused them to halt while Yappi prepared and cooked the rabbit which he had killed, and the others enjoyed the meat of the little animal. As soon as this simple repast was completed they once more moved on.

"What are we to do if we don't find them on this trip?" asked Don.

"We'll have to go to San Diego, recruit a good-sized force and hunt Sackett from one end of Lower California to the other," replied Ned, grimly. "And we may have to get the proper Mexican officials on the job, too. You see, it is possible that Sackett may have carried them off to Mexico, and if that is the case we'll have a fine time locating them. But we'll leave no stone unturned to do it, you may be sure."

"And in the meantime we'll leave Yappi at the ranch in case any news of them should come there," the professor suggested.

Yappi was riding ahead and was just topping a small rise when they saw him slip from the back of his horse and lie flat on the ground. He motioned to them to dismount and they did so, wondering. Cautiously they moved up beside him and looked over the brow of the small hill into the vale below.

The sight that met their eyes astonished them. Off to their left was the sea, not now the calm Pacific, but a tumbling, boiling stretch of water, still showing the effects of the storm. An eighth of a mile off shore a schooner lay on its side, the black expanse of the hull showing above the water, a portion of the keel rising out of the waves. The ship had evidently run aground during the storm, for there was a gaping hole in the bow and the masts were snapped off short, the rigging strewing the deck and trailing into water. But it was the sight of several men in the hollow below which drew their greatest attention.

The men were members of the crew of the schooner and they were at present gathered around a small fire. They had been wet and bedraggled and were gathered close to the fire as though their only concern was to get warm. Some of the crew had gathered wood and lay it piled high nearby. No one was keeping watch and the party on the hill top had not been seen.

"Jim and Terry aren't there," whispered Don, in disappointment.

They were not, and Ned was about to advise that they pass on, when Yappi seized his arm and pointed to a spot some half mile down the shore, to the north of the men. To their astonishment they perceived another schooner, standing at anchor in a cove, and a boat was putting out from that schooner and making for the shore. The second schooner was in good condition and had apparently not suffered from the storm.

"It looks to me as though those fellows were after the men below," the professor said, in a low tone.

They watched the boat from the schooner discharge its load of men, who immediately took to the shelter of a friendly hill and made their way silently

toward the party which sat around the fire. The oncoming men were led by a tall old man with white hair, who seemed to have full authority, for the sailors, who were an orderly looking lot in comparison with the crew below, obeyed his every gesture. They crept nearer the unsuspecting men below until they were on a hilltop opposite from the ranch party.

"Why," murmured Ned. "I think we are going to witness a battle!"

Scarcely had he spoken than the old captain waved his hand and his band rushed down on the men who were seated around the fire. Their coming was totally unexpected and the crew from the wrecked schooner sprang to its feet in dismay. The men from the second schooner fell on them bodily and a free-for-all fight began, a fight that was short-lived, for the second crew were superior in number and moreover, was armed. After a few knock-downs the wretched crew was overcome and all neatly tied up by their attackers.

"Well, I must say I don't understand this," said the professor. "I wonder which one of the parties is in the right?"

"I don't know," answered Ned. "But we've got to go down and ask them if anything has been learned of Sackett or the boys. But I am not sure but what we are running our heads into some sort of a trap."

The mestizo had been following the events below with absorbed interest and had forgotten everything else. He turned to speak to the others. But instead of speaking at them he stared back of them, and then, with a motion like that of a cat, he made a quick dive for his rifle, which was laying beside him.

CHAPTER XVII THE ESCAPE

It seemed to Jim that he was under tons of water and that everything around him was a roaring whirl of confusion. His lungs were filled with water and close to bursting when he finally gained a breath of fresh air after expelling the water from his lungs. He was still on the deck of the *Galloway*, crumpled up against the deckhouse and half buried in the wash which still swept across the deck.

His first act was to stagger weakly to his feet and look for Terry. He was relieved to see the well known red-head emerge from behind some lashed-down canvas on the deck, and a moment later the boy was staggering toward him, furiously blinking his eyes. To their surprise they found that the deck of the schooner was tilted on a decided angle and that the starboard rail was well under water.

The schooner had run hard aground and had settled on its side. One or two of the crew had been swept over the side and lost, the whole thing having happened so quickly that no aid could be given them. The rest of the men were picking themselves up from the deck and looking dazedly around, uncertain as to the next move. Captain Ryan shouted orders which could be heard above the din and the men worked their way over the sloping deck to the large life boat which was hanging at the port side.

Terry started to follow them but Jim grasped his arm, placing his mouth close to his ear. "Wait a minute," he said. "Let them go!"

"Aren't you going with them?" asked Terry, astonished.

Jim shook his head. "Let's stay here. I don't think this ship is going to sink, and we can make our escape. Let's duck behind the wheelhouse."

Terry was a bit bewildered but he followed Jim's lead in crouching out of sight.

"Do you think it is safe?" he asked. "Those fellows are leaving the schooner, and they should know if it isn't going to sink."

"Those fellows are scared to death," Jim said. "They have forgotten about us and the only thing they have in mind is to get to shore. I don't think the ship will go under because it is too firmly grounded. We can give them time to get to the shore and when the storm lets up we can get ashore ourselves. Remember, if we don't want to make a long trip to Mexico, we must get away from here."

"You are right there," murmured Terry. "Did you get hurt any in the crack?"

"Got a bruise on my shoulder, that's all. Look, there goes the crew."

The crew had jumped into the life boat and had pushed it away from the schooner's side. Captain Ryan gave one sweeping look around the wrecked ship as the boys hastily ducked from sight, and satisfied that they had been swept overboard and drowned, he gave the order to pull for shore. The men settled to it with a will, and before many minutes had passed the boys lost sight of them in the gloom which hung over the sea and blotted out the shore.

Terry stood up and looked around. "Alone at last, as the song says. Wonder if we are the only ones on board?"

"I think so," Jim replied, looking rapidly around. "Is there any other boat aboard?"

A thorough search convinced them that there was no other boat on the wreck. They tried to get down into the hold to look around, but it was filled with water. The schooner would have sunk like a shot except that it had folded up on a rock and was held there. Jim noted that the rail was going deeper into the water with the passage of time.

"We'll have to get off in some manner," he told his companion. "I think the ship is slowly turning over, at least it is going to settle completely on its side. But as to how to get off is the problem."

Terry peered off toward the shore, over the heaving water. "The blow has gone down considerably," he said. "The shore isn't far off, you can see it. Do you think you could make it by swimming?"

"I think I could," replied Jim, after considering. "How about you?"

"I could if I had something to hang onto and get a breathing spell once in awhile," Terry thought.

"Well, we can settle that. We can lash a couple of spars together and use them for resting stations. Goodness knows that there are enough spars around."

They secured two large spars and roped them together firmly. Shedding all of their clothing except those absolutely necessary for use on shore they were about to leave the ship when Jim was struck with an idea.

"We can take along all of our clothes by tying them on the spars," he said.

They tied all of their clothes to the top of the spar and threw it into the foaming sea, which had abated in force considerably during the last twenty minutes. Realizing that the men would be on shore directly ahead of them and not wishing to fall into their clutches they decided to head for a point further down the shore, and with this plan in mind they dove off together, landing with a rush in the stinging salt water. When they bobbed up and shook the water out of their eyes they saw the spars a few feet before them. They struck out for the rude craft and each boy passed one arm over it, propelling with the other.

In this manner the spars kept progress with them in their attempt to escape to the shore, and when they became tired, which was often in the long struggle, they hung onto the spars and rested. They knew better than to waste breath in idle talk, so no word was spoken during the fight for shore. Jim was a better swimmer than the red-headed boy, but Terry grimly stuck it out, and after a half hour battle they landed on the shore, almost exhausted.

Terry splashed his way up to the beach, collapsing in a heap on the wet sand, but Jim, blown as he was, had presence of mind enough to take the clothing off of the raft and look around them. The storm was blowing itself out and the sky growing lighter, but as there was no sight of the men nearby Jim soon lay down beside his companion and rested gratefully. They had drifted a mile or more down the shore in their swim and felt reasonably safe from capture.

Jim was the first to sit up and he looked keenly around. They were in a lonely section of coast country, uninhabited and infinitely dreary. He wondered what the next best plan should be, and asked Terry. Both felt that it would be foolish

to go back toward the ranch directly, and both agreed that it would be foolish to go south.

"That means we push inland," Terry nodded.

"Yes, that is all that we can do. And we are in one fine shape to do that, I must say! No weapons, no matches, and not a thing to eat! If we don't fall into somebody's hands we'll starve," said Jim.

"It does look tough from every angle," Terry agreed. He got up and wrung the water out of his trousers and shirt. "I'm pretty tired, but I suppose we ought to get moving, eh?"

"I think so. At least we should get away from the coast. Maybe when we get inland we can find some place to put up for the night, some hollow or something. After a good night's sleep we should be able to cover a lot of ground."

"Little Terry hasn't been bad, but he has to go to bed without his supper!" the red-headed boy grimaced, as they started inland.

They walked slowly, keeping a sharp lookout, but met no one in their journey. They meant to make a long half circle in their return, planning to avoid the party from the schooner and Sackett's henchmen. There was also the possibility that they might run across their own party, who they felt was surely looking for them. But the present object was to find some protected shelter and hide away for the night.

Evening was close upon them when Jim suddenly pulled Terry down behind a bush. He pointed to the right and whispered to his chum.

"A man, over there!"

Terry looked, to see a lone traveler encamped in a small hollow some little distance from them. The man was seated beside a small fire, busily engaged in frying something in a small pan. His horse, a beautiful black animal, was grazing on the short grass nearby, and the man's rifle stood close at hand. Terry turned to Jim with a satisfied air.

