

THE
MOTOR
BOYS
ACROSS
THE
PLAINS



CLARENCE
YOUNG

THE MOTOR BOYS ACROSS THE PLAINS



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THE BEAR WAS TRYING TO CLIMB UP ON THE ENGINE HOOD.

[THE BEAR WAS TRYING TO CLIMB UP ON THE ENGINE HOOD.](#)

THE MOTOR BOYS ACROSS THE PLAINS

Or

The Hermit of Lost Lake

BY

CLARENCE YOUNG

AUTHOR OF "THE MOTOR BOYS," "THE MOTOR BOYS OVERLAND,"
"THE MOTOR BOYS IN MEXICO," "JACK RANGER'S
SCHOOLDAYS," ETC.

ILLUSTRATED

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THE MOTOR BOYS ACROSS THE PLAINS

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THE BEAR WAS TRYING TO CLIMB UP ON THE ENGINE HOOD.

THE INDIAN SEEMED TO KNOW HOW TO OPERATE IT.

THE NEXT INSTANT THE BOY HAD MADE A FLYING LEAP INTO THE CAR.



PREFACE

Dear Boys:

Here it is at last—the fourth volume of “The Motor Boys Series,” for which so many boys all over our land have been asking during the past year.

To those who have read the other volumes in this line, this new tale needs no special introduction. To others, I would say that in the first volume, entitled, “The Motor Boys,” I introduced three wide-awake American lads, Ned, Bob and Jerry, and told how they first won a bicycle race and then a great motor cycle contest,—the prize in the latter being a big touring car.

Having obtained the automobile, the lads went west, and in the second volume, called, “The Motor Boys Overland,” were related the particulars of a struggle for a valuable mine, a struggle which tested the boys’ bravery to the utmost.

While in the west the boys heard of a strange buried city in Mexico, and, in company with a learned college professor, journeyed to that locality. The marvellous adventures met with are told in “The Motor Boys in Mexico.”

Leaving the buried city, the boys started again for the locality of the mine, and in the present tale are told the particulars of some strange things that happened on the way. A portion of this story is based on facts, related to me while on an automobiling tour in the west, by an old ranchman who had participated in some of the occurrences.

With best wishes, and hoping we shall meet again, I leave you to peruse the pages which follow.

CLARENCE YOUNG.

March 1, 1907.

THE MOTOR BOYS ACROSS THE PLAINS

CHAPTER I

RAMMING AN OX CART

Mingled with the frantic tooting of an automobile horn, there was the shrill shrieking of the brake-band as it gripped the wheel hub in a friction clutch.

“Hi, Bob! Look out for that ox cart ahead!” exclaimed one of three sturdy youths in the touring car.

“I should say so! Jam on the brakes, Bob!” put in the tallest of the trio, while an elderly man, who was in the rear seat with one of the boys, glanced carelessly up to see what was the trouble.

“I have got the brake on, Jerry!” was the answer the lad at the steering wheel made. “Can’t you and Ned hear it screeching!”

The auto was speeding down a steep hill, seemingly headed straight toward a solitary Mexican who was moving slowly along in an antiquated ox-drawn vehicle.

“Then why don’t she slow up? You’ve got the power off, haven’t you?”

“Of course! Do you take me for an idiot!” yelled Bob, or, as his friends sometimes called him, because of his fatness, “Chunky.” “Of course I’ve shut down, but something seems to be the matter with the brake pedal.”

“Have you tried the emergency?” asked Ned.

“Sure!”

Toot! Toot! Toot!

Again the horn honked out a warning to the Mexican, but he did not seem to hear.

The big red touring car was gathering speed, in spite of the fact that it was not under power, and it bore down ever closer to the ox cart.

“Cut out the muffler and let him hear the explosions,” suggested Jerry.

Bob did so, and the sounds that resulted were not unlike a Gatling gun battery going into action. This time the native heard.

Glancing back, he gave a frightened whoop and jabbed the sharp goad into the ox. The animal turned squarely across the road, thus shutting off what small chance there might have been of the auto gliding past on either side.

“We’re going to hit him sure!” yelled Ned. “I say Professor, you’d better hold on to your specimens. There’s going to be all sorts of things doing in about two shakes of a rattlesnake’s tail!”

“What’s that about a rattlesnake?” asked the old man, who, looking up from a box of bugs and stones on his lap, seemed aware, for the first time, of the danger that threatened.

“Hi there! Get out of the way! Move the cart! Shake a leg! Pull to one side and let us have half the road!” yelled Jerry as a last desperate resort, standing up and shouting at the bewildered and frightened Mexican.

“Oh pshaw! He don’t understand United States!” cried Ned.

“That’s so,” admitted Jerry ruefully.

“Vamoose, is the proper word for telling a Mexican to get out of the road,” suggested the professor calmly. “Perhaps if you shouted that at him he might—”

What effect trying the right word might have had the boys had no chance of learning, for, the next instant, in spite of Bob’s frantic working at the brake, the auto shot right at the ox cart. By the merest good luck, more than anything else, for Bob could steer neither to the right nor left, because the narrow road was hemmed in by high banks, the machine struck the smaller vehicle a glancing blow.

The force of the impact skidded the auto on two wheels up the side of the embankment, where, poking the front axle into a stump served to bring the car to a stop. The car was slewed around to one side, the ox was yanked from its feet, and, as the cart overturned, the Mexican, yelling voluble Spanish, pitched out into the road.

Nor did the boys and the professor come off scathless, for the sudden stopping of their machine piled the occupants on the rear seat up in a heap on the floor of the tonneau, while Bob and Jerry, who were in front, went sprawling into the dust near the native.

For a few seconds there was no sound save the yelling of the Mexican and the bellowing of the ox. Then the cloud of dust slowly drifted away, and Bob picked himself up, gazing ruefully about.

“This is a pretty kettle of fish,” he remarked.

“I should say it was several of ’em,” agreed Jerry, trying to get some of the dust from his mouth, ears and nose. “You certainly hit him, Chunky!”

“It wasn’t my fault! How did I know the brake wasn’t going to work just the time it was most needed?”

“Is anybody killed?” asked the professor, looking up over the edge of the tonneau, and not releasing his hold of several boxes which contained his specimens.

“Don’t seem to be, nor any one badly hurt, unless it’s the ox or the auto,” said Ned, taking a look. “The Mexican seems to be mad about something, though.”

By this time the native had arisen from his prostrate position and was shaking his fist at the Motor Boys and the professor, meanwhile, it would appear from his language, calling them all the names to which he could lay his tongue.

“I guess he wants Bob’s scalp,” said Jerry with a smile.

“It was as much his fault as mine,” growled Chunky. “If he had pulled to one side, I could easily have passed.”

The Mexican, brushing the dust from his clothes, approached the auto party, and continued his rapid talk in Spanish. The boys, who had been long enough in Mexico to pick up considerable of the language, gathered that the native demanded two hundred dollars for the damage to himself, the cart and the ox, as well as for the injury to his dignity and feelings.

“You’d better talk to him, Professor,” suggested Jerry. “Offer him what you think is right.”

Thereupon Professor Snodgrass, in mild terms explained how the accident had happened, saying it was no fault of the auto party.

The Mexican, in language more forcible than polite, reiterated his demand, and announced that unless the money was instantly forthcoming, he would go to the nearest alcade and lodge a complaint.

The travelers knew what this meant, with the endless delays of Mexican justice, the summoning of witnesses and petty officers.

“I wish there was some way out,” said Jerry.

As the Mexican had not been hurt, nor his cart or ox been damaged, there was

really no excuse for the boys giving in to his demands.

“Let’s give him a few dollars and skip out,” suggested Ned. “He can’t catch us.”

This was easier said than done, for the auto was jammed up against a tree stump on a bank, and the ox cart, which, the native by this time had righted, blocked the road.

But, all unexpectedly, there came a diversion that ended matters. Professor Snodgrass, with his usual care for his beloved specimens before himself, was examining the various boxes containing them. He opened one containing his latest acquisition of horned toads, big lizards, rattlesnakes and bats. The reptiles crawled, jumped and flew out, for they were all alive.

“Diabalo! Santa Maria! Carramba!” exclaimed the Mexican as he caught sight of the repulsive creatures. “They are crazy Americanos!” he yelled.

With a flying leap he jumped into his ox cart, and with goad and voice he urged the animal on to such advantage that, a few minutes later, all that was to be seen of him was a cloud of dust in the distance.

“Good riddance,” said Bob. “Now to see how much our machine is damaged.”

Fortunately the auto had struck a rotten stump, and though with considerable force, the impact was not enough to cause any serious damage. Under the direction of Jerry the boys managed to get the machine back into the road, where they let it stand while they went to a near-by spring for a drink of water.

While they are quenching their thirst an opportunity will be taken to present them to the reader in proper form.

The three boys were Bob Baker, son of Andrew Baker, a banker, Ned Slade, the only heir of Aaron Slade, a department store proprietor, and Jerry Hopkins, the son of a widow. All three were about seventeen years of age, and lived in the city of Cresville, not far from Boston, Mass. Their companion was Professor Uriah Snodgrass, a learned man with many letters after his name, signifying the societies and institutions to which he belonged.

Those who have read the first book of this series, entitled, “The Motor Boys,” need no introduction to the three lads. Sufficient to say that some time before this story opens they had taken part in some exciting bicycle races, the winning of which resulted in the acquiring of motor cycles for each of them.

On these machines they had had much fun and had also many adventures

befall them. Taking part in a big race meet, one of them won an event which gave him a chance to get a big touring automobile, the same car in which they were now speeding through Mexico.

Their adventures in the auto are set forth at length in the second volume of the series entitled, "The Motor Boys Overland," which tells of a tour across the country, in which they had to contend with their old enemy, Noddy Nixon, and his gang. Eventually the boys and Jim Nestor, a miner whom they befriended, gained some information of a long lost gold mine in Arizona.

They made a dash for this and won it against heavy odds, after a fight with their enemies. The mine turned out well, and the boys and their friends made considerable money.

The spirit of adventure would not drown in them. Just before reaching the diggings they made the acquaintance of Professor Snodgrass, who told a wonderful story of a buried city. How the boys found this ancient town of old Mexico, and the many adventures that befell them there, are told in the third book, called "The Motor Boys in Mexico."

Therein is related the strange happenings under ground, of the sunken road, the old temples, the rich treasures and the fights with the bandits. Also there is told of the rescue of the Mexican girl Maximina, and how she was taken from a band of criminals and restored to her friends.

These happenings brought the boys and the professor to the City of Mexico, where the auto was given a good overhauling, to prepare it for the trip back to the United States.

The boys and the professor, the latter bearing with him his beloved specimens, started back for civilization, keeping to the best and most frequented roads, to avoid the brigands, with whom they had had more than one adventure on their first trip. It was while on this homeward journey that the incident of the Mexican and the ox cart befell them.

Having slaked their thirst the boys and the professor went back to the auto where, gathering up the belongings that had become scattered from the upset, they prepared to resume their journey.

"Get in; I'll run her for a while," said Jerry.

"One minute! Stand still! Don't move if you value my happiness!" exclaimed the professor suddenly, dropping down on his hands and knees, and creeping forward through the long grass.



CHAPTER II

A NEST OF SERPENTS

“What is it; a rattlesnake?” asked Bob, in a hoarse whisper.

“Or a Gila monster?” inquired Ned.

“Quiet! No noise!” cautioned the professor. “I see a specimen worth ten dollars at the lowest calculation. I’ll have him in a minute.”

“Is it a bug?” asked Chunky.

“There! I have him!” yelled the scientist, making a sudden dive forward, sliding on his face, and clutching his hand deep into the grass.

As it happened there was a little puddle of water at that point, and the professor, in the excess of his zeal, pitched right into it.

“Oh! Oh my! Oh dear! Phew! Wow! Help! Save me!” he exclaimed a moment later, as he tried to get out of the slough.

The boys hurried to his aid, but the mud was soft and the professor had gone head first into the ooze, which held fast to him as though it was quicksand.

“Get him by the heels and yank him out or he’ll smother!” cried Jerry.

The other boys followed his advice, and, in a little while the bug-collector was pulled from his uncomfortable and dangerous position. As he rolled about in the grass to get rid of some of the mud, he kept his right hand tightly closed.

“What’s the matter, are your fingers hurt?” asked Bob.

“No sir, my fingers are not hurt!” snapped the professor, with the faintest tinge of impatience, which might be excused on the part of a man who has just dived into a mud hole. “My fingers are not hurt in the least. What I have here is one of the rarest specimens of the Mexican mosquito I have ever seen. I would go ten miles to get one.”

“I guess you’re welcome to ’em,” commented Jerry. “We don’t want any.”

“That’s because you don’t understand the value of this specimen,” replied the professor. “This mosquito will add to my fame, and I shall devote one whole

chapter of my four books to it. This indeed has been a lucky day for me.”

“And unlucky for the rest of us,” said Bob, as he thought of the spill.

It was found that a few minor repairs had to be made to the auto, and when these were completed it was nearly noon.

“I vote we have dinner before we start again,” spoke Bob.

“There goes Chunky!” exclaimed Ned. “Never saw him when he wasn’t thinking of something to eat!”