"There's my supper!" he announced, pointing to the pan in the man's hand.

"Don't be too sure of that," Jim warned. "We want to be mighty careful who we walk up to."

"Say, you don't think every human being in this country belongs to Sackett's gang, do you?" asked Terry.

"I suppose not," Jim gave in. "Shall we walk up and announce ourselves?"

"We'll walk up and reserve a table!" grinned Terry. "That pan excites me; let's go!"

They advanced toward the man, who did not see them coming until they were barely twenty yards from him. Then he looked up and they saw that he was a Mexican. He gave a slight start and reached for his gun, but allowed his fingers to slide from the stock as he continued to look at them. At the same time the boys recognized him.

"It is Alaroze, the overseer of Senorita Mercedes ranch!" cried Jim, and Terry nodded.

Seeing that he was recognized the Mexican broke into a smile and welcomed them in Spanish. He was frankly puzzled at their strange and uncouth appearance, but he did not ask any questions. Jim, who could speak fair Spanish, told him that they had taken a trip down the coast in a ship and had been cast ashore, feeling that it would not be wise to tell too much. When the Mexican had heard their story he expressed himself as being deeply grieved and hastened to offer them food. He had some beans and bread and seemed to have a plentiful supply with him, so the boys were not averse to taking what he offered.

They sat down and gratefully ate what he set before them. The overseer talked rapidly, smiling, rebuilding the fire and insisted upon cooking them more of his provisions. Once when he was out of earshot Terry spoke out of the corner of his mouth.

"He isn't a half-bad fellow, this Alaroze. I didn't think I liked him at the ranch, but he surely is treating us royally now."

"He certainly is," agreed Jim, heartily. "We'll see to it that he never regrets it."

Finally the Mexican sat down and ate with them and afterward smoked cigaret

after cigaret as he talked with them. He did not seem to be inquisitive as to the whereabouts of the others, in fact, Jim was more curious than the foreman, for presently he asked him what he was doing so far away from the Mercedes ranch.

"I am looking for stray cattle," the overseer said. "Many of them have wandered away of late and I am looking for them."

It was growing dark now and they made a large fire, before which the boys dried their dripping clothes. The three companions agreed to head back for the ranch of the senorita on the following day and to go from there to the Scott ranch. Jim and Terry warmly thanked the overseer for his supper and hospitality, but the Mexican was effusively modest about it.

Quite early the three of them turned in, the Mexican lingering for some little time after the boys. He sat beside the fire, still smoking his inexhaustible cigarets, looking out into the blackness of the night. He seemed to have no fear of anyone. The boys lay under the shelter of some sandy banks, for the Mexican had but one blanket, and just before they fell asleep they looked at the lone figure near the fire.

"Lucky thing for us that we fell in with him," Jim commented.

"Right you are," Terry returned. "He certainly has been fine to us. I'm just about sorry I ever distrusted him."

"You can't go by looks," said Jim. "But I don't think he is pushing his search for those stray cattle very vigorously."

"Well, you know how lazy most of these Mexicans are," Terry yawned. "Probably just taking his own sweet time."

"Funny he should be out looking for them, instead of the other cowboys," Jim went on. "I should think that he would be needed at the ranch."

"Maybe it is his personality that counts," grinned Terry. "He may attract the cows and bring 'em home that way. I don't care how he does it. I'm going to sleep."

Both boys fell into a deep sleep. The Mexican sat motionless beside the fire for some time longer. Once he turned and looked toward the boys, at the same time

smiling at some thought which was passing through his head. His teeth gleamed for a second and then his face once more became impassive. Shortly after that he rolled himself up in his blanket and fell asleep.

CHAPTER XVIII TREASURE AND TREACHERY

The boys slept late the next morning and when they awoke the Mexican was still lying on his blanket, not sleeping but still not working. Feeling that they should do something to earn the hospitality of their new-found friend the two boys brought wood from the thicket and kindled the fire. The Mexican gave them some beans and they speedily made enough for all of them.

After they had eaten they started off in the direction of Senorita Mercedes' ranch, the Mexican riding slowly and the boys walking beside him. They had managed to dry out their clothes and put them on, and although they were a mass of wrinkles and ridges they did well enough. Their shoes had shrunk somewhat and walking was not easy, but they stuck to the task manfully, plodding along mile after mile without complaint.

Several times during the trip the overseer got down from his horse and insisted that one of the boys mount and ride for a few miles, and although they protested he would not listen to them. So they rode gratefully, in this way saving themselves from a good many aches and pains. The Mexican was not used to walking but he said nothing, trudging along on one side or the other of the horse cheerfully.

They stopped once for dinner and then pressed on again. The foreman of the ranch was sure that they would reach the Mercedes place in two days, or late on the following day, so they pushed on eagerly. In the early afternoon they were forced to take a rest from the heat of the sun, but covered a few miles before it was time to make camp for the night.

They were near the coast at the time and their camp was pitched in the hollow formed by two small hills. They had looked for a favorable location, for this one had no wood near it, as the country was mostly barren, and thickets few and far between. Some green bushes grew nearby and they resolved to use these as a final resource, but before doing so Jim and Terry started out to see it they could find anything more promising. Terry went over the top of one hill and Jim over the top of the other, while the overseer prepared for their supper.

Jim had a small axe which Alaroze had given him and he walked along the ridge of the small hill looking carefully around. On the opposite side of the hill he found a long depression in the soil which looked as though it might have been the bed of a stream at one time, perhaps some creek which had originally flowed from the distant mountains. He wandered down it aimlessly, convinced that his quest for wood was not likely to be very successful. A vast stillness lay over the country and he felt very much alone. A mile or more to the east of him he could hear the sound of the ocean.

There was no use in walking down the defile, he decided, so he started for the slope of the slight hill which was beside him. As he did so his foot struck something solid. He bent down to see what it was and found a small stick of wood protruding from the sand at his feet. He cleared the sand away around the stick, to find that it was quite large and that it ran into the sand for some little distance. When he had finally drawn it from its sheath be examined it with curiosity.

It was a piece of mahogany and it showed the hand of civilization. Although it was now black with age it had at one time been varnished. It was a large splinter and he wondered how it ever got there. Examining it closely he detected signs which led him to believe that it had been burned at some time. There was a thin line running across it that suggested carving.

"That's funny," he reflected. "Somebody once had a fire here and used good wood for it. Perhaps there is more nearby."

With this thought in mind he dug his axe deeper in the sand and began to scoop it out. Before many minutes had passed he ran across another piece of wood, but this one he could not get out. It seemed to have no end and he set to work in earnest to uncover it. But after he had uncovered about twenty-five running feet he stopped in perplexity.

"This must be a house!" he cried. "Every bit of it burned, too."

The top of the long section of wood had been burned. It was thick wood and he

tried to dig down under it. But after he had dug sand out to the depth of four feet he stopped and looked puzzled. It was a straight wooden wall, extending down into the valley of sand.

Jim stopped his work and walked to the top of the rise, where he slowly looked up and down the pass. He looked toward the ocean, calculated thoughtfully and then looked toward the mountains. Then, looking down toward the long strip of black wood which he had uncovered he voiced his thought.

"That's a ship down there, evidently burned to the water's edge and later covered up by shifting sand. Now, I wonder——?"

Without finishing his thought he hurried down to the trench and once more went to work. Digging some five feet down beside the wall of wood he came to a flooring of hard planks, just what he had been looking for. It was the deck of a ship, and he began feverishly to dip out sand. In this task he was finally surprised by Terry and the overseer.

Terry had returned to the camp with a few dead bushes and they had waited around for Jim to return, but as he did not do so they became alarmed and set out to find him. Their first glimpse of him was an odd one. When they topped the rise some distance back of him they saw him standing in a deep trench, facing a four foot wall of wood, busily engaged in scooping sand from the hole and throwing it as far away as he could. With cries of astonishment they hurried up to the long trench which he was making.

"Jim!" Terry cried, while the Mexican looked on with bulging eyes. "What is this?"

Jim started slightly as he straightened up. "It is the remains of a sunken ship," he cried. "See, this is evidently the rail, a solid wall of wood, and I'm just uncovering the deck. It was burned to the edge of the water, and later covered up with sand."

"Well, I'll be jiggered!" shouted Terry. "Do you think it is the treasure ship?"

"I don't know, but I wouldn't doubt it. As you can see, I have uncovered about twenty-five feet of this rail. The deck seems to be good and I'm trying to uncover enough of it to find a hatchway, so that we can see if it is empty down below."

Terry and the Mexican jumped down beside him. The Mexican understood enough of English to know that they thought the ship beneath them might be a treasure ship, and he set to work with a sincere will to scoop sand. They could not make much progress, however, for it was rapidly growing dark, and at last they were forced to give it up until the next day.

"That is the best we can do," Jim decided, peering about him in the dark. "Let's chop some of this wood and then we'll go back to camp."

With his axe he hacked off enough wood to last them through the night and the three companions carried it back to their camp, where, amid much talking, they built the fire and cooked the supper. The Mexican was told the whole story and he replied that he knew the legend of the phantom galleon. The boys were not averse to telling him the story for they felt that they owed him much and knew that his future help would mean everything. It was late that night before they lay down to sleep, and with the rising of the sun they were up and at work on the buried wreck.

It took them all the morning to clear the solid deck of the ancient ship for a space of several feet and at last they came to a hatchway, covered by a heavy door which was flush with the deck. There was a bolt on the door but one blow of the axe broke it in pieces, and the three united all their strength to pulling the hatch open. It came upward at last, releasing a flood of stale and poisonous air that sent them reeling backward with all possible speed.

"Diable!" gasped Alaroze. "I think all the fiends are closed inside!"

When the air had cleared sufficiently they all peered down the open hatchway, to discover a wide flight of stairs leading down into the hold of the ship. There was now no longer any doubt but what it was the phantom galleon, for it was built on a magnificent scale. They realized that had it not been burned the rear of the galleon would never have been covered up, for the rear of the Spanish ships were composed of high after-deck houses, but this ship had been burned and only the deck, which had been below the water, had remained.

"The hold must be full of water and sand," Terry commented.

Jim swung his feet over the edge of the deck and gingerly felt the step below. "Full of sand, yes, but not of water. The sand will be wet, though. Now be careful on these stairs."

The stairs were solid and safe, but they did not go far. Originally the ship had run aground and filled with water, and in time the sand had filled up the hold of the galleon. A space of about six feet only was open, and in this space the foul air had been held. The three companions found a bed of moist sand cutting off any further progress.

"If there is any gold in this ship, it is below the sand," Alaroze said in Spanish.

"Yes, senor," nodded Jim. "I think we had better not walk on this sand for fear of falling into some pit. If we ever sank in this wet stuff, that would be the end of us."

"It surely would," remarked Terry. "What is this sticking up out of the sand? A piece of brass?"

It was a dull strip of brass, but when Jim scraped the sand from it they found that it was long and finally discovered that it was the edge of a brass-bound chest.

"Oh, somebody's trunk!" said Terry, indifferently.

But the eyes of the Mexican were glittering and Jim himself was excited. "More likely the top of a treasure chest!" he retorted, and dealt the chest top a slashing blow with his axe.

With a shuddering, sucking sound the paper-like substance tore off, revealing to the three in the hold a sight which took away their breath. Gold in the form of coins of all sizes was revealed, gold which lay and still gleamed in the interior of the trunk. The Mexican talked furiously to himself in his native language, and the boys simply stared.

"Gold, the gold of the treasure ship!" gasped Jim, scarcely able to believe his eyes.

Terry picked up some of it and examined it curiously. "It is gold, sure enough," he agreed, dazzled. "Wish we had the professor here to tell us just what it represents."

"Perhaps there is more around," Jim suggested. He began to dig his axe into the sand, while the Mexican stood back of him, his eyes gone suddenly black and calculating. But Jim found that there was no more.

"Probably this chest was brought up here, while the rest of the treasure is still below. At any rate, even if there is no more, there is enough to make us all rich." He turned to Alaroze with a smile. "Well, senor, it was lucky for us when we ran across you, and lucky for you when you agreed to guide us home. Your share from this will make you a rich man."

"Yes, yes, senor," agreed the overseer, breaking into a smile. "I bless the day we met! May the saints reward you!"

"We've been rewarded pretty well already!" grinned Jim. "Well, what shall we do? We can't do much of anything until we return home, get the rest of the party and return here to go to work. Suppose we take along some of the gold and start out for the ranch."

They took several of the largest coins, the hands of the Mexican trembling as he did so, and made their way up on deck again. Terry demanded of Jim if he was going to leave the galleon ruins uncovered.

"Yes," replied Jim. "There isn't much chance of anyone coming this way, and it would take us hours to cover it up. Let's spend that time on our homeward journey."

"All I hope is that we run across the others in quick order, then," said Terry. "I'd hate to lose time while this treasure is lying uncovered."

Leaving the galleon they returned to camp and prepared to start back for the ranch. The Mexican went to his horse, picked up his rifle and looked at it, and then placed it against a tiny mound of sand. With averted face he picked up the blanket and his few supplies.

Terry and Jim were conferring earnestly. "It will take a large force of men to dig down into that wreck," Terry said. "We'll let the professor and Ned decide what is best to do."

"Sure," agreed Jim, swinging around. "Well, I guess we're ready to go."

Then, both boys stopped suddenly. Standing before them, with his rifle levelled straight at them, stood the Mexican overseer. There was a hard light in his black eyes and his mouth was a straight line, the lips white.

"What—what's the matter?" asked Jim, smiling slightly, and thinking that there was some joke in the wind.

"Nothing is wrong, senor," came the reply. "But since you two know so well where the gold is, I shall regret the necessity of killing you both so that it will be all mine!"

CHAPTER XIX AN OLD FRIEND JOINS THE PARTY

The party on the hill was surprised at the action of the mestizo as he fairly pounced upon his rifle. But before he could even lift it a clear-cut voice spoke out back of them.

"Keep your hands off of that gun, or I'll drill a few holes into you!"

They turned, to find back of them a little short man in a blue uniform of a sailor, who had crept up on them quietly from the rear. He held a rifle in his hand and turned it unwaveringly toward the members of the watching group.

"What is the meaning of this?" demanded the professor, after a second of silence.

"No meaning at all," chuckled the man, whose uniform proclaimed him a mate on a sailing ship. "You fellows march down the hill until my captain looks you over."

"Who are you to tell us to march down the hill?" snapped Ned. "This is a free country, in case you don't know it."

"I know it," chuckled the mate. "But this here gun of mine don't know nothing about it! I've tried my best to teach the blooming thing, but it's just naturally ignorant!"

"Who are you?" Don asked.

"Go on down the hill!" commanded the mate, suddenly changing his tone. "The captain will answer all questions."

There was nothing to do but to obey, so, in silence the boys and the older man

walked down the hill, leading their mounts. The crowd below saw them coming and looked on with marked interest. The captain of the attackers strode to the front. He was a tall old man with a white beard and snow white hair, and at sight of him Don caught his breath.

"What have you here, Harvey?" the captain asked.

"This bunch was lying on their tummies and looking over the hill at you," answered the mate, a twinkle in his eyes.

"Yes, we were, Captain Blow," said Don, boldly. "How are you, sir?"

Captain Blow, their old friend from Mystery Island, started at hearing his name, and looked closely at Don's smiling face. He had been their staunch friend at the time they made their summer cruise and captured the marine bandits. Recognition dawned on him and he joyously seized the boy's hands.

"Why, by jumping Tunket, if it isn't Don Mercer!" he roared heartily. "What in the name of Goshen are you doing out here, boy?"

Don explained briefly that he was staying with the Scotts at their ranch and then looked around at the sullen captives. "What is all this, Captain Blow?" he asked.

"These fellows are one fine bunch of prison birds who are soon going in their cage!" retorted the captain vigorously. "I'm running a schooner out here, in the carrying trade now, and this Captain Jake Ryan run off with two of my men. Last night I chased them but lost 'em in the storm. Early this morning I saw the wreck and sent my mate there ashore to locate them. When he gave me the signal, from the hill back of where you were looking, we came ashore. He saw you fellows and thought you were part of the enemy."

Don then introduced the Scotts and told the captain of their search for Jim and Terry. The captain was deeply interested.

"These fellows are part of Sackett's gang," he said. "Maybe they know something." He turned to the scowling Ryan. "Did you have anything to do with two boys?" he asked.

"No!" said Ryan, promptly.

But one of the men who had been liberated by the coming of Captain Blow spoke up quickly. "Yes he did, Captain Blow! Those two boys came aboard yesterday just before the storm, down at the old tannery. And they are still aboard the wreck!"

"How do you know they weren't swept overboard?" shouted Jake Ryan.

"You know how I know, you scoundrel!" snapped the sailor, shaking his fist in Ryan's face. "When you stampeded for the lifeboat I saw those two boys duck down behind some canvas and I told you to put back and make 'em come off in the lifeboat, but you was so scared you wouldn't go back!"

"It's a lie," Ryan retorted.

"No it isn't. Those boys are still on the ship," said the sailor.

"I guess they decided to stay on the schooner and keep out of the hands of these fellows," decided Captain Blow. "Too bad they didn't come right along, and we would have them now. But we'll probably find them out there."

"That is once Jim and Terry figured their move wrong," grinned Don, greatly relieved at the news concerning his chums.

"Yes, but they thought they were doing the correct thing," put in the professor. "Now, what do you propose to do with these men, Captain Blow?"

Blow turned to his mate. "Harvey, you and the men march these fellows back to the boats and take 'em to the schooner. I'm going out to the wreck with these men and I'll be back to the ship later. Don't let one of these rats escape, and we'll take them to prison."

"Aye, aye, sir!" replied Harvey. The crew hustled the captives away over the top of the hill and then Captain Blow turned to the party of friends.

"Now we'll go out and look that wreck over," he announced. The boat in which the crew of the *Galloway* had reached shore was still lying upon the sand, and they all climbed in and pushed off, the old captain, Ned and Don taking the oars. It was the first time that the mestizo had ever been in a boat and he sat gingerly in the bow, holding himself stiffly.

"When did you leave Mystery Island, Captain Blow?" asked Don, as they rowed out to the wreck.

"Early in the spring," replied the old captain. "When I saw you last I told you that Mystery Island would soon be a regular summer colony, now that the old house and bandits are gone, and sure enough, that is what happened. Got so full of young men with white pants and slicked down hair and young ladies with tootin' roadsters that my polly and me didn't have any peace at all. So I came west, got a nice schooner, and am now running between here and Mexico, picking up anything I can get, mostly fruit. I didn't have any trouble, although I had heard plenty about this Sackett, until a few days ago when this Ryan ran off with two of my men. Kidnapped them in some eating house in San Francisco and I went right after them."

"I see," nodded Don. "So Bella, the parrot, is still living?"

"Oh, yup! She's still sayin' 'Bella is a good girl.' Probably she'll still be saying that after I'm dead and gone."

They had now approached the wreck and the captain made fast the painter of the lifeboat. Climbing aboard was somewhat of a task, as the deck sloped dangerously, but by dint of clinging to every support available they managed to do so. But a hasty survey of the deck revealed that the two boys were not on board.