“Well, I guess if the truth was known you are just as hungry as I am,” expostulated Chunky. “This Mexican air gives me a good appetite.”

Bob’s plan was voted a good one, so, with supplies and materials carried in the auto for camping purposes, a fire was soon built, and hot chocolate was being made.

“I’m sick of canned stuff and those endless eggs, frijoles and tortillas,” complained Bob. “I’d like a good beefsteak and some fish and bread and butter.”

“I don’t know about the other things, but I think we could get some fish over in that little brook,” said the professor, pointing to a stream that wound about the base of a near-by hill.

A minute later the boys had their hooks and lines out. Poles were cut from trees, and, with some pieces of canned meat for bait they went fishing. They caught several large white fish, which the professor named in long Latin terms, and which, he said, were good to eat.

In a little while a savory smell filled the air, for Ned, who volunteered to act as cook, had put the fish on to broil with some strips of bacon, and soon there was a dinner fit for any king that ever wielded a scepter.

Sipping their chocolate, the boys and the professor watched the sun slowly cross the zenith as they reclined in the shade of the big trees on either side of the road. Then each one half fell asleep in the lazy atmosphere.

Jerry was the first to rouse up. He looked and saw it would soon be dusk, and then he awakened the others.

“We’ll have to travel, unless we want to sleep out in the open,” he said.

Thereupon they made preparations to leave, the professor gathering up his specimens, including the Mexican mosquito that had caused him such labor.

“I think we’ll head straight for the Rio Grande,” said Jerry. “Once we get into Texas I expect we’ll have some news from Nestor, as I wrote him to let us know how the mine was getting on, and, also, to inform us if he needed any help.”

“I’ll be glad to see old Jim again,” said Bob.

“So will I,” chimed in Ned.

The auto was soon chug-chugging over the road, headed toward the States, and the occupants were engaged with their thoughts. It was rapidly growing dusk, and the chief anxiety was to reach some town or village where they could spend the night. For, though they were used to staying in the open, they did not care to, now that the rainy season was coming on, when fevers were prevalent.

The sun sank slowly to rest behind the big wooded hills as the auto glided along, and, almost before the boys realized it, darkness was upon them.

“Better light the lamps,” suggested Ned. “No telling what we’ll run into on this road. No use colliding with more ox carts, if we can help it.”

“I’ll light up,” volunteered Bob. “It will give me a chance to stretch my legs. I’m all cramped up from sitting still so long.”

Jerry brought the big machine to a stop while Bob alighted and proceeded to illuminate the big search lamp and the smaller ones that burned oil. He had just started the acetylene gas aglow when, glancing forward he gave a cry of alarm.

“What is it?” cried Jerry, seeing that something was wrong. “Is it a mountain lion?”

“It’s worse!” cried Bob in a frightened voice.

“What?”

“A regular den of snakes! The horrible things are stretched right across the road, and we can’t get past. Ugh! There are some whoppers!”

Bob, who hated, above all creatures a snake, made a jump into the auto.

“There’s about a thousand of ’em!” he cried with a shudder.

“Great!” exclaimed the professor. “I will have a chance to select some fine specimens. This is a rare fortune!”

“Don’t go out there!” gasped Bob. “You’ll be bitten to death!”

Just then there sounded on the stillness of the night a strange, whirring buzz. At the sound of it the professor started.

“Rattlers!” he whispered. “I guess none of us will get out. Probably moccasins, cotton-mouths and vipers! There must be thousands of them!”

As he spoke he looked over the side of the car, and the exclamation he gave caused the boys to glance toward the ground. There they beheld a sight that filled them with terror.

As the professor had said, the ground was literally covered with the snakes. The reptiles seemed to be moving in a vast body to some new location. There were big snakes and little ones, round fat ones, and long thin ones, and of many hues.

“Let’s get out of this!” exclaimed Ned. “Start the machine, Jerry!”

“No! Don’t!” called the professor. “You may kill a few, but the revolving wheels of the auto will fling some live ones up among us, and I have no desire to be bitten by any of these reptiles. They are too deadly. So keep the car still until they have passed. They are probably getting ready to go into winter quarters, or whatever corresponds to that in Mexico.”

“It will be lucky if they don’t take a notion to climb up and investigate the machine and us,” put in Jerry. “I have—”

He gave a sudden start, for, at that instant one of the ugly reptiles, which had twined itself around the wheel spokes, reared its ugly head up, over the side of the front seat, and hissed, right in Jerry’s face.

“Here’s one now!” the boy exclaimed as he made a motion to brush the snake aside.

“Don’t touch it as you value your life!” yelled the professor. “It’s a diamond-backed rattler, and one of the most deadly!”

“Here is another coming up on my side,” called Bob.

“Yes, and there are some coming up here!” shouted Ned. “They’ll overwhelm us if we don’t look out!”

For a time it seemed a serious matter. The snakes began twining up the sides of the car, and, though most of them dropped back to the ground again, a few maintained their position, and seemed to exhibit anger at the sight of the boys and the professor.

“What shall we do?” asked Bob. “We can’t run ahead, or go backward, and, if we stay here we’re likely to be killed by the snakes.”

Jerry, who was feeling around in the bottom of the car for his rifle, gave a cry as his hand came in contact with something.

“Get bitten?” asked the professor in alarm.

“No, but I found this lariat,” said Jerry in excited tones.

“Are you going to lasso the snakes?” asked Ned, wondering if Jerry had gone crazy.

“No, but you see this lariat is made of horse hair, and I think I can keep the snakes away with it.”

“How; by shaking it at ’em?”

“No. I read in some book that snakes hated horse hair, and would never cross even a small ring of it.”

“Well?”

“Well, if I run this lariat all around the auto the snakes will not cross it to come to us. Then we can stay here until they all disappear.”

“Good!” exclaimed Ned. “That’s the ticket!”

The reptiles that had climbed up the wheels had gone from sight. With the help of Ned and Bob, Jerry began to spread the horse-hair lariat in a circle about the car.



CHAPTER III

THE DESERTED CABIN

In a few minutes the hair rope was all about the auto, spread out on the ground in an irregular circle. As the boys dropped it over the sides of the car the lariat struck several of the big snakes, and the reptiles shrunk away as though scorched by fire.

“They’re afraid of it all right!” exclaimed Ned. “I guess it will do the business.”

Sure enough, there seemed to be a desire on the part of the snakes to clear out of the vicinity of the hair rope. They glided off by scores, and soon there was a clear space all about the car, where, before, there had been hundreds of the crawling things.

“Shake the lasso,” suggested Bob, “and maybe it will scare them farther off.”

“Yes and we might try shooting a few now they are at a safe distance,” put in Ned.

“It’s too bad I can’t get some specimens,” lamented the professor, “but I suppose you had better try to get rid of them.”

So Jerry, who had retained one end of the long lasso vibrated it rapidly, and, as it wiggled in sinuous folds toward the reptiles they made haste to get out of the way. Then Bob and Ned opened fire, killing several. In a little while there were no snakes to be seen.

“I guess we can go ahead now,” said Jerry. “Who’ll crank up the car? Don’t all speak at once.”

“My arm is a bit sore,” spoke Ned, rubbing his elbow.

“Then you do it, Chunky,” asked the steersman.

“I think I have a stone in my foot,” said Bob, making a wry face.

“Ha! Ha!” laughed Jerry. “Why don’t you two own up and say you’re afraid there’s a stray rattler or two under the machine, and you think it may bite you?”

The two boys grinned sheepishly, and both made a motion to get out.

“Stay where you are,” called the professor preparing to leave from the side door of the tonneau. “I’m used to snakes. I don’t believe there are any left, but if there are I want them for specimens. I’ll crank the car.”

So he got out and peered anxiously under the body, while the boys waited in anxiety.

“No,” called the scientist, in discouraged tones, “there are none left.”

He crawled out, covered with dust, which fact he did not seem to mind, and then turned the crank that sent the fly wheel over. Jerry turned on the gasoline and threw in the spark, and, the next instant the familiar chug-chug of the engine told that the auto was ready to bear the boys and Professor Snodgrass on their way.

They were headed on as straight a road as they could find to the Rio Grande, but, because of the conditions of the thoroughfares it would be several days before they could cross the big river and get into Texas. Their main concern now was to reach some place where there was shelter for the night.

“Keep your eyes peeled for villages,” called Ned. “We don’t want to pass any. I think a good bed would go fine now.”

“A supper would go better,” put in Bob.

“Oh, of course! It wouldn’t be Chunky if he didn’t say something about eating,” remarked Jerry with a laugh. “But there seems to be something ahead. It’s a house at all events, and probably is the mark of the outskirts of the village.”

On the left side of the road, about a hundred yards ahead they saw an adobe, or mud hut. They could see no signs of life about in the half-darkness, illuminated as it was by the powerful search light, but this gave them no concern, as they knew the native Mexicans retired early.

When they came opposite the hut Jerry brought the machine to a stop, and he and the other boys jumped out. The professor, who, as usual was arranging some specimens in one of the many small boxes he carried, remained in the car.

“Hello!” shouted Bob. “Is any one home? Show a light. Can we get a supper here?”

“Why don’t you ask for a bed too?” inquired Ned.

“Supper first,” replied Chunky, rubbing his stomach with a reflective air.

No replies came to the hail of the boys, and, in some wonder they approached nearer to the hut. Then they saw that the door was ajar, and that the cabin bore every appearance of being deserted.

“Nobody home, I guess,” said Jerry.

“No, and there hasn’t been for some time,” added Ned.

“Maybe there’s a place to build a fire where we can cook a good meal,” put in Bob, whereat his companions laughed.

They went into the hut, and found, that, while it was in good condition, and furnished as well as the average native Mexican’s abode, there was no sign of life.

“Might as well make ourselves to home,” said Ned. “Come on in, professor,” he called. “We’ll stay here all night. No use traveling further when there is such a good shelter right at hand.”

It was now quite dark, and the boys brought in the two oil lamps from the auto, as well as a lantern, to illuminate the place. As they did so they disturbed a colony of bats which flew out with a great flutter of wings.

“There’s a charcoal stove, and plenty of fuel,” said Bob, as he looked at the hearth. “Now we can cook something.”

“Well, seeing you are so fond of eating, we’ll let you get the meal,” said Jerry, and it was voted that Chunky should perform this office.

Meanwhile the others brought in blankets to make beds on the frame work of cane that formed the sleeping quarters of whoever had last lived in the hut.

“Rather queer sort of a shack,” remarked Jerry, as he sat down in a corner on a pile of rugs. “Seems to have been left suddenly. They didn’t even stop to take the dishes, and here is the remains of a meal,” and he pointed to some dried frijoles in one corner of the main room or kitchen.

“Perhaps the people who lived here were frightened away,” came from Ned.

“Well I’m tired enough not to let anything short of a regiment of soldiers in action scare me awake to-night,” said Jerry.

Under Bob’s direction supper was soon ready, and the travelers sat down to a good, if rather limited meal as far as variety went. There were no dishes to be washed, for they ate off wooden plates, of which they had a quantity and which they threw away after each meal. Then, after a good fire had been built on the

hearth—for the night was likely to be chilly—the boys and the professor wrapped themselves up in their blankets and soon fell asleep.

Jerry must have been slumbering for several hours when he suddenly awakened as he heard a loud noise.

“Who’s there?” he called involuntarily, sitting up.

It was so dark that at first he could distinguish nothing, but, as his eyes became used to the blackness he managed to make out, by the glow of the fire, a shadowy figure gliding toward the door.

“Who’s there?” called the boy sharply, feeling under the rolled up blanket that served for a pillow, for his revolver. “Stop or I’ll fire!”

The shadowy figure halted. Then Jerry saw it drop down on all fours and begin to creep toward him. Though he was not a coward the boy felt his heart beating strangely, and he had a queer, creepy sensation down his spine.

“What’s the matter?” asked Ned, who was awakened by Jerry’s voice.

“Get your revolver, quick!” called Jerry. “There is some one in the hut besides ourselves! Look over by the fire!”

“I see it! Shall I shoot?” asked Ned.

There came a sudden crash, followed by a wild yell.

“Help! Help! I’m killed! They are murdering me!” shouted Bob’s voice. “They are choking me to death!”

Bang! went Ned’s gun.

Fortunately it was aimed at the ceiling, or some one might have been hurt.

“What’s the trouble?” inquired the professor, who only just then awoke.

“Robbers!” yelled Bob.

“Brigands!” exclaimed Ned.

“Some one is in the cabin!” cried Jerry.

By this time he had managed to creep over toward the fire, on which he threw some light wood. The glowing embers caught it, and as the blaze flared up it revealed a big monkey tangled up amid the folds of Bob’s blanket, while Chunky was buried somewhere beneath the pile. The beast was struggling wildly to escape, but Bob, in his terror, had grabbed it by a leg.

“Stop your noise!” commanded Jerry. “You’re not hurt, Chunky!”

“Are you sure they haven’t killed me?” asked Bob, releasing his hold on the beast, which, with a wild chatter of fear, fled from the hut.

“You ought to be able to give the best evidence on that score,” said Jerry, as he lighted one of the lamps.

“The fellow tried to choke me,” sputtered Bob.