"Maybe they are in the hold," suggested Ned.

"I doubt that," replied Captain Blow. "That hold must be full of water. You see, these fellows crowded on all canvas to get away from me and they ran in too close to shore, with the result that they jammed hard and fast aground. The bottom must be stove in plenty and full of water, and the only reason they didn't sink is because they are sort of lying on a shelf. However, we'll give a look down the companionway."

A look down into the hold of the wrecked schooner proved that Captain Blow was right in his surmises. The hold was filled with water and it was manifestly impossible for anyone to have gone down there. Don was worried.

"You don't suppose they were swept overboard, do you?" he asked, anxiously.

"No," said the captain promptly. "I don't. My sailor says they ducked down behind something to keep hidden probably with the idea of escaping all by themselves. My idea is that they grabbed a spar or two, swam to shore, and got away that way. I wouldn't be a bit surprised if they was even now heading up the shore toward your ranch, professor."

"I believe you are right, Captain," replied the professor. "They certainly wouldn't stay here when there was no necessity for it, and they probably swam ashore, as you say. I think, therefore, that we should go ashore and follow up the coast, in the hope of overtaking them."

"We ought to overtake them," said Ned. "We are mounted and they aren't. No use in wasting any more time around here, is there?"

"No," Captain Blow answered, slipping down the deck. "Let's go back."

On the way to the shore the professor told the captain about the treasure hunt and he was tremendously interested. Once on shore he spoke about going back to his boat.

"I wish you the best of luck," he told Don. "By thunder mighty! I wouldn't mind going with you!"

"Why don't you?" asked Don, quickly. "Can't your mate sail with these men to the city and stop for you on the return trip? I feel sure that the rest of us would be glad to have you."

"We surely would!" said Ned and his father, together.

"Why, yes, I guess that would do," said the captain slowly. "I'd sure like to go along. Will you give me time to go out and tell Harvey what to do?"

They assented and the captain signalled for a boat, which took him off to his schooner. He was gone for about fifteen minutes, and when he came back he had a blanket and some supplies. He joined them and the boat put off once again for the schooner.

"Harvey is in complete charge," he announced. "He'll stop for me at Quito on the way back. I'm ready to go now."

The mestizo surrendered his horse to the captain, who protested vigorously, but the mestizo was a far better hand at trotting along than the old salt, so they arranged to share the horse, and when it was cooler, to ride it double. Feeling that their best plan was to push on back to the ranch they started off, leaving the deserted wreck far behind them.

CHAPTER XX THE TAR BARREL

Jim and Terry looked helplessly at the Mexican overseer as he faced them with levelled rifle and the cool assurance that he would kill them to keep the treasure from the galleon for himself. They tried to believe that he was only joking, but from the set on his face and the glint in his eyes they knew better. All too often in the history of gold hunting and discovery had the discoverers paid for it with their lives, so that someone else could reap the reward.

"But why should you wish to kill us, senor?" Jim asked in Spanish. "Have not we agreed to see that you have a large share in it?"

"How do I know that you will keep your word to me?" the Mexican answered.

"Well, I like that!" cried Jim. "We know how to keep our word, Senor Alaroze!"

"What of it?" returned the overseer, with a slight shrug. "Why should I not have all of it instead of a small part?"

"Oh, well, if you feel that way about it," said Jim, turning pale.

While Jim had been talking Terry had been doing some rapid thinking. They were standing close to the man, and the extended muzzle of the rifle was within easy reach. Any kind of motion toward it would be sure to be disastrous, and Terry knew it. There was one thing needed and Terry did it. With great coolness, a feeling which he was far from possessing, he looked over the shoulder of the overseer.

"Well," he said, carelessly. "I guess neither of us will get the treasure. Here comes Sackett and his party."

He used just the right amount of conviction in his tones and he won. Jim looked

away over the Mexican's shoulder and was fooled as completely as the overseer. With a muttered imprecation the man turned his head slightly to see who was back of him. That motion was his undoing. Quick as a flash Terry's foot came up in a splendid football kick that sent the rifle flying upward. Before the astonished ranchman could move the red-headed boy flung himself on him and punched him a hard wallop on the stomach. With a groan the Mexican sank to the ground.

"Bully for you, Chucklehead!" cried Jim, springing forward and securing the gun. "Now we have this fellow where we want him!"

They dragged the crestfallen Mexican to his feet and tied his hands behind him with a piece of cord which they had originally tied their clothes to the spars with. He groaned and moaned and begged them to show mercy to him. Terry became impatient.

"Shut up!" he ordered, savagely. "If I hadn't done that our two bodies would have been lying here right this minute, and here you are crying your head off for mercy! You're getting a whole lot better than you deserve right now, let me tell you. Don't howl until you get back to the ranch, then we'll give you something to howl about."

Still dazed at their terrible peril the boys started on the journey, placing the cowardly overseer on the horse and following close behind. When darkness came down they made camp, fed the captive without speaking with him, and then made camp for the night, resolving to take turns at keeping watch.

"We can't let this snake get loose again," warned Jim. "If he ever gets away, good night!"

"That was the luckiest break we ever had," said Terry. "If he had been standing any further away I never could have done it."

Jim took the first watch and Terry the second, during which time the Mexican seemed to sleep calmly. His hands had been untied, so they covered him with the rifle and kept unwavering eyes upon him. In the morning the march was resumed and late in the afternoon they approached the ranch of the Senorita Mercedes.

The senorita was the first to approach and she expressed amazement at the strange sight which they presented as they walked down into the ranch yard. Jim related the story to her and she was deeply interested. Turning to the sullen

foreman she upbraided him furiously in Spanish and turned back to the boys.

"He did not go away to look for stray cattle," she said. "None of my cattle have strayed. I do not know why he left me, but I think he is part of that wicked Sackett band. I think he was only kind to you so he could place you in that man's hands."

"By George, I'll bet that is right!" exclaimed Jim, and Terry nodded.

"Put him in that small shed," directed the senorita, pointing to a little building which stood at the edge of the ranch yard. "Then come to the house and rest and eat."

Quite willingly the two boys locked the silent prisoner in the little shed and returned to the ranch house. The energetic little senorita had hot water, soap and towels laid out for them, and they fairly revelled in the washing process.

"When I was a kid," grinned Terry, "I loved to have a dirty face, but now I know just what luxury it is to feel clean again."

"Hope I don't break this comb of the senorita's trying to comb my tangled hair," grunted Jim. "I can't honestly say that we are any beauties to appear at the table of the young lady."

When they sat down with the youthful and beautiful owner of the little ranch to eat she said: "My men are at present eating, but as soon as they have finished I shall send one of them to Ned's ranch for your friends."

"That is very kind of you, Senorita," murmured Jim, as he ate ravenously.

"Nonsense!" laughed the girl, tossing her head. "You have been through such thrilling adventures of late! Tell me more about them."

As Jim knew more Spanish than Terry it fell to him to relate the experiences of the past few days. They were lingering over their coffee when an excited ranchman burst into the room. All three at the table rose quickly and the man poured something out in some unknown dialect.

"Ride immediately to the Scott ranch for help!" commanded the senorita, growing pale.

"Alas, senorita, the house is surrounded, I cannot go," said the man, in Spanish.

"What, is the house surrounded?" asked Jim, quickly.

"Yes," answered the senorita, rapidly. "This man tells me that Sackett and three men rode down, let Alaroze out, and are creeping to the house. Fly to the doors, quickly!"

Flying was necessary. Terry and Jim hurled the main door of the ranch house shut just in time to keep Sackett and Abel from rushing it. Rapidly, under the direction of the girl, they closed all windows and drew the blinds. Then she gave them each a rifle and took one herself.

"We must watch diligently," she said, her eyes shining. "They will try to burst in and we must keep them off."

A shot rang out and a bullet crashed through the front door. Feeling that they would be attacked from more than one side they separated, Jim going to the front of the house and Terry and the senorita keeping watch on the sides. Several shots were fired, all of which did no harm.

It was now very dark and their peril was increased. A concerted rush might blast their hopes and Jim in particular was worried. It would be bad enough to have to surrender to Sackett's gang, but it would be far worse to have the dainty senorita fall into their hands. He set his teeth and determined that it should not happen. There was complete silence outside, a silence that was not reassuring.

Jim went to the girl where she was crouching beside a window, peering out into the darkness of the yard. He knelt down beside her.

"Is it possible that one of your men could have slipped away to Ned's ranch?" he asked.

"I am sorry to say no, senor. My man tells me that they were all penned up in their bunkhouse. There is no way we can let our friends know of our danger."

"I see. They couldn't see a light from the top of the ranch, could they?"

"No, the hills are too high. We must fight these men off until morning and then see what we can do."

"If we could only attract Ned's attention someway," said Jim. "Watch out, senorita!"

He fairly dragged her away from the window as a shot tore in through the glass and the blinds. She shook him off, but kept away from the exposed part.

"There is nothing—Ah, the tar barrel!" she exclaimed.

"Where is there a tar barrel?" asked Jim, quickly, as Terry fired his rifle out of another window.

"You see that hill?" asked the senorita, pointing to a low mound back of the ranch. "On top of that hill is a barrel which is half full of tar. I have been using it to repair my roofs, and it is half full. If that could only be lighted they would see it at Ned's ranch."

"That's fine!" cried Jim. "I'll light that tar barrel myself!"

"Senor, you will be killed!"

"Maybe!" said Jim, grimly. "But I'll start that bonfire, anyway!"

He related his plan to Terry, who warmly assented, and a little later Jim worked his way to a side of the house where there was no shooting. Senorita Mercedes wanted to send her ranchman out on the perilous venture but Jim had opposed it.

"No, I'll go," he said. "It means everything to have it succeed, and the man might get scared or bungle it in some way. Let me do it."

He opened a low window on the quiet side of the house, while Terry stood in the shadows, prepared to shoot down anyone who should loom up. Jim dropped out of the window and lay flat alongside of the house, and after a moment he raised his head. The attacking party was in the front and the rear of the house and he had not been seen. Terry closed the window and watched Jim slide forward along the ground toward the distant barn.

Fortunately the night was dark and Jim had a good opportunity. Using extreme care he reached the barn and then looked toward the hill where the tar barrel stood. The senorita had stood it on the hill because she was afraid of fire and thought it best to keep it away from the ranch building. Bending low Jim ran

quickly toward the black barrel and reached it in safety.

Near the house he could see three shadows and he knew that they were Sackett's men. They had not dreamed that anyone would be foolhardy enough to leave the building and so they waited for a favorable opportunity to rush the doors and break in. They had no intention of doing so as long as those three guns were flashing out viciously.

There were still three flashes from the house and Jim readily saw what had happened. Terry or the senorita had given the ranchman who had brought the news of the attack a gun and he was firing. Probably the attacking party thought Jim was still in the house. Lying flat on the ground Jim took a long piece of paper from his pocket and a box of matches. He placed the papers in the soft tar and lighted it.

The tar caught fire quickly, so quickly that Jim was bathed for a second in its light. He had made no plans for a retreat, and as the tar barrel burst into flames he was clearly revealed.

A shout arose from the men who were attacking the house and they sprang recklessly from cover and dashed toward him. This piece of carelessness cost them dearly, for the senorita and Terry each brought one man down with accurate shots in the legs. At the same time Jim sprinted for the corner of the barn and crouched there, his rifle held in readiness to bring down anyone who should attempt to put out the blazing beacon.

Higher and higher blazed the barrel with its cargo of tar, sending its light for several miles over the surrounding countryside. The outlaws had now rushed back to cover, to consider what move to make next.

"I surely hope the others are at Ned's and that they see that light," thought Jim fervently, as he waited in his position back of the barn.

CHAPTER XXI THE CAIRN

Professor Scott, the captain, Don and Ned were all sitting around a fire in the living room discussing the next move to be made. To their intense disappointment they had not found the missing boys upon their return to the ranch, nor had they come across a single trace on their homeward journey. They had just decided that a more vigorous hunt must be started in the morning when Yappi hastily entered the living room.

"There is a large fire at the ranch of Senorita Mercedes, senor," he informed Ned.

The young man jumped to his feet in dismay. "Oh, I hope those fellows haven't set her ranch on fire!" he groaned. "Let's see what is up."

The entire party ran to the back door and looked across the plains in the direction of the Mercedes ranch. Just as the mestizo had said, the sky in that direction was red and they could see the flames against the sky. But it was several feet south of the house.

"It isn't the house," decided Ned. "Perhaps they are just burning some old rubbish."

"Why should she select a hilltop to burn rubbish on?" asked the professor, sensibly. "Does she usually burn things at night?"

"No," admitted Ned. "There must surely be something wrong. Yappi, the horses!"

The mestizo sprang around the house and went to the barn, from which he soon led mounts for all of them. He was instructed to stay at the ranch with the cook, in case the boys should return, and then the others threw themselves on the

animals and started off. Ned and Don rode well in front, their anxiety making them impatient, while the professor and the captain, who were not riders of note, lagged somewhat.

It was not a long journey to the ranch of the senorita, but to the boys it seemed long, and when at last they ascended the last hill they drew a breath of relief. They were now near enough to see that the blazing beacon was a tar barrel, and the circumstances became more puzzling than ever. But before they had much time to wonder about it they had topped the rise and were looking down on the scene below.

The light from the blazing barrel showed them a curious scene. The outlaws had realized that they must make one last desperate assault, and at the present moment they were making it. Four men were close to the front door, flat in the yard, a log rolled before them as a shield, over which they were firing at the door, splintering the wood badly. They were rolling the log before them as they advanced, and hoped in this manner to get close enough to the door to make a determined rush. From the interior of the house came occasional flashes of fire from three rifles and from the corner of the barn came another.

While the relief party was taking this in the professor and the captain joined them. The attacking party had not yet become aware of their presence, and seeing that the moment was favorable Ned and Don charged down the hill, the older men following. A single shot, fired by Ned, told Sackett and company that help had arrived, and without even stopping to offer resistance they fled in every direction.

The captain instantly discharged his gun at one of the fleeing men and he went down in a heap. The professor shot Abel in the shoulder and Ned and Don pounced on the same man, springing from their horses upon the man. The fourth man, who was Sackett, ran to the thicket, made a single bound into his saddle, and thundered away, passing close to Jim in his corner of the barn, who fired at him but missed in the excitement.

Jim looked for an instant after the fleeing outlaw and then dashed around the barn and entered it. The horses stood there, moving restlessly, and he selected a fine looking steed and hastily saddled it. Leading it from the barn he mounted and started off with all speed after Sackett.

The slim edge of a moon was rising above the horizon and by its somewhat sickly light Jim was able to follow the course of the bay pirate. The man was making straight for the mountain and felt confident that he would make it, but he was soon undeceived. The horse which Jim had selected from the stables of the senorita was a high strung, fiery animal, and he was eager to run. Jim needed no spur to keep him at top speed, and the lead which the bandit had held was steadily cut down.

Seeing that he could not make the mountains before the pursuing boy was well within gunshot the outlaw made for a patch of trees that stood nearby. They were a little more than a mile before him, and consisted of a fairly dense tangle of low bushes and trees. His idea was probably to make a last stand there, Jim decided, and the race settled down grimly in that direction.

Once Sackett turned and fired at Jim, but the shot went wide of the mark, for the ground was uneven and the distance too great for accuracy. From that time on he gave his attention to the task of escaping, bending low over the neck of his steed and urging it on. The patch of trees was now very near and Sackett well in the lead.

The outlaw drove his horse into the shelter of the little refuge at headlong speed and vanished from Jim's sight. Jim pulled the steed to a halt and paused uncertainly. Sackett was in the thicket and armed, and he knew better than to recklessly dash on. If his theory was right the pirate was waiting for him to do that very thing, and it would be the worst move he could make. So he sat quietly in the saddle, wondering what his next move should be.

It was impossible for Sackett to escape to the mountains without being seen for Jim could see all around the thicket, and if the man tried to slip from the other side and continue his flight Jim would surely spot him. And yet, his object in running into the brush also puzzled Jim. What could he gain by that? In a few minutes the others would come up and they would be able to charge him and take him prisoner. It seemed to Jim that there was some deep scheme in the head of the outlaw, and so he watched with all his senses alert, keeping well out of gunshot.

In this position Don and Ned found him when they galloped up a half hour later. Don fairly threw himself on his brother in his joy and Ned was equally enthusiastic. Jim was in rags but was a welcome sight to Don.

Jim explained the position of the outlaw in the thicket and they were undecided. No sound had come from the thicket all the time that Jim had been stationed there, and no one had left the place. Ned decided that they had better spread out and rush the cover.

"If we rush the woods on three sides we'll have him," he said. "He can't shoot at all three of us at once, and we can fairly hurl ourselves into the place. By coming up on three different points we can prevent him from running out of one side of the thicket while we charge in another."

"We must rush the thicket in a zigzag course," Don put in. "If we don't, we're likely to be shot."

Agreeing on a gunshot for signal purposes the three boys took up positions on three sides of the silent thicket and looked to their rifles. Each one could see the other and at last Ned discharged his gun. At top speed they bore down on the thicket, driving the horses in an irregular line.

To their astonishment there was no shot or sound from the thicket and they entered it together, to find it empty of life except for Sackett's horse, which was quietly grazing close to the edge of the brush. The patch inclosed by trees was about twenty-five feet in diameter and was nothing more than a mere cluster of trees and bushes. The only thing to be seen, beside the horse, was a huge pile of stones. They jumped from the horses and looked at each other in perplexity.

"Now, where in the world did that man go?" demanded Ned, holding his rifle in instant readiness.

"You can search me!" answered Don, in bewilderment. "He's not in the trees, is he?"

Ned looked quickly up and then shook his head. "No, there isn't room enough in these trees for anyone to hide themselves. He must be in the place, because he certainly didn't walk out while we were there."

"He didn't get away before you came, either," Jim said. "I kept an eagle eye on the place, and he couldn't have made it without my seeing him."

"Well, he's gone," said Ned, walking to the horse and examining it. "Just vanished into thin air."

Don was looking at the heap of stones. It was a high cairn, composed of stones which had been heaped there generations ago for some unknown reason, and moss had grown over the mound. Stones of a larger size made up the bottom and smaller stones lay above these. Near the base of it he found a straight slab with some Spanish lettering cut upon it.

"What is written on this stone?" he asked Ned. The young engineer bent over the stone, lighted a match and read the inscription.

"I can't make it all out," he replied, as the match expired in his hand. "But it seems to be the burial place of someone of importance. They had a custom once of taking a distinguished man and piling a cairn of stones over his grave. Sometimes the custom was for anyone who came past to add a stone to the pile and in that way it grew larger. This is one of those piles, and someone is buried down at the bottom of it."

"All of which doesn't bring us any nearer Mr. Sackett," murmured Jim. "I'd give anything to know where that gentleman went to!"

"It just seems silly!" said Ned, impatiently. "You chase him in here and he simply disappears. That isn't logical."

"Look here!" cried Don, who had been moving around the pile of stones, and who was now on the other side. "Shouldn't all of these stones be covered with moss?"

"I suppose so," Ned replied. "Why."

"Because they aren't covered with moss on this side. The stones here are different than the others, and seem to be looser. Come here and give me a hand."