“I guess the poor beast was as badly scared as you were,” remarked the professor. “It was probably attracted in here by the light and warmth. Well, we seem bound to run up against excitement, night as well as day.”

“The monkey must have knocked something over,” said Jerry. “I was awakened by the sound of something falling.”

They looked and saw that the beast had tried to eat the remains of the supper, and had upset a big pot.

“I was sure it was a man, at first,” explained Jerry, “and when I saw it go down and start over toward me I was afraid it was some of those Mexican brigands that traveled with Vasco Bilette and Noddy Nixon, when those rascals were on our trail.”

It was some time before the excitement caused by the monkey’s visit died down sufficiently to allow the travelers to go to sleep again. It was morning when they awoke, and prepared to get breakfast.

“We need some water to make coffee,” said Jerry, who had agreed to get the morning meal. “As chief cook and bottle washer I delegate Bob to find some. Take the pail in the auto.”

Bob started for the receptacle, and, as he reached the door of the hut he gave a cry.

“What’s the matter?” called Jerry and Ned.

“There’s a man out here,” replied Bob.

“Well, he won’t bite you,” said Jerry. “Who is he?”

“Pardon, senors,” called a voice, and then, into the hut staggered a Mexican, who bore evidences of having passed through a hard fight. His face was cut and bruised, one arm hung limply at his side, and his clothing was torn.

“What’s the matter?” cried Jerry.

Before the stranger could reply he had fallen forward in a faint.

“Bring some water! Quick!” called Ned.

“Let me see to him! I have a little liquor here!” exclaimed the professor, kneeling down beside the prostrate form.



CHAPTER IV

NEWS FROM THE MINE

By the use of the strong stimulant the Mexican was revived. His eyes opened, and he sat up, muttering something in Spanish which the boys could not catch.

The professor, however, made reply, and, at the words the stranger seemed to brighten up. He drank some water, and then, at the suggestion of Mr. Snodgrass the boys brought him some food, which the native ate as if he had fasted for a week.

His hunger satisfied, he began to talk rapidly to the professor, who listened attentively.

“What’s the trouble?” asked Jerry at length.

“It seems that the poor man lives in this hut,” explained the scientist. “Night before last some robbers came in, took nearly everything he had and beat him. Then, driving him into the forest they left him. Only just now did he dare to venture back, fearing to find his enemies in possession of his home. He is weak from lack of food and from the treatment he received.”

The boys felt sorry for the Mexican, and, at Jerry’s suggestion they gave him a sum of money, which, while it was small enough to the travelers, meant a great deal to the native. He poured forth voluble thanks.

As the boys and the professor were anxious to get under way, a start was made as soon as it was found that the native was not badly hurt, and that he was able to summon help from friends in a near-by village if necessary. With final leave-takings the travelers started off.

For several days and nights they journeyed north, toward the Rio Grande, which river separated them from the United States. Once they crossed that they would be in Texas.

“And we can’t get there any too soon,” remarked Bob, one morning after a sleepless night, passed in the open, during which innumerable fleas attacked the travelers.

It was toward dusk, one evening, about a week after having left the City of

Mexico that the boys and the professor found themselves on a road, which, upon inquiry led to a small Mexican town, on the bank of the Rio Grande, nearly opposite Eagle Pass, Texas.

“Shall we cross over to-night or wait until morning?” asked the professor of the boys. “Probably it would be better to wait until daylight. I could probably gather a few more specimens then.”

This was something of which the scientist, who rejoiced in such letters as A.M.; Ph.D.; M.D.; F. R. G. S.; A. G. S., etc., after his name, all indicating some college honor conferred upon him, never seemed to tire. He was making a collection for his own college, as well as gathering data for four large books, which, some day, he intended to issue.

“I’d rather get over on our land if we can,” said Ned, and he seemed to voice the sentiments of the others.

So it was decided, somewhat against the professor’s wish, to run the automobile on the big flat-bottomed scow, which served as a ferry, and proceed across the stream.

Quite a crowd of villagers came out to see the auto as it chug-chugged up to the ferry landing, and not a few of the children and dogs were in danger of being run over until Ned, who was steering, cut out the muffler, and the explosions of the gasoline, unconfined by any pipes, made so much noise that all except the grown men were frightened away.

There was no one at the ferry house, and after diligent inquiries it was learned that the captain and crew of the boat had gone off to a dance about five miles away.

“I guess we’ll have to stay on this side after all,” remarked the professor. “I think—”

What he thought he did not say, for just then he happened to catch sight of something on the shoulder of one of the Mexicans, who had gathered in a fringe about the machine.

“Stand still, my dear man!” called the professor, as with cat-like tread he crept toward the native.

“Diabalo! Santa Maria! Carramba!” muttered the man, thinking, evidently, that the old scientist was out of his wits.

“Don’t move! Please don’t move!” pleaded Mr. Snodgrass, forgetting in his

excitement that his hearer could not understand his language. "There is a beautiful specimen of a Mexican katy-did on your coat. If I get it I will have a specimen worth at least thirty dollars!"

He made a sudden motion. The Mexican mistook the import of it, and, seemingly thinking he was about to be assaulted, raised his hand in self defense, and aimed a blow at the professor.

It was only a glancing one, but it knocked the scientist down, and he fell into the road.

"There, the katy-did got away after all," Mr. Snodgrass exclaimed, not seeming to mind his personal mishap in the least.

This time the professor spoke in Spanish. The Mexican understood, and was profuse in his apologies. He conversed rapidly with his companions, and, all at once there was a wild scramble after katy-dids. So successful was the hunt that the professor was fairly burdened with the insects. He took as many as he needed, and thanked his newly found friends for their efforts.

Matters quieted down after a bit. Darkness fell rapidly and, the Mexican on whom the professor had seen the katy-did invited the travelers to dine with him.

He proved to be one of the principal men of the village, and his house, though not large, was well fitted up. The boys and the professor enjoyed the best meal they had eaten since leaving the City of Mexico.

"Do me the honor to spend the night here," said the Mexican, after the meal.

"Thank you, if it will not disturb your household arrangements, we will," replied the professor. "We must make an early start, however, and cross the river the first thing in the morning."

"It will be impossible," replied Senor Gerardo, their host.

"Why so?"

"Because to-morrow starts the Feast of San Juarez, which lasts for three days, and not a soul in town, including the ferry-master, will work in that time."

"What are we to do?" asked Mr. Snodgrass.

"If you do not cross to-night you will not be able to make the passage until the end of the week," was the answer.

"Then let's start to-night," spoke Jerry. "We went over the Rio Grande after

dark once before.”

“Yes, and a pretty mess we made of it,” said Ned, referring to the collision they had with the house-boat, as told of in “The Motor Boys in Mexico.”

“But I thought they said the ferry-master was away to a dance,” put in Bob.

“He is, Señor,” replied their host, who managed to understand the boy’s poor Spanish. “However, if he knew the Americanos wanted him, and would go for him in their big marvelous—fire-spitting wagon, and—er—that is if they offered him a small sum, he might be prevailed upon to leave the dance.”

“Let’s try it, at all events,” suggested Jerry. “I’m anxious to get over the line and into the United States. A stay of several days may mean one of a week. When these Mexicans get feasting they don’t know when to stop.”

He spoke in English, so as not to offend their kind friend.

It was arranged that Jerry and Señor Gerardo should go in the auto for the ferry-master, and summon him to the river with his men, who could come on their fast ponies.

This was done, and, though the master of the boat demurred at leaving the pleasures of the dance, he consented when Jerry casually showed a gold-piece. He and his men were soon mounted and galloped along, Jerry running the auto slowly to keep pace with them. The five miles were quickly covered and, while half the population of the village came out to see the strange machine ferried over, the boys and the professor bade farewell to the country where they had gone through so many strange adventures.

It was nearly ten o’clock when the big flat-bottomed boat grounded on the opposite shore of the Rio Grande.

“Hurrah for the United States!” exclaimed Bob. “Now I can get a decent meal without having to swallow red peppers, onions and chocolate!”

“There goes Chunky again,” laughingly complained Ned. “No sooner does he land than he wants to feed his stomach. I believe if he had been with Christopher Columbus the first thing he would have inquired about on landing at San Salvador would be what the Indians had good to eat.”

“Oh you’re as bad as I am, every bit!” said Bob.

Eagle’s Pass, where the travelers landed, was a typical Texas town, with what passed for a hotel, a store and a few houses where the small population lived. It

was on the edge of the border prairies and the outlying districts were occupied by cattle ranches.

Nearly all, if not quite all, of the male population came down to the dock to see the unusual sight of a big touring automobile on the ferry boat. Many were the comments made by the ranchmen and herders.

After much pulling and hauling the car was rolled from the big scow, and the travelers, glad to feel that they were once more in their own country, began to think of a place to spend the night.

“Where is the nearest hotel?” asked Jerry of a man in the crowd.

“Ain’t but one, stranger, an’ it’s right in front of you,” was the reply, as the cowboy pointed to a small, one story building across the street from the river front.

“Is Professor Driedgrass in that bunch?” asked a voice as the travelers were contemplating the hostelry. “If he is I have a letter for him.”

“I am Professor Snodgrass,” replied the scientist, looking toward the man who had last spoken.

“Beg your pardon, Professor Snodgrass. I kinder got my brands mixed,” the stranger went on. “Anyhow I’m th’ postmaster here, an’ I’ve been holdin’ a letter for ye most a week. It says it’s to be delivered to a man with three boys an’ a choo-choo wagon, an’ that description fits you.”

“Where’s it from?” asked Mr. Snodgrass.

“Come in a letter to me, from a feller named Nestor, up at a place in the mining section,” was the reply. “Th’ letter to me said you might likely pass this way on your journey back.”



CHAPTER V

TROUBLE AHEAD

“I remember now, I did write to Nestor, telling him we were about to start back, and would probably cross the river at this place,” spoke the professor. “I had forgotten all about it.”

“Well, here’s your letter,” said the postmaster. “Now allow me to welcome you to our city, which I do in the name of the Mayor—which individual you see in me—and the Common Council, which consists of Pete Blaston, only he ain’t here, in consequent of bein’ locked up for disturbin’ th’ peace an’ quiet of the community by shootin’ a Greaser.”

“Glad to meet you, I am sure,” replied the scientist politely, as he received the letter from the dual official.

“What is the news from Nestor?” asked Jerry anxiously. “Is the mine all right?”

“I’ll tell you right away,” replied Mr. Snodgrass, as, by the light of the gas lantern on the auto he read the letter.

As he glanced rapidly over the pages his face took on an anxious look.

“Is there anything wrong?” asked Ned.

“There is indeed,” replied the professor gravely. “The letter was written over a week ago, and, among other things Nestor says there is likely to be trouble over the mine.”

“What kind? Is Noddy Nixon trying to get it away from us again?” asked Jerry.

“No,” replied Mr. Snodgrass. “It appears our title is not as good as it might be. There is one of the former owners of the land where the mine is located who did not sign the deed. He was missing when the transfer was made, but Nestor did not know this, so there is a cloud on our title.”

“But I thought we claimed the land from the government, and were the original owners,” put in Ned.

“It seems that a company of men owned the mine before we did, but they sold out to Nestor and some of his friends. They all signed the deed but this one man, and now some one has learned of this, and seeks to take the mine, on the theory that they have as good a claim to the holding as we have.”

“I should say that was trouble,” sighed Bob. “To think of losing what we worked so hard to get!”

“Well, there’s no use crossing a bridge until you come to it,” Professor Snodgrass went on. “Nestor and his friends are in possession yet, and that, you know, is nine of the ten points of the law.”

“Then if we can’t do anything right away I move we have something to eat,” suggested Bob.

“It’s a good suggestion,” agreed the scientist.

They had drawn a little to one side from the crowd of townspeople while talking about the letter from Nestor, but, having decided there was nothing to be done at present, they moved toward the hotel.

“I reckon I’ve got some more mail for your outfit, Professor Hayseed—er I beg yer pardon—Snodgrass,” said the postmaster-mayor. “There’s letters fer chaps named Baker, Slade and Hopkins. Nestor sent ’em along with that other,” and the dual official handed over three envelopes.

“They’re from home!” cried the boys in a chorus. And in the glare of oil lamps on the porch of the hotel they read the communications.

The missives contained nothing but good news, to the effect that all the loved ones were well. Each one inquired anxiously how much longer the travelers expected to stay away, and urged them to come home as soon as they could.

“Now for that supper!” exclaimed Bob, as he put his letter away.

If the meal was a rough one, prepared as it was by the Chinese cook, it was good, and the travelers enjoyed it thoroughly. As they rose from the table a cowboy entered the dining room and drawled out:

“I say strangers, be you th’ owners of that there rip-snortin’ specimen of th’ lower regions that runs on four wheels tied ’round with big sassages?”

“Do you mean the automobile?” asked Jerry.

“I reckon I do, if that’s what ye call it.”

“Yes, it’s our machine,” replied Jerry.

“Then if ye have any great love for th’ workin’ of it in the future, an’ any regard or consideration for it’s feelin’ ye ought t’ see to it.”

“Why so?”

“Nothin’,” drawled the cowboy as he carefully pared his nails with a big bowie knife; “nothin’ only Bronco Pete is amusin’ his self by tryin’ t’ see how near he can come to stickin’ his scalpin’ steel inter th’ tires!”