The other two boys hastened to Don's side and found that he was right. The stones to which he pointed had a brighter look than the others, and where the chinks and crevices of the other rocks had long since been stopped up by moss, these rocks were singularly free. Moreover, they were not well placed, and the boys were struck by the same idea.

"Ah, ha!" exclaimed Ned, as he began to tear away the upper stones. "I think I see a thing or two! Help me with these stones."

The other two went to work with a will and soon the stones were pulled out and tossed to one side. To their intense satisfaction a large opening was revealed.

"Just as we thought, the opening of a tunnel!" exclaimed Don.

CHAPTER XXII THE DEN

No sooner were the words out of Don's mouth than a burst of flame came from the interior of the cairn and a shot whistled uncomfortably close to their heads. They made all haste to retreat, Ned dragging Jim aside somewhat roughly.

"He's in there, all right," said Jim, grimly.

"Yes, there must be a regular hiding place in there," responded Ned. "The question is: how are we going to get him out? We certainly can't rush him in there."

"We can starve him out," suggested Don.

"That will take too long," said Ned. "However, if there isn't anything else to do, we'll do that."

"I have another plan," put in Jim. "We'll smoke him out!"

"Smoke him out!" echoed Don and Ned.

"Sure, why not? I doubt if there is any other outlet to that cairn, except maybe some small air-hole, so we can easily smoke him out. Let's gather some of this green wood and set it afire."

Keeping a vigilant lookout toward the mouth of the uncovered tunnel so as to guard against a sudden dash or shot the three boys gathered some fairly green wood, with which they mixed some dry dead wood, and after piling it near the mouth of the tunnel, pushed it into place with the butts of their guns. They knew that the tunnel was straight and not wide enough to allow the penned outlaw to fire on them unless they stood directly before the opening, so they took excellent care to keep out of range. When the wood was piled Ned leaned cautiously

forward and lighted the pile.

The dry wood caught fire and blazed up, touching the green wood and causing it to smoke. The boys stood with guns in readiness to fire a shot into the entrance of the cave if the bandit tried to make a thrust at the fire with a view to scattering it. The flames mounted higher, causing a heavy pall of smoke from the green wood.

"Take off your hats and fan it down the opening," said Ned, suiting the words by the action. All three of the boys fanned the smoke vigorously, causing it to go into the tunnel.

They did not have long to wait for results. After a few moments they heard a violent coughing and then at last Sackett staggered out into the opening, still coughing and wiping his streaming eyes. Before he could use the gun which he held in his hands they were upon him and had disarmed him.

"Well, Squint Sackett," said Ned, grimly, as they bound his hands with a piece of rope which was on his own horse. "We have you at last."

The bandit replied by a fit of coughing that made him red in the face. Seeing that he was quite safe Don scattered the fire and stamped it out. The quest was now over and the bay pirate securely bound.

"You kids'll pay for this!" the man said, hoarsely. "You can't prove anything against me!"

"No, not at all," said Don cheerfully. "Just stealing, breaking into a ranch, kidnapping, and a few other trifles. I guess we can put you where you belong this time. It was an unlucky day for you when you decided to attack Professor Scott."

"Suppose we take a look through this cairn and see what it looks like before we go?" suggested Jim.

"All right," agreed Ned. "But first we'll tie this slippery gentleman up. He mustn't be allowed to get away again."

Sackett was tied to a convenient tree and then the boys made a torch of a dry stick of wood. With this in hand Ned took the lead and they entered the mouth of

the tunnel, bending low to keep from scraping their heads on the roof of the passage. They went down on a slight slope for a distance of about four feet and then came to a single cave-like room hollowed out under the rocks.

"I see the whole business now," remarked Ned, as they peered about the little cave. "This place was evidently some pirate's den years ago, and in some way Sackett learned of it. You can see that the place was built for no other purpose, and the slab outside is a plain blind."

Ned was right in what he said. Some forgotten pirate had purposely built the cairn retreat for a refuge in time of storm, when the law was hunting him along the coast. The room was large enough to contain a blanket and a low table that had evidently been constructed in the place. Overhead there was a concealed opening between the rocks, so that air could get into the place and the inmates could breathe. Once inside it was an easy matter to place the rocks before the opening in such a way that no one except a careful observer would ever discover it.

"It is a pretty clever hiding place," remarked Don. "Anyone would have one chance in a hundred of finding it. I only stumbled across it because I was curious about the whole mound."

"It pretty nearly stood Sackett in mighty good stead," Jim said.

They left the cairn and went back to the thicket, to find the outlaw tugging frantically at his bonds, but when he saw them he sullenly ceased and became quiet. They untied him from the tree, leaving his hands tied, however, and helped him mount his horse. Then they left the thicket and started back for the ranch of the senorita.

Three miles from the ranch they were joined by the professor, the captain and Terry, who had become anxious because of their long absence and who had mounted and set out to find them. The meeting between the reunited friends was warm and they were glad to see that the author of all their troubles was taken at last.

"Well, Sackett," said the professor, with a twinkle in his eyes. "It is certainly time that we took you. You had your inning at taking most of us and now it is our turn."

"You won't keep me long," snarled the man.

"No, we won't," struck in Captain Blow. "But the big house with the bars will hold on to you for a good long time, my bucko!"

"Who are you?" demanded the bay pirate. "I never did anything to you!"

"No, but your friend Captain Ryan took a couple of my sailors with him when he sailed on his last voyage. He's taking another sail right now, down to San Francisco to the jail."

"Tryin' to be funny, aren't you?" retorted the river pirate.

"All of your gang is in custody, Sackett," said Professor Scott, quietly.

They went back to the ranch, to find the senorita taking care of four wounded men, all of whom had slight wounds in the legs or shoulders. The overseer was one of them and he pleaded for mercy with the boys. Jim and Terry were undecided but Captain Blow and the professor were not.

"Can't let these fellows go, any of 'em," said the old captain. "He would have left you two boys' bodies out there in the desert without thinking about it, according to Terry's story, so you can't let him go. Maybe he wouldn't ever turn up to harm you again, but he's a potential murderer and he's better off behind bars."

It was now late at night and the whole party accepted the invitation to remain at the ranch until morning, at which time they were to take the prisoners to Quito and see that they were taken from there to San Francisco. The night passed without incident and in the morning the whole party, with the wounded men in a wagon which belonged to the senorita, started for the sea coast.

The journey to Quito was a long one and all of them did not make it. The professor dropped off at the Scott ranch and the others kept on with the cargo of dangerous rascals. In due time they reached the town, made out the proper papers, and then waited two days for a government boat to come and take the prisoners away. When this was done they went back to the Scott ranch.

Subsequently Sackett, who was wanted for many types of crime, was placed behind the bars for the rest of his life and his crew of men each received all that was coming to them from their lives of dishonesty. The river pirates and bay pirate gang, of which Ryan and his crew formed the main branch, was broken up once and for all, and it was a good many years before any of them ever became free again.

Captain Blow left a message at Quito for his mate and then joined the party that was going home. He had been invited to go with them on their gold hunt and was eager to do so. But this time all stories had been told and the boys in particular were impatient to go and dig for it.

"Well, now we'll go have a look at that Spanish gold," said the captain, as they started on the return trip. "And I want to have a look at that ship moored in the sand for so long! They say some of those old-timers were pretty good sailors, but I don't think much of a skipper who runs his windjammer under the ground!"

CHAPTER XXIII THE DRAGON'S LAST STROKE

The sun had barely raised above the horizon on the following day before the ranch echoed to the preparations for the treasure hunt. The boys had slept poorly, looking forward eagerly to the time when they should be in close contact with the long buried ship in the desert sands. With hurry and bustle and good-natured shouts they prepared to set out.

Now that their minds had been relieved of all anxiety concerning Sackett and his gang their spirits soared as only those of the young adventurous can. They had spent a jolly evening around the fireplace on the previous day, talking, planning and laughing over some of Captain Blow's humorous stories. It was late before they sought their beds, and the professor had been compelled to curb some of their animal vigor.

Jim had stood at the foot of his bed, surrounded by Ned, Don and Terry. Captain Blow and Professor Scott were preparing for bed in another room at the time. There had been some pillow throwing and now Jim was acting a part.

"This is the way Terry kicked the gun out of the overseer's hand," he said. He was in his pajamas at the time and the other boys were also ready for bed. Jim loosed a vigorous kick in front of him, but his enthusiasm proved his undoing. The force caused him to lose his balance, and amidst the shouts of delight of his companions he thumped to the floor, knocking the wind out of himself.

"That was some kick!" exclaimed Don, laughing. "No wonder the poor overseer lost his gun! If the kick had that much force I bet the gun sailed clear into the ocean!"

"I protest," put in Terry, solemnly. "I never cut such a wild figure as that! Your imagination is running away with you, Jimmie, my boy!"

"Somebody else had better start running away!" puffed Jim, in huge disgust. "Just wait until I get up!"

Once up he bore down on the grinning Terry and bowled him onto the bed. Don reached for his foot, but received a hearty thrust in the stomach from the foot, which Jim declared he had tickled. Don then jumped on the wiggling chums and Ned stood laughing. But in a minute he too was drawn into hostilities. He attempted to pile pillows on the warring factions, who promptly turned upon him, and the four young men were soon engaged in a frantic tussle that overturned one bed and mussed them up royally.

Such was the scene that greeted the eyes of Captain Blow and Professor Scott as they hastily entered the room. The professor opened his mouth to protest, but the captain, his gray eyes snapping with mischief, whispered something to him. The professor smiled and nodded and they ran forward, the professor seizing the ankles of Terry, who happened to be on top of the pile, while Blow grasped his shoulders.

"Heave aloft!" bellowed the captain, and in concert they heaved.

To his astonishment Terry felt himself lifted bodily from the struggling mass and tossed through the air, to land with a bounce on the bed. Ned Scott followed and Jim followed him. Don, seeing what was in the wind, made a frantic scramble to get under the bed, but to the delight of the watching boys he was switched from under by the active captain and treated to a ride through the air. When he had finally landed with a thud on the bed the two older men promptly sat on him.

"Now," said the professor, with mock severity. "What is the meaning of all this?"

"Jim was illustrating something," replied Terry, gravely. "And we helped him out!"

"By jumping tinder!" cried the captain. "I don't know what in time you could have been illustrating! Showing your affection for each other, likely!"

"What ever it was," said the professor. "I suggest that you stop it. We want to make an early start in the morning and you can save some of that energy for digging sand. From the noise we heard we thought that Sackett had returned and was trying to carry one or all of you off. Who upset the bed?"

"All of us," said Don, truthfully.

"I don't doubt it. Well, to bed now, and calm down a bit."

Now, on the morning of the hunt, the boys impatiently ate their breakfast and placed blankets and provisions on the horses. There was no telling how long they would linger around the sunken galleon, and they wanted to be sure that it would not be necessary to cut the visit short because of a lack of provisions. It had been decided to take the mestizo along with them and leave only the cook at home. When all arrangements had been made they started briskly off.

The day was bright and somewhat cool and they made rapid progress, the boys in their eagerness keeping always ahead of their elders. The older men wisely held them in check, realizing that there was a long journey in front of them and not wishing to run the risk of tiring out before they got there. They halted once for a meal and then pushed on, not stopping for a nap in the afternoon, since it was not hot enough to do so, and just as evening drew on they topped a small hill and looked down on the valley in which Jim and Terry had so nearly lost their life.

"There is the wreck!" shouted Jim, pointing to the corner of the galleon which they had uncovered. "Looks as though no one had been near it, all right."

No one had apparently been near the place, for there were no traces of footmarks in the sand other than those left by the two boys and the treacherous overseer. They rode down the incline and picketed the horses, hastening at once to the few feet of deck uncovered. The professor gazed at the uncovered rail in rapture.

"By George, this is wonderful!" he exclaimed, his face glowing with the enthusiasm of the scholar. "Just think, after reading a story like that, to run across the very ship on which it happened! I hope we can uncover the whole ship!"

"Ned," asked Don. "Where was that piece of wreckage found, the piece that first gave the idea of a sunken galleon?"

"About three miles north of here," replied the engineer. "I guess I see what you are getting at. You think that the piece was washed out of the creek that used to be here, and was found, after it drifted down shore?"

"Yes," nodded Don. "Don't you think so?"

"I surely do," assented Ned, stepping down onto the deck of the buried galleon. "Is this the hatchway?"

Terry lifted the hatch, which they had replaced when they had left the galleon with the Mexican. "Yes, and here is the flight of stairs. Did anyone bring a flashlight?"

"I have one," said the professor, producing it from his saddle bag. "Let's be very careful about going down those stairs."

It was now dark and the flashlight was needed. The professor flashed the beam of light down the stairs and went first, treading with infinite care, but the steps were apparently solid. The others, with the exception of the mestizo, who would not trust himself in a place which looked so much like a trap, followed the savant down into the hold of the ancient ship.

"There is the treasure chest," said Jim, and the professor swung the beam of light on the mouldering chest. Don lifted the lid and the gold was revealed.

They fingered it and found that it consisted of coins of various degrees. The professor did not recognize any of them except some pieces of eight.

"Sorry I didn't study up on ancient coins," murmured the teacher. "However, I'm pretty sure that there is quite a fortune here."

"No doubt there is a substantial treasure further down in the sand," suggested Ned.

"Yes," the professor agreed. "Cups and plate silver and perhaps other things. The sailors didn't carry anything away with them, expecting to return and gather it all on some other occasion, I presume." He turned his light from side to side. "The hold here was filled with water, and all above deck must have been burned. We won't find much of anything until we get down under the sand."

After some more looking around they went outside and made camp close to the wreck, the boys again hacking firewood from the remains of the galleon. They ate supper and then sat around the fire discussing plans and waiting for the morrow and daylight.

"It is going to be quite a job digging into that sand," observed the captain. "In the first place, it's mighty wet."

"Yes," said the professor. "I'm very much afraid it is too much of a job for us to attempt. It will take a whole crew to dig down into those ruins, and a regular excavating gang will be the ones to do it. However, we can look around and see what we can pick up ourselves, and then later see to it that the right sort of a company goes to work on the job."

"We'll have to make a legal claim to it, won't we?" asked Jim.

Ned nodded. "That will have to be our first job. If we don't anybody who comes along will be able to take it right out of our hands. It is much the same as discovering a gold mine, only in this case the gold is already refined and cast for us."

"I can't wait until morning!" said the impatient Terry.

"I'm glad you said that," the professor spoke seriously. "I want you boys to promise me that you won't go on the wreck at any time during the night or in the morning before we are all awake and ready to tackle it. We have had quite a bit of trouble so far and we want to avoid any more, certainly any that may turn out to be more serious than any we have had. I don't believe that there are any ghosts or goblins on the thing that will hurt you, but we had better not do anything that we'll regret."

"I for one won't," Terry promised. "I remember what that dragon says in the old manuscript!"

The others promised, and after some further talk they all went to sleep and remained asleep until daylight. After a hasty breakfast they went to the wreck once more.

"Fine day we have for our treasure hunting party," remarked Don, as they went down the hatchway.

It was indeed a fine day, with a clear blue sky and a bright sun. Once down in the hold, however, all light and warmth was shut out, except for a single shaft that came in from the open hatchway.

"Now," said the professor, who was the leader. "We aren't going to be able to do much with this proposition, but I suggest that we at least dig out this room. It wouldn't be of any use to dig down into the main hold of the galleon, for it would take us months and it would be dangerous work. Before anything like that is done all sand would have to be cleared away from the sides of the ship."

The room in which they stood, and which held the chest of gold, was about fourteen feet square. With small trench shovels brought from the ranch they went to work on the moist sand, digging it out and by a system of relays throwing it out on the deck. Don stood on a wide step where the sand was deposited by Ned, the professor and Jim, and shovelled it up to the hatch, where Terry and Blow threw it to one side. They worked on with a will, and although it soon became hard work no one complained.

It was soon found that the chest of gold had been upon a table at the time of the sinking of the galleon, for they had scarcely begun their work before they struck the top of the table. It was soon uncovered and proved to be a massive affair of black wood. It was about four feet high, and when they had cleared away the sand down to the bottom they found solid flooring.

From time to time they changed positions so as to give each one a chance to work inside the buried galleon and also to get a chance at the sunlight. The person who relayed the sand on the stairs had the hardest job, as he was compelled to stoop down, scoop the sand, straighten up and throw it out of the hatch. Don was not sorry to give up his post and get out on the deck, and later on to get down into the old hold.

When Don got downstairs the room had been almost completely excavated and some more treasure had been found. Several bars of solid silver had been uncovered in one corner and even the walls held relics, in the shape of several old muskets and knives, along with a rusted sword. There were two heavy chairs in the room also, which were both overturned, probably by the force of the shock when the galleon ran aground.

They stopped at dinner time to eat, all of them being profoundly grateful for the respite. The room in which they had been working was now almost empty and they decided to do a little more work and then take the gold and as much silver as they could carry and go back to the ranch, there to put in motion the necessary machinery to make the treasure theirs. Accordingly, as soon as the noon meal

was finished, they went back to work.

"Better not do much more excavating," warned Captain Blow. "That pile of wet sand on the deck is getting pretty heavy."

They finished excavating that room, finding nothing more of importance and then held a parley. There was a door in one side of the room and they were in doubt as to whether to open it. The professor feared that something might happen if they did, but the others disagreed with him, so the door was finally chopped open.

It came out of its frame with a rush, disclosing nothing but a blank wall of sand. Some portion of the deck, as yet under sand, had evidently been ripped off or had burned off, and in that manner the ship had filled completely, much as a paper boat that a child buries in the sand. They picked at the wall of sand before them, but it was solid and they gave it up.

"I guess this will be as much as we'll want to do," the professor announced. "The rest of the job is for a regular crew of excavators, and moreover, must be undertaken scientifically. We'll be satisfied to go back with what we have and lay claim to the rest of it in the right way."

"Are you thinking of starting tonight?" asked Terry, looking at his watch. "It is five o'clock now!"

"Is it that late?" cried Captain Blow. "By thunder mighty! this day zipped right by!"

"Yes, it is that late," retorted the professor, consulting his own watch. "We've been so busy and interested that we haven't kept track of the time. No, we won't start back tonight. We'll stay in camp and start early in the morning!"

"All right, suppose we get back," suggested the captain. "The bottom of my stomach is sunk lower than this fishing smack!"

They went up the stairs, Ned and Don stopping to examine one of the musty guns that was on the wall. The others stepped off of the deck and onto the sand, and seeing that the two boys were not with them, the professor called out: "Come on, boys, back to camp."

"We're coming!" Don replied, as he started up the stairs, with Ned a step or two back of him. Don had just thrust his head out of the hatchway when there came a warning shout from Terry.

"Hurry up!" he yelled. "The sand is sliding!"

The wet sand which they had piled up during the day suddenly slid down the hill with gathering force. Don sprang forward quickly, but was too late. The sand hit the deck of the galleon, there was a dull report and a sucking sensation, and then the whole room which they had excavated caved in. The deck, rotting and weakened, gave way under the descending weight of the wet and dry sand, and went through with a roar. Don and Ned disappeared from sight, buried alive in the wreck of the galleon!