“Great Scott! We must stop that!” exclaimed Jerry, running from the hotel toward where the auto had been left in the street. The other boys and the professor followed.

They found the machine surrounded by quite a crowd that seemed to be much amused at something which was taking place in its midst. Making their way to the inner circle of spectators the boys beheld an odd sight.

A big cowboy, who, from appearances had indulged too freely in something stronger than water, was unsteadily trying to stick his big knife into the rubber tires.

“Here! You mustn’t do that,” cried Jerry, sharply, laying his hand on the man’s shoulder.

“Look out for him! He’s dangerous!” warned some of the bystanders.

“I can’t help it if he is,” replied Jerry. “We can’t let him ruin the tires.”

“This is the time I do it!” cried Bronco Pete, as he made a lunge for the front wheel. Jerry sprang forward and the crowd held its breath, for it seemed as if the boy was right in the path of the knife.

But Jerry knew what he was about. With a quick motion he kicked the cowboy lightly on the wrist, the blow knocking the knife from his hand, and sending it some distance away.

“Look out now, sonny!” called a man to Jerry. “No one ever hit Pete an’ lived after it.”

It seemed that Jerry was in a dangerous position. Pete, enraged at being foiled of his purpose, uttered a beast-like roar, and reached back to where his revolver rested at his hip in a belt. Jerry never moved an inch, but looked the man straight in the eye.

“Here! None of that Pete!” called a voice suddenly, and a big man pushed his way through the crowd, and grabbed the cowboy’s arm before he had time to draw his gun. “If you don’t want to get into trouble move on!”

“All right, Marshall; all right,” replied Pete, the desire of shooting seeming to die out as he looked at the newcomer. “I were only havin’ a little fun with th’ tenderfoot.”

“You didn’t appear to scare him much,” remarked the town marshall, who had seen the whole thing. “You had your nerve with you all right, son,” he added, to Jerry.

“That’s what he had,” commented Pete. “There ain’t many men would have done what he did, an’ I admire him for it. Put it there, stranger,” and Pete, all the anger gone from him, extended a big hand, which Jerry grasped heartily.

“Three cheers for the ‘tenderfoot,’” called some one, and they were given with a will for Jerry, as Pete, under the guidance of the marshall, moved unsteadily away.

“I wouldn’t have been in your boots one spell there, for a good bit,” observed the postmaster as he came up. “Pete’s about as bad as they come.”

“I didn’t stop to think of the danger, or maybe I wouldn’t have done as I did,” said Jerry. “All I thought of was that he would spoil the tire, and it would take a long while to fix it.”

“Yes, and we don’t want to delay any longer than we can help,” spoke Ned in a low voice. “I’m anxious to get back to the mine and see what we can do to perfect our title.”



CHAPTER VI

ON A STRANGE ROAD

For several days they made good progress, for the roads were in fair condition. The machine was kept headed as nearly as possible toward Arizona, though they often had to go some distance out of their way to get rid of bad places, or find a ford or bridge to cross a stream.

“We’ll soon be out of Texas,” remarked Bob one afternoon, when they had passed through a small ranch town where they had dinner.

“And I think we’re going to get a wetting before we leave the big state,” put in Ned.

“I think you’re right,” agreed the professor, as he turned and looked at a bank of ugly dark clouds in the southwest. “A thunder shower is coming up, if I’m any judge. There doesn’t seem to be any shelter, either.”

As far as they could see there was nothing but a vast stretch of wild country, though, far to the north, there was a dark patch which looked as if it was a forest.

“It’s coming just at the wrong time,” remarked Jerry, who was steering. “I was in hopes the storm would hold off a bit. Well, we shan’t melt if it does rain.”

And that it was soon going to pour in the proverbial buckets full was evident. The wind began to blow a half gale, and the clouds, from which angry streaks of jagged lightning leaped, scurried forward. At the same time low mutterings of thunder were heard.

“We’re in for it,” cried Bob.

The next instant the storm broke, and the whole landscape was blotted out in a veil of mist and rain which came down in sheets of water. Now and then the darkness would be illuminated by a vivid flash of fire from the sky artillery, and the thunder seemed to shake the earth.

Jerry could barely see where to steer, so fiercely did the rain beat down. Fortunately they had time to put on their raincoats before the deluge hit them.

The provisions and other things in the auto had, likewise, been covered up

with canvas, so little damage would result from the downpour.

“Look out!” yelled Ned suddenly to Jerry. “There’s something ahead of us!”

Jerry partially shut off the power, and, as the machine slowed down, he and the others peered forward to see what the object was.

“It’s some sort of an animal!” cried Bob, who had sharp eyes. “It’s running along on four legs, right in front of the car!”

“It’s a bear, that’s what it is!” shouted Ned. “A big black bear!”

“Let me get it for a specimen!” exclaimed the professor, in his enthusiasm, not considering the size of the animal, nor the difficulties in the way of capturing it. “Let me get out! It’s worth forty dollars if it’s worth a cent!”

At the sound of the excited voices, which the animal must have heard above the roar of the storm, the bear turned suddenly and faced the occupants of the car. So quickly was it done that Jerry had barely time to jam on the brakes in order to avoid a collision.

“Why didn’t you run him down, and we could have some bear steaks for supper?” asked Bob.

“Because I don’t think it’s just healthy to run into a three hundred and fifty pound bear with a big auto,” replied Jerry. “We might kill the bear, but we’d be sure to damage the car.”

The beast did not appear to be frightened at the sight of his natural enemies. Raising on its haunches the animal slowly ambled toward the stalled machine, growling in a menacing manner.

“I believe he’s going to attack us!” exclaimed the professor. “Let me get out my rifle!”

But this was easier said than done. The weapons and ammunition were all under the canvas, and it would require several minutes to get at them.

In the meanwhile [the bear](#), showing every indication of rage [was trying to climb up on the engine hood](#), despite the throbbing of the engine, which was going, though the gears were not thrown in.

“Start the car and run over him!” exclaimed Bob.

“Back up and get out of his way!” was Ned’s advice to Jerry.

“I’ve got to do something,” muttered the steersman.

Matters were getting critical. The storm was increasing in violence, with the wind lashing the rain into the faces of the travelers. The growls of the angry beast mingled with the rumble and rattle of thunder, and the machine was shaking under the efforts Bruin made to climb over the hood and into the front seat.

“Hold on tight! I’m going to start!” yelled Jerry suddenly.

He threw in the intermediate gear and opened wide the gasoline throttle. The car sprang forward like a thing alive. But the bear had too good a hold with his long sharp claws sticking in the ventilator holes of the hood, to be shaken off.

“I should think he’d burn on the water radiator,” said Ned.

“His fur’s too thick I guess,” was Bob’s reply.

On went the auto, the boys and the professor clinging to it for dear life, while Bruin hung on, half crazed with fear and anger.

“How you going to get rid of him?” shouted Ned above the roar of the storm.

“I’ll show you,” replied Jerry grimly.

Some distance ahead the steersman had seen a sharp curve in the road. It was dimly discernible through the mist of water.

“Hold tight everybody!” shouted Jerry a second or two before the turn was reached.

Then, suddenly swinging around it, at as sharp an angle as he dared to make and not overturn the car, Jerry sent the auto skidding. The next instant, unable to stand the impetus of the turn, the bear lost its hold on the hood, and was flung, like a stone from a catapult, far off to the left, rolling over and over on the muddy ground.

“There, I guess it will be quite a while before he tries to eat up another live automobile,” remarked Jerry as he slowed up a bit.

Off in the distance they heard a sort of reproachful whine, as if Bruin objected to such treatment. Then the rain came down harder than ever, and all sight of the bear was lost.

“Let’s get out of this!” exclaimed Ned, as he felt a small stream of water trickling down his back. “Can’t we strike for those woods we saw a while ago?”

“I’m headed for them,” spoke Jerry. “I just want to get my bearings. Guess

we'd better light up, as it will soon be dusk."

After some difficulty in getting matches to burn in the wind and rain, the big search lights and the oil lanterns were lighted, and then, with four shafts of light cutting the misty darkness ahead of them the travelers proceeded.

The roads seemed to be getting worse, but there was nothing to do except to keep on. Every now and then the machine would lurch into some hollow with force enough to almost break the springs.

"Hello!" cried Jerry suddenly. "Here are two roads. Which shall we take?"

"The right seems to go a little more directly north," said the professor, peering forward. "Suppose we take that?"

"Especially as it seems to be the better road," added Jerry.

He turned the machine into it, and, to the surprise of all they felt the thoroughfare become hard and firm as the auto tires rolled over it. It was almost as smooth as asphalt, and the travelers were congratulating themselves on having made a wise choice.

All at once the rain, which had been coming down in torrents, seemed to let up.

"I believe it's clearing up," said Bob.

"No, it's because we've run into a dense forest, and the trees above keep the rain off," spoke the professor.

The others looked about them and saw that this was so. On every side the glare of the lamps showed big trunks and leafy branches, while ahead more trees could be observed.

"Why it's just like a tunnel in the woods," said Bob. "See, the trees seem to meet in an arch overhead."

"And what a fine road it is," put in Ned.

"An altogether strange sort of road," agreed Jerry. "Suppose we stop and look about before we go any further? I don't like the looks of it."

Accordingly the machine was brought to a halt, and the travelers alighted. They found it just as Bob had said, almost exactly like an immense tunnel in the forest. Beneath their feet the road was of the finest Macadam construction.

"And to think of finding this in the midst of Texas," observed Jerry.

“Some one built this road, and cut the trees to make this tunnel,” remarked the professor. “I wonder what sort of a place we have stumbled into.”

“At all events it doesn’t rain anything to speak of in here,” said Bob, “and it’s a good place to stay until the storm is over.”

Jerry, in the meanwhile had walked on ahead some distance. In a few minutes he came hurrying back. His manner showed that he had seen something.

“What is it?” asked the professor.

“Don’t make any noise, but follow me,” replied the lad.

In silence, and wondering what was about to happen, Bob, Ned and the scientist trailed after Jerry. He led them several hundred feet ahead of the automobile, and away from the glare of the lamps, the tunnel curving somewhat.

“See!” whispered Jerry, hoarsely.

“Well, I never!”

“That’s queer!”

There, about three hundred feet to the left of the main road and on a sort of side path, the travelers saw a small hut, brilliantly lighted up. Through an open window, a room could be seen, and several figures moving about in it.



CHAPTER VII

THE RESCUE OF TOMMY BELL

“I wonder who they can be, to hide off in the woods this way,” whispered Bob.

The next instant there floated out from the hut a cry of anguish. It was the voice of a boy, seemingly in great pain or fear, and the travelers heard the words:

“Oh don’t! Please don’t! You are killing me! I don’t know! I can’t tell you, for I would if I could! Oh! Oh! Please don’t burn me again!”

“It’s a gang torturing some one!” almost shouted Ned. “Let’s go to the rescue!”

He would have sprung forward had not Jerry laid a detaining hand on his arm.

“Wait, Ned,” counseled Jerry. “Some one there evidently needs our help, but we must go with caution. First we must get our guns. We may need them!”

Once more the appealing cry burst out.

“Quick!” whispered Jerry. “Professor, you and Bob go back for the rifles, and bring the bulls-eye lantern that has the dark slide to it. Ned and I will stay here and watch!”

Mr. Snodgrass and Bob lost no time. In less than five minutes they had rejoined Ned and Jerry.

“Has anything happened?” asked Bob.

“Nothing since,” whispered Jerry. “Now we will go forward. Every one have his gun ready. I will carry the lantern.”

Almost as silently as shadows the four figures stole forward, Jerry showing a cautious gleam now and then to guide them on their way. They found there was a fairly good path leading up to the hut.

They had covered half the distance when once more the cries of anguish burst out. This time they were followed by angry shouts, seemingly from several men, and voices in dispute could be heard.

“One of us had better creep forward and see what is going on inside the cabin,” whispered Jerry. “We must know what sort of enemies we have to meet.”

“I’ll go,” volunteered Bob.

“Better let me,” suggested the professor. “I have had some experience in stalking animals, and I can probably advance more quietly than you can.”

They all saw the reasonableness of this and the scientist started off. Like a cat he made an advance until he was so close to the hut that he could peer into the uncurtained window. What he saw made him start back in terror.

In the room were half a dozen roughly dressed men, all armed, and with brutal faces. The room was filled with smoke from cigars and pipes, and cards were scattered over a rough table in the middle of the apartment.

But what attracted the attention of the professor and made his heart beat fast in anger, was the sight of a small, pale boy, bound with ropes up against a big stone fireplace, on the hearth of which logs were burning.

In front of the lad stood one of the largest and strongest of the tough gang, and in his hand he held a redhot poker, which, as the scientist watched, he brought close to the bare legs of the terror-stricken lad.

Then came again those heart-rending cries:

“Oh don’t! Please don’t! I would tell you where he is if I knew! Please don’t burn me again!”

The professor’s blood boiled.

“We’ll soon put a stop to this horrible work!” he exclaimed to himself as he glided back to where the boys were and quickly made them acquainted with what he had seen.

“Come on!” cried Jerry. “We must rescue that boy!”

As softly as they could, the travelers advanced toward the hut. They found the door and, while the others with rifles in readiness stood in a semi-circle about it, Jerry made ready to knock and demand admittance.

“If they don’t open the door we must burst it in,” said the boy. “The professor and I will look to that, while you and Ned, Bob, must stand ready to rush in right after us with your guns ready. But don’t shoot unless your life is in danger, and then fire not to kill, but to wound.”

There was a minute of hesitation, for they all realized that it was taking a desperate chance to tackle such a rough gang in the midst of woods, far from civilization. But the sound of the poor boy's cries nerved them on as, once more, the pitiful appeal for mercy rang out.

Jerry sprang forward and gave several vigorous blows on the door with the butt of his gun. All at once silence took the place of the confusion inside the hut.

"Who's there? What do you want?" asked a gruff voice.

"Open the door! We want that boy!" cried Jerry.

Confused murmurs from within told that the gang had been taken by surprise.

"I don't know who you are, but whoever you are you had better move on, if you don't want a bullet through you," called the man who had first answered the knock. "This is none of your affair."

"Open the door or we'll burst it in!" cried Jerry, knowing the best way to be successful in the fight was to act quickly and take the men by surprise.

There was a laugh from within the hut. It was answered by a rending, crashing splintering sound as Jerry and the professor, using the stocks of their guns, began a vigorous attack on the portal. The door was strong enough, but the hinges were not, and, in less than half a minute the barrier had given way and, with a bound the travelers found themselves tumbling into the hut.

Instantly confusion reigned. The men shouted hoarsely, and several tried to reach their guns, which were stacked in one corner.

"Hands up!" commanded Jerry sharply, leveling his gun at the man who seemed to be the leader.

"Why, they're nothing but boys! Knock 'em out of the way!" cried one of the gang. At the same time another began creeping up behind Jerry, his intention being to grab the lad from the back and disarm him.

But Bob saw the movement, and, leveling his rifle at the fellow, told him to halt.

"I guess you've got the drop on us," growled the man whom Jerry was covering with the gun. "What's the game anyhow? Are you stage robbers?"

"We want you to stop torturing that boy," cried Jerry.

"Why, that's my kid, and I was only givin' him a taste of the rod because he

wouldn't mind me; 'spare the rod and spoil the child,' is a good saying, you know."

"Not from you!" snapped the professor. "Is this man your father?" the scientist asked the bound boy.

"Speak up now! Ain't I your daddy?" put in the leader, scowling at the boy.

"Tell the truth! Don't let him scare you!" said the professor reassuredly. "We are in charge here now. Is he your father?"

"No—no—sir," stammered the poor little lad, and then he burst into tears.

"I thought so!" commented the scientist. "Now you scoundrels clear out of here before we cause your arrest!"

"You're talkin' mighty high," sneered the leader, "but look out! This matter is none of your affair, and that boy belongs to us!"

"Take me away! Oh, please take me away! They'll kill me!" sobbed the lad.

There was such a fiery look in the professor's eye as he leveled his gun at the gang of men that they started back, evidently fearing to be fired upon.

"Come on!" called one. "We'll get some of the Mexicans and then we'll see who's runnin' things around here!"

With that the gang sneaked out of the door, leaving the boys and the professor master of the situation. Their first act was to unbind the lad, who was almost fainting from pain and fear.

"Are there any more of them?" asked Jerry.

"Yes," said the boy faintly. "There are a lot of half-breed Mexicans in the gang. They are in a hut about a mile farther up the road, where they keep a lot of horses on a ranch."

"Then perhaps we'd better get out of here while we have a chance," said the professor. "We can't fight a score or more. Let's take the boy and hurry away."

"Come on then," said Jerry. "We'll get back to the auto. I only hope these men don't discover it and damage the car."

But when an attempt to start was made it was found that the boy, who said, in response to an inquiry from Ned, that his name was Tommy Bell, was unable to walk. The ropes bound about his legs had caused the blood to stagnate in the veins.

“Here!” exclaimed Jerry. “Bob, you and Ned go ahead with the lantern, and the professor and I will carry Tommy. Step lively now!”

Moving in that order the procession started, and in a few minutes the travelers were back at the machine, which did not seem to have been disturbed. There was no sight or sound of the gang.

Tommy was made as comfortable as possible, and then there was a brief consultation.

“Which way had we better go?” asked Jerry.

“I think it would be best to turn around,” said Bob. “We’ll run up against the gang if we go ahead.”

“The best road is straight ahead through this woods,” spoke Tommy. “If you take the other your machine will get stuck.”

“Then we’ll take this one, and trust to luck not to have any trouble with the gang,” decided Jerry, as he cranked up the car.

Just as they started the moon came out from the clouds, for the rain had ceased, and, though not many of the silver beams shone through the thick foliage, it was much lighter than it had been. Jerry threw in the gear and the next instant the car glided forward and shot along the tunnel of trees, leaving the hut where Tommy Bell had been a prisoner.

“Is the Mexican camp near this main road?” asked the professor of Tommy.

“About three hundred feet in,” answered the boy, who was feeling much better.

“How many men are at it?”

“About one hundred, I guess, from what I heard them say.”

“Then I guess we’d better go past it on the fly,” muttered Jerry, as he speeded up the machine until it was skimming along at a fast rate. In a little while there was a gleam of light through the trees ahead.

“There’s the camp!” exclaimed Tommy.

A minute later the travelers were made well aware of it, for, as they whizzed past in the auto, they heard shouts of anger, mingling with the sounds of rushing feet, while an occasional pistol shot rang out, the flash of fire cutting the darkness.

“They saw us,” spoke Bob. “Lucky it was pretty dark, or they might have damaged the auto.”

“To say nothing of ourselves,” added Ned.



CHAPTER VIII

PURSUED BY ENEMIES

As the auto sped along, Professor Snodgrass asked Tommy Bell how he had come to the hut in the forest.

“Those men took me there,” replied the boy.

“And what did they try to make you do?” asked Jerry.

“They wanted me to tell them where my father was,” went on Tommy. “I could not because I did not know, and they burned me, because they did not believe I was telling the truth.”

“What did they want of your father?” inquired Mr. Snodgrass.

“They want him to sign some papers connected with some property,” went on Tommy. “I don’t know much about it, except that father used to work with those men developing a mine. It didn’t pay, and they left it, after selling it to some other men. I lived with my father, and my mother was alive then.”

The boy stopped, and, at the mention of his mother’s name began to cry softly.

“Poor little lad,” muttered the professor, putting his arm, with a sort of caressing motion about Tommy. “Don’t cry, lad,” the scientist went on, in what seemed a sort of husky voice, for he was very fond of children; “don’t worry, we’ll look out for you; won’t we, boys?”

“You bet!” exclaimed Jerry, Ned and Bob in one voice.

The auto was slowed down now, as there seemed to be no danger of pursuit.

“After mother died,” Tommy resumed, “and the mine did not pay, father started prospecting with Nat Richards and the others in that crowd. But they were bad men, and soon got the better of my dad, taking away what little money he had left.

“This ruined my father, and he grew discouraged, for he was old, and in poor health. He wandered away and I haven’t seen him for nearly a year. I traveled about, doing what little work I could get to do, until I struck Texas. One day, about a week ago, I passed a ranch, the same one we just came by. I asked for

work, and got it. Then I found the same men owned it that had ruined my father.

“As soon as Nat Richards saw me he demanded to know where dad was. I couldn’t tell, and then he promised me one hundred dollars if I would tell. He said they needed my father’s signature to a paper.

“I don’t know as I would have told them where dad was if I did know. When I kept on refusing to give them the information, Nat Richards grew ugly. He had me taken off to the hut where you found me, and said he’d starve me to death if I didn’t tell.

“I almost did die from hunger,” Tommy went on with a catch in his voice. “Then they tried torture. They burned me on the legs with a hot poker. That’s what they were doing when you came in,” and, overcome again by the thought of all he had suffered Tommy cried bitterly.

The boys and the professor did all they could to comfort the friendless lad, and, soon Tommy’s grief wore off.

“We’ll take you along with us,” said Jerry heartily, “and we’ll try to help you find your father. Where did you see him last?”

“He was in Arizona,” answered Tommy.

“That’s just where we’re headed for,” exclaimed Bob. “We’ll take you there all right.”

Jerry leaned forward to throw in the higher speed gear when there was a sudden ripping, breaking sound, and the auto began to slow up.

“What’s the matter?” asked Ned.

“Stripped the gear, I’m afraid,” replied the steersman. “This is a nice pickle to be in.”

“Won’t it run on the low or intermediate gear?” asked Bob.

Jerry tried them, and found they were all right.

“I guess we’d better stop here for the night,” he said. “We may need the high gear any minute, and perhaps I can fix it in the morning. I have a spare wheel.”

“Then let’s camp and have supper,” said Bob eagerly. “I haven’t eaten in a week by the way I feel.”

“Same here! I agree with you for once, Chunky,” spoke Jerry. “It has been a long time since dinner, but with the excitement of the storm, the bear, and

rescuing Tommy I didn't notice it before."

In a little while the camping outfit was taken from the automobile, and a fire started in the sheet-iron stove, with the charcoal that was carried to be used in emergencies, such as being unable to find dry wood after a rain.

Ned ground the coffee, while Bob went in search of water, using the lantern to aid him in the somewhat dim forest, though the moon helped some. He found a spring close at hand, and soon a fragrant beverage was steaming under the trees. Then some bacon was placed in the frying pan, and the hard tack was taken from the tin and other things prepared.

"Fall to!" commanded Ned, who was acting as cook, and fall to they all did, with a will.

"Do you often camp out and eat in the woods like this?" asked Tommy. "I think it's jolly fun," and the lad, who was about twelve years old, laughed for the first time since his rescue. He, too, was eating with an appetite that showed he needed the food.

Jerry briefly related some of their travel adventures, at which Tommy opened his eyes to their widest extent.

"Cracky! But you have had stunning times!" he exclaimed.

The meal having been finished, they began to think of getting some sleep. Blankets were brought out, and rolling themselves up in them the boys and the professor were soon in the land of nod.

It was nearly dawn when Jerry was suddenly awakened by the far off baying of a dog. At first he could not imagine what the sound was, and sat up to listen more intently. Then a long, mournful howl was borne to him on the wind.

"That's strange," he muttered. "There are very few dogs about here. I wonder what it is."

At the same time Tommy Bell roused up, and he, too, heard the sound.

"It's the gang after us!" he exclaimed. "They have a lot of hounds on the ranch! Hurry up! Let's get out of this!"

"Hark!" exclaimed Jerry, raising his hand.

Then the boys heard, faint and far off, the sound of galloping horses.

"They're coming!" cried Jerry.

His cry awakened the others, who sat up bewildered and heavy from sound sleep.

“Lively’s the word!” called Jerry. “They’re after us!”

No further explanation was needed, for all knew what Jerry meant. There was a hasty piling of blankets into the auto; the stove was packed up, and, while the travelers jumped into the car, Jerry went in front to crank it up. The cheerful chug-chug told that the machinery was in good working order, and then, the boy, leaping into the steersman’s seat, threw in the low gear for the start.

As he did so Ned glanced back and saw, coming around the bend of the forest road a score of horsemen and a pack of dogs.

“Speed her up, Jerry!” called Bob.

“I will!” was the exclamation, as Jerry leaned forward to throw in the high gear. A mournful screeching of the engine was the only response.

“I forgot! The high gear is broken!” the steersman cried. “We can only use the intermediate, and that is not very fast!”

“It’s the best we can do, though!” said Bob. “We may get away from them!”

On the intermediate cogs the auto made good speed, and, for a while, distanced the gang, the members of which, with shouts of rage, put their horses to their best effort.



CHAPTER IX

INTO THE CAVE

The sun began to peep up from beneath the eastern hills, throwing a rosy light over the earth. The woods began to thin out, and the sides of the "tunnel," which had been dense, became more open, so that glimpses of the country could be seen now and then.

The chase was now on in earnest. For some time, however, the auto kept well in advance of the horsemen, for Jerry used all the power possible on the differential gear. If the high speed one had been in working order there would have been no question of the outcome, but, for once, luck was against the boys.

Nearer and nearer came the gang on horseback. They got so close that their shouts to halt could be plainly heard. But Jerry was not going to give up. He gritted his teeth and gripped the wheel with a firmer grasp.

"We seem to be slacking up," observed Ned.

"That's what we are," spoke Jerry. "The auto is going back on us."

The car did seem to be dragging, and there was no excuse for it in the condition of the road, which was a fine level one.

"The car needs repairing," said Jerry, "and the way I have to run it isn't the best thing in the world for it."

"Do you think they'll catch up to us?" asked Bob.

"I'm afraid so," muttered Jerry. "We are going the limit now."

The thunder of the horses sounded nearer and the shouts of the pursuing gang came more plainly on the morning breeze. The auto coughed and wheezed, seeming like a man who has run far and is about to collapse. The explosions became less frequent, and finally one of the cylinders ceased to work altogether, leaving only three in commission.

"Now we're in for it!" muttered Jerry, as, by a hasty glance back he saw the men spurring their horses on.

"You'd better give up!" one of the gang shouted.