The party on the shore stared dumbly for one minute, appalled by the horror of the tragedy, and then Captain Blow leaped forward.

"Come on and dig!" he cried. "If we don't dig like fury they'll smother to death!"

As the others followed him the intrepid captain leaped down on the heap of sand where the boys had last been seen and began to dig frantically. The sand was loose and he sank down in it, but he dug without heeding his own peril, and the others helped him. Don's hand speedily worked loose from the sand and they caught hold of it.

"Work right around his arm," cried the captain. "Be careful not to hit his head with your shovels."

The scene was one of wildest confusion. By digging with furious energy they got Don's head free and only just in time. He was purple and fairly clawed for air. They attempted to drag him loose, but failed. He pushed the sand from his mouth and spoke urgently.

"Get Ned!" he gasped. "He's down around my knees, somewhere!"

The professor's face was white and he silently kneeled beside Don's head and dug with all his strength. Terry and Jim held the slippery sand back as the two men shovelled it away, and in a few seconds, which seemed like hours to them, one of Ned's shoulders was uncovered. Dropping their shovels the men wormed

their hands beneath his armpit and tore him loose from the sand.

"Here, water, senor," said Yappi, appearing beside them with a canteen.

Ned was blue and unconscious, and they were forced to dig the sand from his nose and mouth before he could catch his breath. When he had become conscious he drank some water, and Don followed his example. They both were free to breathe but were still buried and sinking, for the sand was sifting down into the room below.

"This fight has only just begun," said the captain, grimly. "We've got to get them out of here as fast as we can."

Then began a spirited battle between the men and the sand, the human beings putting every ounce of strength into the battle to keep their companions from being engulfed again and the sand exerting its power to entomb them once more, with a persistence that was perfectly amazing. The muscles of the friends ached, for they were tired from the events of the day, but they knew it was a race of life and death. They dug ceaselessly, throwing sand as far away as possible, baffled and maddened by the steady stream of the soil that returned to the charge.

It grew steadily darker and at last the captain, who had assumed charge of the rescue operations spoke briefly to the professor. "Tell your man to light a big fire," he commanded.

When this was done they labored on, and after an hour had gone by they were down as far as the boys' waists. They were working in a hollow that had been made even more of a hole than normally by the collapse of the deck, and so the sand proved to be a persistent foe. As fast as they threw it up it slid back, and there was no way to keep it up.

"Now," said the captain, briskly. "Tell your man to back the horses down here, throw out a hawser, grapple onto those lads, and tow 'em out!"

When this had been put into the kind of language that Yappi could understand he quickly ran the horses into position, threw out a rope, and it was passed under Don's armpits. Yappi sprang into the saddle gave the horse the pressure of his heels, his hand steady to check him at moment's notice.

The rope tightened, and the boys pushed Don's body, with the result that he was

hauled out of the treacherous hole. Nothing was said at the time, and Don made all haste to scramble to safety, shaken by his experience. It was now an easier task to get at Ned, for the freeing of Don had left a bigger hole, and they tied him up securely. This time the horse strained, the boy gritted his teeth as the rope cut into his body, and the others pushed with a will. With a final rush he came up and out of the hole.

"Hurrah!" shouted the captain, dropping his shovel. "The battle is won, mates! By tunket, let's get out of here."

They made haste to leave the place and then had a happy reunion. The professor's lips moved as he pressed Ned to him and Jim's eyes were not steady when he hugged Don. Terry addressed the remains of the wreck, while the mestizo patted the head of the horse.

"Pretty smart, you old mud scow!" the red-headed boy said. "That was the dragon's last stroke, and he nearly made good on it."

CHAPTER XXIV NED TAKES A NEW OVERSEER

They were all glad enough to rest that night around the campfire. The muscles of the party were stiff and sore, and Don and Ned declared that their bodies ached from head to foot.

"Got enough sand in me to build a new bunkhouse at the ranch," Ned, declared.

They told their sensations as the wall of sand closed over them, sensations by no means pleasant. Smothering in sand was not an enviable means of ending one's life, according to Ned, who had been closest to it. Don had felt that he had a good chance for his life, for he had been near the surface, but his chief worriment had been for his friend, whom he knew to be lower down.

"All things considered, I rather think we earned that treasure," the professor remarked, and the others agreed with him heartily.

Yappi could not be persuaded to go near the place again. He was firm in the belief that an evil spirit had tried to punish them for meddling with the gold of dead men. During the time they had needed his help he had been brave enough, but now that there was nothing to fear he was more frightened than he had ever been. More than all the others, he looked forward to going home in the morning.

They slept the sleep of the utterly exhausted that night and were late in getting up on the following day. When all their things were packed and the treasure which they had taken placed on the horses they left the place and started for the ranch.

"That place isn't the best place in the world for us," laughed Don, as they paused on a rise and looked around. "Jim and Terry were nearly killed near there and then Ned and I got a sand bath. That guardian dragon doesn't appear to like young men!"

"Maybe he doesn't object to the professor and me," observed the captain, with a broad smile. "We both have beards and are more nearly his age!"

The journey back to the ranch was made without incident and they were glad to arrive. After remaining there for a day the professor and the captain took the treasure and set out with it to the coast, there to go to San Diego and claim legal right to it. The boys accompanied them to Quito, where Blow's own schooner, which was fortunately lying at anchor, took them to their destination. The boys left them in the town and returned to the ranch.

There they passed several happy days, riding, visiting the mines, going once or twice to visit the senorita, and generally having a good time. Ned went several times to the senorita's and Terry wisely nodded his head.

"Big doings pretty soon," he observed, wisely.

"What do you mean?" asked Don. They were out near the barn and Ned was not with them.

"Wait and see. The young man is going over the hill quite frequently now, and you wait and see if something exciting doesn't happen."

"Getting married isn't exciting," said Jim.

"Don't know, my boy," drawled Terry, trying to throw a lasso. "Never been that way, myself! Look at that for a throw, will you! Aimed it at the fence post and got the corner of the barn!"

When the professor and the captain returned they reported success. Their claim was legal and they had authority to recruit a gang of men to excavate the ancient ship.

"That's the end of the phantom galleon," observed Don. "It won't be a phantom any more."

"You pretty nearly joined the phantoms yourself," Jim reminded him.

Terry's surmise regarding the state of affairs at the Mercedes ranch turned out to

be correct. In a few days Ned announced that they were to be married.

"There is no use in allowing her to stay over there and try to run that little ranch all by herself," he said, as they sat in the living room one night. "So we are going to combine and form one big ranch, after we are married. That will end all of her troubles about getting help and overseers."

"I see," said Terry, dryly. "You are doing it so as to help her run her ranch. Funny way to get married."

Ned made a pass at him and the red-headed boy dodged. The professor smiled.

"That's the easiest way of saying it," he said. "Ned wouldn't want you to suspect that he loves the young lady!"

"Ned spoke about her difficulty in getting an overseer," remarked Don. "Another way to look at it is that Ned himself is getting an overseer!"

"Yes, he'll have to behave himself now," said the captain, as they all laughed at Ned's red face.

In the days that followed an excavating crew came down from San Francisco and went to work on the wreck of the galleon. In a remarkably short time it was unearthed and systematically cleaned out. A treasure estimated in value at something like fifty thousand dollars was found in the wreck, a treasure that consisted of gold and silver plate, gold coins, silver coins and several gold chains. There was also some silk, but it had been spoiled. The wreck itself, when uncovered, showed that it had been burned to the water's edge before being covered with the sands of the plains.

"Well, when that is all divided, up, we'll have plenty, each one of us," said the professor.

"At last my mother will get a few of the things in life that she has really needed," said Terry, to whom the fortune meant most.

Not long after that there was a simple wedding in the Scott ranch. A minister came to the ranch from Quito and Ned and the senorita were married in the living room of the ranch which was now to be her home. Ned was quietly happy and the senorita brilliantly so. All the lonely years of living alone were now over,

and she looked forward to a life of happiness with the American boy whose simple manliness had always appealed to her. Don was Ned's best man.

"By golly," said Terry, when it was all over. "If getting married makes you feel as happy as Ned and his lady friend looked, I think I'll try it!"

"That'll be fine, Terry," responded Jim. "By the way, who is the lady?"

"What?" asked the red-headed boy, blankly.

"Who is the lady that will look so happy when you marry her?" Jim answered.

"Gee, I don't know!" was the reply. "You have to have a lady friend, don't you? I hadn't thought of that!"

"You had better give it some thought," retorted Don. "Most people have one when they get married."

After a few more days the boys prepared to return home, along with the professor, who was eager to return to his classes in school. The boys were looking forward to their second year at Woodcrest, to the study and the sports of the coming season. Captain Blow left them a few days earlier, expressing his pleasure at having met them once more.

"I hope I fall in with you Mercer boys again sometime," he said, as he shook hands at the dock. "I always have a barrel of fun when I'm with you. Makes me young again. If you ever sail past old Mystery Island, think of me, will you?"

A few days later they all said goodbye to the new Mr. and Mrs. Scott, wishing them well and promising to come and see them if they were ever in that part of the world again. Before long they were back in San Francisco and on the train, bound for home and school. Terry was with them, having had "Jumpiter" shipped by rail.

"Well," remarked Don, as they rolled past long fields of grain. "That's the end of one of the best vacations we ever had. Now we'll go back to school, to settle down and take things easy for a change."

But if Don could have seen the events that awaited them in the coming school term in the form of a baffling mystery he would not have been so sure that they would settle down. In the next volume, entitled The Mercer Boys' Mystery Case, or the '13 Class Trophy Riddle the exciting things which befell them will be related.

THE END

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