“Not yet, you scoundrels!” cried Jerry, as he advanced the sparkling lever to the final notch. This seemed to be the last straw to the auto engine, for with a dismal snort it stopped short.

“This settles it,” muttered Ned grimly. “We are done for.”

Fortunately, however, they were on a slight slope now, and the car, with the impetus it had gathered, began to glide down the hill under its own momentum.

But the horsemen were not one thousand feet in the rear and were drawing nearer. There seemed to be no help at hand and there was every indication that the boys would fall into the hands of their desperate enemies.

“How much farther can we go?” asked Tommy suddenly.

“To the foot of the hill,” replied Jerry. “Why do you ask?”

“That’s far enough!” exclaimed Tommy. “I guess we can escape them.”

“How?”

“Steer straight for that dead pine tree,” replied the young lad, “and when you get almost to it, make a wide turn to the right.”

“What good will that do?”

“There’s a big cave right at the foot of the hill,” replied Tommy. “I know for I passed it as I was tramping toward the ranch. It is large enough to take in the auto, and maybe we can hold it against the gang.”

“Hurrah!” shouted Jerry, as he shifted the wheel to conform with Tommy’s directions. “We’ll beat ’em yet!”

Straight toward the dead pine Jerry aimed, and, as he came to the bottom of the slope, he saw an opening in the bush-lined side of the hill, that told him the cave was at hand. Into it, by a skillful turn, he steered the auto, and the machine, running in about one hundred feet from the opening came to a stop, just as the horsemen came dashing up, much surprised by the sudden disappearance of those they were pursuing.

“We’re safe!” whispered Ned.

“Not yet,” said Jerry. “We must arm ourselves,” and he began to get out the rifles from the bottom of the car, and hand them around to his companions.

Outside the cavern, which was a natural one in the rocky side of the hill, there came confused shouts.

“Where did they go?” they heard a voice ask.

“Must have gone over some ledge and been killed,” was the reply.

“Then that settles it,” said the first one. “That’s just our bad luck!”

Then came a curious cry, and, by it, the boys knew their hiding place was discovered.

“Here are the tracks of the wheels!” the travelers heard some one shout. “They turned off somewhere about here.”

“Then they’re in that cave,” was the rejoinder.

“Dismount!” came a sharp order.

The boys could hear the men getting off their horses, and the animals being led away.

“Get your carbines ready!” was the next command.

“It’s time for us to act!” whispered Jerry. “We must each one take a gun, and stand at the mouth of the cave. We’ll warn them not to enter. If they persist we will have to fire, but we must try not to hurt any one mortally. Aim at their legs!”

In the half darkness of the cavern the boys and the professor each took a rifle and crept to the mouth of the opening. No sooner had they reached it than they heard the tramp of feet, and shadows told them the bad men were advancing.

“Halt!” cried Jerry, who had naturally assumed command.

“Who are you?” asked the leader of the gang.

“Never mind who we are,” replied Jerry. “We are in possession of this cave, and we warn you not to come in!”

“Big words for a kid!” sneered the leader.

“You’ll find we can back them up,” spoke Jerry. Then, in lower tones, he bade his comrades stand in readiness.

There was a consultation in whispers among the members of the gang, and then, seeming to feel that they had nothing to fear, they made a rush.

“Fire!” cried Jerry.

Remembering his instructions, the boys and the professor aimed low. To the reports of the rifles there succeeded howls of pain. Several of the gang shot back, but, as it was dark in the cave they could not see to aim, and they did no damage.

“Give them another volley!” yelled Jerry.

Again the rifles spoke, and this time, to the chorus of howls there was added a command from the leader to retreat, and the men rushed from the cave, which was filled with smoke.

“Are—are any of them killed?” asked Tommy.

“I don’t believe so,” replied Jerry. “We fired too low to do much damage. I only wanted to let them know we were ready for them.”

Waiting several minutes to see if there would be any further attack, Jerry cautiously advanced to the mouth of the cavern. In the semi-light he saw several blood stains, but the absence of any bodies told him the battle had not resulted fatally, for which he was thankful. Though the men were desperate characters, who, perhaps, would not stop at murder, the boy did not want the responsibility of killing any of them.

“They seem to have retreated,” Jerry reported when he joined the others. “But I don’t suppose they have gone for good. This probably will only make them more anxious to get Tommy away from us, for it is him they are after.”

“Do you think they want me?” asked the younger lad.

“I am pretty sure, after what you have told us about the mine, that they would give a good deal to get you,” replied Jerry. “Perhaps your signature may be as good as that of your father’s in case—in case—” and Jerry stopped suddenly.

“You mean in case dad is dead?” asked Tommy quietly.

“Yes,” answered Jerry.

“I don’t believe my father is dead,” spoke the boy bravely. “Somehow I feel that he is alive, and that I will find him. But if the gang is after me, it is not right for you all to be in danger on my account. Give me up to them, I’m not afraid—that is, I’ll try not to be. Let me go out and surrender, and perhaps they’ll go away.”

“I’d like to see myself!” exclaimed Jerry. “You don’t stir out of this cave, Tommy Bell, until we go! I’m not afraid of that gang. We’ve been in tighter places than this and gotten out; haven’t we, fellows?”

“You bet!” echoed Bob and Ned.

“Then give me a gun and let me help fight,” begged Tommy.

“Can you shoot?” asked Jerry.

“My father taught me,” was all Tommy said, and Jerry gave him a rifle, at which Tommy’s eyes sparkled.

A cautious glance from the mouth of the cave showed that the gang had withdrawn some distance away. But that they had no notion of giving up the fight was evidenced by the fact that they were constructing a camp so as to command the entrance to the cavern.

“I guess they’re going to try and starve us out,” remarked the professor. “Lucky we have plenty of provisions and ammunition on hand for a siege.”

“Well, I guess we’re just as well off here as anywhere,” observed Jerry. “We’d have to lay up a few days at any rate, to fix the machine, and it might as well be in a good roomy cave, where the rain can’t wet us.”

The boys waited an hour before laying aside their arms. Then, as the gang showed no signs of renewing the attack, they proceeded to make themselves more comfortable.

“Might as well get ready to camp out,” said Ned. “I’ll set up the stove, and we’ll have breakfast, though it is a little late.”

So while he set up the sheet iron apparatus, Jerry instructed Bob to stand guard at the mouth of the cavern, and to give instant notice of any activity on the part of the enemy.

“But what will we do about eating breakfast?” asked Bob in a sorrowful voice.

“Don’t worry about that, ‘Chunky,’” said Jerry. “I’ll relieve you, or some one will, in time to get a meal. In the meantime keep a good watch.”

Then Jerry went back to help Ned, and, at the same time, make ready to repair the machine.



CHAPTER X

ATTACKED BY A COUGAR

“I say, Jerry,” called Ned, “we’re in a sort of a pickle.”

“How’s that?”

“Why, I started to make coffee and I got along all right until I came to the water.”

“Well?”

“No, it’s not at all well. In fact we ought to have a well here.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean there’s no water in the cave!”

“Great Scott! Is that so?” exclaimed Jerry. “I never thought of such a thing. Are you sure there’s not a spring away in the rear?”

“The professor and I made a good search,” replied the temporary cook. “The cave comes to an end about three hundred feet back, and there’s not a sign of water.”

For a few seconds Jerry was silent. Then he gave an exclamation.

“I have it!” he cried. “We can use the emergency water supply on the auto. It is not very fresh, but it will do for coffee.”

“The very thing!” ejaculated Ned.

It was fortunate that the auto carried an extra tank of water, as well as one of gasoline. They had often found it useful in getting a supply of the fluid for the radiator in places far from a supply, and the reserve tank had been built with that purpose in view. It held about ten gallons. Drawing on this Ned had a supply for his coffee which was soon boiling merrily on the stove, while some canned chicken and bacon were put on to fry.

“I say, is anybody going to relieve me?” called Bob from his post on guard.

He smelled the breakfast in preparation, and it added to his hunger.

“I’ll go,” volunteered the professor. “I’m in no hurry to eat, and perhaps I may pick up a specimen or two. This cave ought to be a good place for them.”

Accordingly he took Bob’s place, and soon the four boys were eating ravenously, and with as good appetites as if a band of bad men was not outside, ready to attack them at the first opportunity.

“Now to fix the machine,” said Jerry as he rose from the ground that served as a table. “Light all the lamps, Ned, and then you and Bob come and help me. Tommy and the professor can take turns standing guard.”

It was no easy matter to take the automobile engine apart, and substitute a new gear for the broken one. It was also found necessary to insert new spark plugs, which had become covered with a coating of carbon; and the cylinders also needed cleaning, while the pistons had to be adjusted.

The afternoon was spent in working at the auto, and by night such good progress had been made that Jerry said by the next evening it would be in shape to start.

“That is if the gang let’s us,” spoke Ned.

“We’ll make a dash for it,” replied Jerry. “We needn’t fear them with the car in good order, for we can leave them behind in less than half an hour. We’ll try to escape to-morrow about midnight.”

“In the meanwhile let’s eat,” suggested Bob, and his cry brought forth the usual chaffing about “Chunky’s” appetite.

Ned started to get supper. He went to the tank of the auto to draw some water for the tea, when he gave a cry of surprise.

“What’s the trouble?” called Jerry.

“The water’s gone!” exclaimed Ned. “That’s a leak in the tank!”

They all rushed to the car. There, on the ground under the reserve tank was a muddy spot, showing where the precious fluid had dripped away. A quick examination showed there was a small hole in the reservoir.

“Now we are up against it,” murmured Bob.

“Not quite yet,” said Jerry.

“How can we get water without being shot?” asked Ned.

“There is quite a bit left in the pipe coils of the radiator,” answered Jerry. “It

will be pretty poor stuff to drink I guess, but it's better than nothing."

There was considerable of the fluid in the big brass radiator on the front of the car, and, though it was stale, and had been heated many times, as it circulated about the cylinders, still, it was better than none. Made into tea, which was served as a change from coffee, it did not taste so very bad.

But the situation was grave. With only water enough on hand to last about half a day, the plight of the travelers was a critical one.

"We'll have to have water for the car, as well as ourselves," spoke Ned. "We can't run the machine without water."

"That's so," admitted Jerry dubiously. "Something will have to be done."

After the evening meal Jerry resumed his labors on the car, working at double speed, in which he was assisted by Ned and Bob. The professor and Tommy took turns watching at the cavern's mouth.

But there seemed to be no need of this, as the men showed no inclination to make a second attack. They appeared to know that the boys were caught in a trap; a trap that contained no water. So they evidently felt sure of success sooner or later, and that without the danger of being wounded.

Jerry and his comrades worked to such advantage that shortly after midnight the auto was in shape to be used, and with the new high gear wheel in place. The car was given a good oiling, and was repacked in readiness for a quick start.

"Now if we only had water," sighed Jerry, "we could slip out, and, I believe get away."

But he knew it was useless to proceed without at least a full radiator. The extra tank, which had been repaired, could be filled later. The radiator coils were empty however. What had not been used for cooking had been made up into weak tea, as it was not considered healthful to drink the water as it came from the pipes.

"We've got to do something," said Jerry decidedly. "If we stay here much longer we'll die of thirst. If we could only make a dash and get some water we could manage. Two pails full would do."

"Let me go after them," exclaimed Tommy. "I'm not afraid. I can run fast. Maybe I can get out there by the brook, get the water and come back before any of them see me."

“No you couldn’t,” spoke Jerry, pointing to where one of the men, as sentry, could be seen, from the mouth of the cave, walking up and down near the camp fire. “If any one goes I will, and I think I’d better start.”

Bob and Ned both offered to make the dangerous attempt, and the professor insisted that he be allowed to try, as he knew how to move over ground very silently. But Jerry was firm in his determination.

“I’m going to make the try about two o’clock,” he said. “They’ll be sounder asleep then.”

As he was very tired he stretched out in some blankets until it would be time to make the try. He fell asleep soon, and the others moved away, talking in whispers lest they disturb him.

Almost exactly at the appointed hour Jerry awakened. He sat up, and, slipping a pair of Indian moccasins over his shoes, to enable him to move as silently as possible, he cautiously approached the mouth of the cavern, carrying two water pails with him.

The moon had gone down and it was quite dark, which was favorable to Jerry’s plans. As he got to the entrance of the cavern the boy looked toward the gang’s camp. There seemed to be no sign of life, and Jerry thought perhaps the sentry had fallen asleep.

As silent as a cat the lad made his way toward the stream, which he could hear gurgling and splashing over the stones. His throat was dry, for the last of the cold tea had been drunk, and his exertions had made him very thirsty. As he heard the sound of the brook he felt a fierce desire for water, so strong was it that he felt he would brave anything to get it.

Foot by foot he advanced, crouching down as low as he could. He was beginning to feel that he would be successful, and not be detected. He could see the sparkle of the water about three hundred feet away, and his parched mouth and throat seemed to be as dry as leather. He could hardly swallow.

On and on he went. Now he was about two hundred feet away and he was getting ready to make a dash for the brook.

Suddenly he heard a clicking sound, and knew it was a rifle being cocked. Next there rang out on the night air the command:

“Halt or I’ll fire!”

Poor Jerry was detected! He came to a stop, sick at heart at the failure of his

plan.

For a moment there was no other sound. The boy could not see who had discovered him, though he instinctively felt the eyes of the man on him. Suddenly there was a shaking in the tree somewhat to Jerry's left, and about one hundred feet away. Then came a rustle of the leaves on the ground and the boy made out the figure of a man, dimly, standing with rifle aimed straight at him.

"Throw up your hands!" was the next order, and, letting the pails fall to the ground, Jerry obeyed.

Then, all at once, there burst out on the air a most terrifying sound. It was a blood-curdling yell, a screech as if from some one in mortal agony. Jerry felt the cold chills go down his back.

The next instant there was a crashing sound, and, from the tree under which the man stood who had aimed at the boy a dark body shot downward.

The screech of the cougar, for such it was, mingled with the terrific yells of the sentry. Jerry dimly saw a confused tangle of man and beast. He heard the man shout for help. He heard his rifle go off, and then came sounds that told that the camp had been aroused.

The attack of the cougar had come just in time. Jerry, taking advantage of the diversion, grabbed up his pails, and running to the brook filled them with water. Then, as fast as he could go, he ran toward the cave.



CHAPTER XI

A RUNAWAY AUTO

Behind the boys sounded the yells and shouts of the men in camp, mingled with rifle shots and the screeching of several of the cougars, for, it developed, a band of three, grown desperate by hunger, had made an attack.

“Are you hurt, Jerry?” cried Bob and Ned, as, with his pails of water, the boy staggered into the cave.

“Not a bit, but I had a close shave,” was the answer. “But we must be quick! Here! Help fill the radiator with the water.”

“Can’t we drink any?” asked Bob who, like the others, was very thirsty.

“Not a drop,” said Jerry firmly. “We need every bit for the automobile. Without it we can’t get away from here, and now is the only chance we may have to escape. We can drink later.”

While Jerry and Ned filled the radiator the other boys and the professor made ready for the escape. Everything was packed up and placed in the car, which, as soon as the coil was filled, would be ready to start and dash from the cave.

“I’m afraid this is not going to be water enough,” spoke Jerry as the second of the pails was emptied into the radiator.

“Can’t I make a dash for some more? There seems to be excitement enough in the camp to keep them from watching me,” said Ned. “I’m going to try.”

There was considerable activity among the ranch men. The cougars, though wounded, seemed to have temporarily lost all fear and made attack after attack on the men, who had to fire several volleys from their rifles.

“Go ahead,” said Jerry. “I’ll start the engine slowly.”

Grabbing up the pails Ned walked from the cave.

“I’m going to help, also,” said Tommy.

“No, you stay here,” commanded Jerry. “Bob can go if he wants to.”

Bob joined Ned. They ran to the stream and had filled the pails when, just as

they started on the way back, the wounded cougars, driven from the camp, came dashing after the boys.

“Now we’re in for it!” exclaimed Ned. “Run, Bob!”

And run they did, as they had never run before, and left the beasts behind.

“Have you the water?” asked Jerry eagerly as the boys came in.

“We have!” exclaimed Bob. “And hard enough work we had getting it.”

“Good!”

Jerry hurriedly poured most of it into the radiator, though every one in the cave looked at the fluid with longing eyes.

“I must get a drink soon, or I shall go half crazy!” said the professor suddenly. “I never was so thirsty in my life.”

“I’m saving just a little bit for each of us,” spoke Jerry. “But it is a very small quantity, and will only serve to wet our mouths. If all goes well we shall soon have plenty.”

He distributed about a pint of the water among his companions, and though each one got only a little it brought welcome relief.

“Now we’re ready to skip out!” announced Jerry as he screwed the cap on the radiator tank, and increased the speed of the engine. “But first we had better take a look outside to see if any of that gang are in sight.”

The professor, who had good eyes, went to the mouth of the cave, and, coming back, reported that he could see a dark mass moving on the further bank of the stream.

“They have evidently gotten over their scare about the cougars,” Mr. Snodgrass said, “and are waiting to bag us. What are we going to do?”

“There’s only one thing to do,” replied Jerry.

“And that is what?”

“We must make a dash for it. The road is fairly good, and I guess we can speed up enough to get out of the range of their bullets in a short time. They can’t be very good shots or they would have killed the three cougars, with all the bullets they fired.”

So it was decided. They all took their places in the car, and Jerry, who, as if by mutual consent, assumed the place of steersman, leaned forward to throw in the

gear clutches.

“Here we go!” he cried. “Look out everybody!”

Slowly at first, but gathering speed, the auto moved out of the cave. The lamps lighted up the path, and, though the boys realized that the lanterns disclosed their position to their enemies, they had to use them for their own safety. It was too dark to do without them.

A few seconds later and the car emerged from the cavern. As it shot out there came a chorus of angry cries from the camp of the ranchmen, and several shots were fired, though none of them came close enough to be uncomfortable.

“Here we go!” cried Jerry again, as he increased the speed, and the auto fairly leaped forward. It swayed from side to side, and struck several ruts, so that the occupants were tossed about.

But the main thing was that they went ahead, and away from their enemies. Jerry, peering as best he could into the darkness ahead, made a course for the stream, intending to go close to it, and then run along the bank, or near it, as he had noted in the afternoon that there was a fairly good road there.

Gradually the shouts of the men, and the firing of their guns died away, and the travelers began to breathe more freely. They had made their escape, and, for the present, were safe.

“Oh do let’s stop and get a drink!” pleaded Bob.

“Not yet!” exclaimed Jerry. “Five minutes more will not kill you, and it may save all our lives,” for he did not want to slack up while there was any danger of the ranchmen coming after them.

The five minutes seemed like an hour to Bob, and the others, too, were impatient. But at last Jerry shut off the power and the machine came to a halt not far from the creek. Out scrambled the boys and the professor, and then, in spite of the danger of drinking snakes and lizards in the darkness, they all made for the stream, where they quenched their thirst from small collapsable cups which each one had been holding in readiness for just that chance.

“That’s better than an ice cream soda!” exclaimed Ned.

“You bet!” agreed Bob heartily. “I never tasted such fine water.”

“Very good!” said the professor.

“I guess we can stop long enough to lay in a supply now,” remarked Jerry.

“We can start off again in five minutes, and in that time they can not catch up to us.”

So the radiator was filled to the top, and the auxiliary tank likewise, while the boys indulged freely in the liquid, thinking, perhaps, they might have some of the characteristics of the camel, and could drink enough at one time to last a week or more.

Then they started forward again, and the auto soon carried them beyond the possibility of capture that night. They camped out in the open, and, in spite of their rather exciting adventures they slept soundly, awaking as the sun rose.

Ned was given a chance to run the machine, and he took the front seat with Tommy, who was delighted to be there for the first time. They had not been going long before they found the land was rising.

“We’re coming into the mountains now,” said Jerry.

Up a long hill, with a gradual ascent, puffed the auto. On either side were broad fields where tall Pampas grass was growing, amid which thousands of grasshoppers, or some similar insect, were singing.

“Better be sure your brake is in good working order,” suggested Jerry, as they came to the steep descent on the other side. “We don’t want any more accidents.”

Ned tried the ordinary brake. There was a clicking sound, followed by a snapping one.

“Brake’s busted!” exclaimed Jerry. “Try the emergency!”

Ned did so. That, too, gave out only a faint screech, and did not grip the axle as it should.

“Look out now!” yelled Jerry. “We’re in for it!”

An instant later the auto began to move forward at a rapid pace. All Ned’s efforts to check it were in vain.

“We’re running away!” cried frightened Tommy. “I wish I’d stayed in back!”

“Keep to the middle of the road!” Jerry cried above the noise of the auto rushing down the steep hill. At the bottom the road took a sharp turn, and the hearts of all beat rapidly with fear as they beheld it.



CHAPTER XII

TOMMY FINDS A FRIEND

So rapidly did the machine shoot down the descent that it almost seemed the curved road was rushing to meet the travelers. Again and again Ned tried the brakes, but without avail. He had shut off the power at the first indication that something was wrong.

“We can never make that turn!” exclaimed Bob.

“I’m afraid not,” agreed Jerry.

They were all clinging to the sides of the car, while Ned gripped the steering wheel with a desperate hold.

“Look out for the turn!” cried the professor as they came to the sharp curve.

But, to the surprise of all, Ned, instead of shifting the wheel in at least an attempt to swing around the half circle kept straight on the course. The boy had resolved on another plan.

Directly in front of him, and to the left of the road was a big field of tall waving Pampas grass, the plumes nodding eight feet above the ground. It was shut off from the thoroughfare by a frail wooden fence.

“I’m going to steer into the grass!” cried Ned. “It’s our only chance!”

The next instant there was a splintering sound as the auto crashed through the fence, which offered no more resistance, because of the great speed, than a paper hoop does to a circus performer. Then it seemed to the travelers as though they had been plunged into a tossing, waving sea of grass.

The tall Pampas plumes and the stems wrapped themselves about the boys and the professor, almost choking them by the pollen that was shaken off. The feathery-like tops tickled them in the eyes, nose and mouth as, carried by the runaway auto, they were dashed through them.

But the grass had just the effect Ned had intended and hoped for. It clogged the wheels of the machine, and though soft, offered so much resistance that the machine soon began to slow down, as does a locomotive when it runs into a

snow drift.

After plowing through the field for about two hundred feet the car came to a final stop, with a little jolt.

“Santa Maria! Caramba!” yelled a voice and then followed such a string of Spanish that the boys thought they had run down a whole camp of Mexican herders.

“Did we hit any one?” asked Jerry, peering forward as well as he could through the tall grass.

“Caramba! Hit any one! The Americano pirates have killed Don Elvardo!” exclaimed the unseen one. “You have broken—!” and then followed such a confusion of words that the boys could not understand.

“Have we broken your leg?” asked Jerry, speaking in Spanish this time.

“Santa Maria! No! You have broken the cigarette I just rolled!” and with that the grass parted in front of the auto, and a little Mexican, wearing a suit profusely trimmed with silver braid, showed himself.

The boys felt like laughing as they beheld the woe-begone face of Don Elvardo. In his hand he held the remains of a cigarette.

“Behold!” he went on tragically. “I am peacefully walking in my field, looking over my crop of Pampas, when I feel a desire to smoke. I sit me down and roll a cigarette. I am about to light it, when—Santa Maria! There is a rushing sound of ten thousand imps of darkness. My grass is mowed down as if by a sickle in the hands of a giant. I turn in fear! I see something coming! I can not tell what it is, for the tall grass hides it! I turn to flee! The infernal thing keeps after me! Presto! Caramba! It hits me so—”

Don Elvardo illustrated by slapping himself vigorously on the thigh.

“Then I fall! I am crushed! I am killed! I die in pain and fear! I arise! Behold, senior Americanos, my cigarette is broken!”

“We’re very sorry, of course,” said Jerry politely. “But you see our auto ran away on the hill, and as the brakes would not work, the only thing to save our lives was to steer into this field. We did not know you were here, or we would have sent around to your house to ask permission to enter,” added the lad sarcastically.

“But I am here!” snapped the Mexican.

“So we see,” admitted Jerry. “We are willing to pay for any damage we have done.”

The Mexican’s eyes sparkled, and he rubbed his hands as if in anticipation.

“That alters the case,” said Don Elvardo. “The Americano senors are welcome ten thousand times to my field. I bid you welcome. I salute you. Pay. Oh, yes! It is but right that you should pay!” Again he rubbed his hands together.

“About what would you say it was worth?” asked Ned.

“I am no miser,” replied the Mexican. “I do not wish to insult my friends the Americanos. I will only charge them for the damage to the grass. The broken fence is of no moment. Pay me one hundred dollars and I will say no more about the affair.”

“He’s a robber!” said Jerry in a low voice. “We haven’t done five dollars’ damage to his crop and the fence combined.”

“I guess he will whistle for his one hundred dollars,” said Ned.

Don Elvardo heard him.

“So!” he exclaimed. “You will not pay me one little hundred dollars for the damage. Caramba! Then it is I who shall at once lodge a complaint with the authorities. We will see if there is a law in the land, or if crazy Americanos can spoil a poor man’s crop and pay nothing. We shall see!”

“Offer him ten dollars,” suggested Bob. The boys consulted together a minute or two. They wanted to be fair, but they did not care to be robbed. The professor had taken no part in the discussion. He seemed to be intently examining the tall grass on either side of the machine.

Suddenly the scientist stepped from the side of the car, and rapidly made his way to the front, where Don Elvardo stood. Mr. Snodgrass gazed intently at the Mexican. Then he gave a leap toward the Don, exclaiming as he did so:

“There it is! Right on your hat! Don’t move an inch or it will jump away! I have it now! This is indeed a lucky day! Just a second and I’ll have it!”

With that the professor made a leap toward the Mexican with outstretched hands.

“Santa Maria! Diavolo?” screamed Don Elvardo as he saw the scientist coming for him. “Caramba! It is to murder me that you come!”

Then, calling for help at the top of his voice, the Mexican turned and fled in terror, his course being marked through the tall grass by the wave-like motion he imparted to the plumes in his haste.

“Why—why what in the world ails him?” asked Mr. Snodgrass.

“He probably thought you were going to choke him to death,” said Jerry with a laugh. “In fact your actions were not so very far from giving that idea.”

“Why bless my soul!” ejaculated the professor. “All I wanted was to get a fine specimen of a blue grasshopper from his big hat, where the insect had alighted. It was worth about forty dollars.”

“I saw some just as good in a city once for twenty dollars,” put in Tommy, “and they had more silver braid on.”

“What! A grasshopper with silver braid on?” cried the scientist.

“I thought you said his hat was worth forty dollars,” went on Tommy, somewhat embarrassed.

“I was speaking of the blue grasshopper,” explained Mr. Snodgrass. “My, I am sorry to have missed that one.”

“But you did a good service in scaring this Mexican away, as you did the chap with the ox cart,” spoke Ned. “He might have made trouble for us.”

“And we had better get out of here while we have the chance,” said Jerry. “He may come back any minute.”

Accordingly the auto was turned around, and run over the same course by which it had entered the field. Otherwise it would have been almost impossible to have advanced, so thick was the grass. The road regained, the machine was sent along it at good speed, for fear Don Elvardo or some of his friends might appear.

“We had better stop and fix the brakes,” suggested Ned, after an hour’s run.

“And get dinner at the same time,” put in Bob. “We’ll kill two stones with the same automobile, as the poem says.”

“I guess you’re a little twisted,” remarked Ned, “but your intentions are good.”

A halt was made under a big tree, near a little stream, and soon a good fire was built and dinner was being cooked.

It was found that some nuts had become loose on the brakes, and this trouble Jerry soon remedied. After the meal they sat about and talked a while.

“We’ll soon be in New Mexico,” remarked Jerry, consulting a small map.

“Will we?” asked Tommy. “I’m so glad.”

“Why?”

“Because there’s a man who was once a friend of my father at a place called Las Cruces. It’s near the Rio Grande river. If we could go there I know Mr. Douglass would take care of me.”

“Then we’ll go there,” said Jerry. “It will be right on our route.”

They all agreed this would be a good plan. That night the travelers stopped in a small village where they had good beds and meals. They resumed the journey next day, and for several days thereafter met with no mishaps as they speeded toward Las Cruces. They had left the lowlands and were well up among the hills by this time.

One day, just at dusk, they rolled into Las Cruces and, after a little inquiry found Mr. Douglass, who was very glad to see Tommy.

“I will be glad to take care of him for the present,” he said.



CHAPTER XIII

THE COLORED MAN'S GHOST

The travelers found the town where Tommy's friend lived such a pleasant place that they spent several days there. It was a thriving place, and the auto was a source of endless wonder to most of the inhabitants, who had never seen one.

Had the boys wished they could have made considerable money taking parties out in the car for short trips, but they knew they had a long journey before them and they wished to save the machine all they could. It needed some repairs which were made by the local blacksmith, and then the travelers were ready to move forward again.

"I don't know how to thank you for all you did for me," said Tommy, as the boys were leaving. "You saved my life. Maybe I will have a chance to do you a good turn some day. If I have, you can bet I'll do it."

"We know you will, Tommy," said Jerry. "Well, good-by. I hope we see you again."

"Same here!" exclaimed Bob and Ned.

They did not know how soon they were to meet their friend again, nor in what a peculiar manner he was able to aid them in return for what they had done for him.

For several days the auto skimmed along through a somewhat lonely country. The roads were not very good and a number of times progress was so slow that only a few miles were made between sunrise and sunset. Now and then the travelers would come to a lonely cabin, where they could replenish their food supply or get a night's lodging. But, in the main, they had to depend on their own resources.

Occasionally they would reach a little settlement, where their arrival never failed to produce as much excitement as a fire and circus combined. Every day brought them nearer their gold mine, concerning which they were very anxious, as they had heard nothing further from Jim Nestor.

"The mine may have been taken away from him for all we know," chafed

Jerry as he fretted at the delay caused by bad roads.

“We’ll hope for the best,” said Ned. “No use crossing a bridge until you come to it.”

The travelers were well up among the lower mountains now, though compared with the heights they had still to scale the range was one of mere hills. One evening just at dusk, after a particularly hard day of travel, during which the auto had broken down several times, necessitating minor repairs, the Motor Boys came to a place where two roads divided.

“I wonder which we had better take?” asked Bob, who was at the wheel.

“The right,” said Jerry.

“The left,” advised Ned.

“Toss up a cent,” suggested the professor. “Make it heads right and tails left.”

They did so. The coin came down heads up, and Bob turned the machine to the right. It had not proceeded far on this road when, about a mile ahead, the travelers saw a couple of log cabins.

“Well, there’s shelter for to-night, at all events,” Jerry remarked, “and, I hope, supper as well. I’m getting a little tired of bacon and coffee.”

They found one of the cabins occupied by a negro, his wife, and seven children, the oldest a boy of sixteen and the youngest a little girl, just able to toddle.

“Good evening,” greeted the professor, “can we get supper and lodging anywhere about here?”

“I reckon I kin fix yo’ up on th’ eatin’ question, boss,” remarked the darkey as he stood in the cabin door as the auto drew up, “but I ’clare t’ goodness I can’t find no room t’ stable that there rip-snortin’ beast ye got.”

“We don’t expect you to take the auto in,” spoke Jerry. “If you give us beds for ourselves, or even a room to sleep in we’ll pay for it and glad to do it.”

“Land sakes, I’d like t’ ’blige yo’, deed ’n I would boss,” went on the negro, “but my cabin am jest crowded t’ th’ doah wif me an’ my fambily. Yo’ am welcome t’ suthin’ t’ eat, but land a’ massy whar I’s e goin’ t’ have yo’ sleep hab got me cogitatin’.”

“What’s the matter with that other cabin?” asked Ned.

“What other cabin?” asked the negro, not turning to look in the direction of the second shack, about a quarter of a mile down the road.

“That one,” went on Ned, pointing to it. “There may be room in it.”

“Oh I reckon there’s room enough,” replied the colored man, “only—well to tell you th’ truff, boss, it ain’t exactly healthy t’ sleep in that cabin, er even t’ talk about it. ’Scuse me but I don’t want even t’ look at it.”

“Why not?”

The colored man seemed to hesitate. He fidgeted and seemed ready to go back into his house.

“Why not?” asked Ned again.

“Kase it’s—it’s got ghosts an’ it’s hanted!” exclaimed the negro, “an’ it ain’t safe fer any one to go near it, let alone sleep in it.”

“Nonsense,” remarked the professor. “There are no such things as ghosts.”

“Yo’ wouldn’t say so if yo’ went to that there cabin after dark,” persisted the colored man. “’Tain’t safe t’ talk about it, so yo’ll please ’scuse me.”

“But what sort of a ghost is it?” asked Jerry.

“It’s big an’ it’s white, an’ it rattles chains an’ groans sumthin’ turrible,” said the negro.

“Did you ever see it?” asked Ned.

“Did I ever see it, boss? Couse I done see it. Only t’other night it near skeered me to deff.”

“How long has it been there?” asked Bob.

“’Bout a week I reckon,” replied the negro. “Ever since Rastus Johnson moved away from th’ cabin.”

“I guess we’ll take a chance with the ghost for the sake of spending a night under shelter,” said Jerry. “Meanwhile we can get supper here.”

And a fine supper they had. Mrs. Jones, wife of the colored man, proved an excellent cook. She fried some chicken, made some corn bread, and that, with preserves and some good coffee, made up a meal which the travelers voted one of the finest they had eaten in many months.

“Can we get breakfast here, also?” asked Jerry when supper was finished.

“If yo’ am alive,” replied Jones solemnly.

“If we’re alive? What do you mean?”

“Well I reckon ef yo’ sleeps in that hanted cabin, there won’t be any of yo’ left t’ want a meal in th’ mo’nin’,” explained Jones. “It’s takin’ yo’uns’ lives in yo’ hands t’ go nigh it suah yo’ is boahn!”

All they could say did not induce the man to change his mind. He was plainly afraid of the cabin and the “ghost.”

But the travelers were determined not to let a little thing like that interfere with a chance to sleep under shelter. Accordingly they covered the auto with the tarpaulin provided for that purpose, and moved their blankets into the deserted cabin, which was fairly clean and in good condition. One of the big oil lamps gave sufficient light.

The cabin contained only two rooms, one on the ground floor, and the other above it, reached by a movable ladder.

“I think we had better sleep upstairs,” said Jerry. “The door doesn’t fasten very securely, and besides I think it will be drier there.”

So they mounted the ladder, spread their blankets out on the floor, and were all soon fast asleep. None of them expected to be disturbed, for they laid the story of the ghost to an overwrought imagination of the colored man.

So it was with a sudden feeling of terror that Jerry was awakened in the middle of the night by hearing a deep groan, seeming to come from the room below.

He sat up, rubbing his eyes to further awaken himself, and then he became aware that Bob was also sitting up. He could see because of the moonlight streaming in through a window.

“Did you hear anything?” asked Jerry.

“I thought so,” answered Bob.

“I thought I did,” put in Ned, who, it seems had been awakened at the same time the others were.

Once more there sounded an unmistakable groan. It came from the ground floor, and was so loud, penetrating and, in spite of the would-be bravery of the boys, so awful coming out of the darkness, that they shuddered.

“What’s that?” asked the professor, who also, this time, was roused from his slumbers.

Before either of the boys could answer the groan was repeated and this time it was followed by the unmistakable clanking of chains.

“The colored man’s ghost!” whispered Bob.

“Nonsense!” exclaimed the professor, but, no sooner had he spoken than there came another weird noise, and the chains rattled louder than ever.

“Light the lantern,” whispered Jerry. “We must see what it is. Perhaps it’s only some one playing a joke.”

“Let me take a look before you make a light,” suggested the professor. “I can look down the ladder hole.”

Softly he crawled over to the opening and peered down. As he did so the noises were repeated. The professor uttered an exclamation.

“It bears the other descriptive marks of the creature the negro told about,” he said, crawling back to where the boys were huddled together. “It is big and white and it seems to be trying to climb up the ladder.”

“Wait until I get my revolver,” whispered Jerry. “We’ll soon see if it’s a ghost or not.”

“Don’t fire,” cautioned the professor. “It may be some one trying to scare us, but we have no right to fire at any one.”

“I’ll give ’em a warning, at any rate,” said the lad. He went to the opening and called down:

“Tell us who you are or I’ll shoot, do you hear?”

A groan and the clanking of chains was the only answer. This was followed by a violent agitation and shaking of the ladder.

“Bang!” went Jerry’s revolver. He had fired into the air.

Succeeding the report there was a silence. This was broken by a further clanking of chains. Then came a crash, and when the echo of this died away the sound of feet running away could be heard.

“Pretty solid footsteps for a ghost,” commented Ned.

“Look! Look!” cried Bob, pointing out of the window.

There, running down the moon-lit road the boys saw a big white mule, to the neck of which was fastened a chain that rattled with every step.

“There’s the ghost,” said the professor. “I thought I recognized the voice as that of a quadruped with which I was familiar. The animal has probably broken loose from the field and came here in search of food.”

“Well it certainly scared me all right,” admitted Bob. The others did not commit themselves, but there was no doubt but that they had several heart-flutters.

“I wonder what that crash was?” asked Ned.

The professor glanced down the hole leading to the first floor.

“The ghost made it by kicking our ladder away,” the scientist replied. “I wonder how we can get down.”

But the boys did not worry about this, being too sleepy. Soon they were all snoring again, and did not awaken until the sun was streaming in the window.



CHAPTER XIV

TROUBLE WITH A BAD MAN

“This is a nice pickle!” exclaimed Bob, who was the first to rise.

“What’s the matter, lost your collar button?” sleepily inquired Jerry.

“No, but the mule knocked the ladder down, and we’ll have to jump or stay here.”

“It isn’t far to the ground in this shanty,” remarked Jerry. “Go ahead and drop down.”

“It may not be very far,” said Bob, “but I don’t want to take the chance.”

“Afraid you’ll sprain your ankle?”

“No, but I don’t want to fall into the cistern.”

“Cistern? What are you talking about?”

“Well,” went on Bob, “there’s a cistern right under this ladder opening. The mule pulled the cover off last night, and whoever drops down is going to land goodness knows where.”

The others soon confirmed what Bob had said. When the cabin was built a cistern had been sunk in the middle of the ground floor. This had been covered, and the ladder rested on it when the travelers went to bed, but the mule, probably in search for a drink, uncovered it.

“Can’t get down without a ladder,” observed Ned.

“What’s the matter with jumping from one of the outside windows?” asked Jerry.

They thought the idea a good one until they saw that the only one there was opened onto a pile of sharp rocks, into which even a jump of fifteen feet might be dangerous.

“What’s to be done?” asked Bob.

“Guess we’ll have to wait until Jones comes to see if we are dead,” replied Jerry. “Then he can cover the cistern and raise the ladder.”

“I guess we’ll have a long wait for Jones,” commented Ned. “He’s so afraid of this place that he’ll never come within hearing distance of it.”

“Let’s yell out of the window,” suggested Bob.

They did so, uniting their voices in a volume of sound. It seemed to have no effect though, for there was no movement about the colored man’s cabin.

“Once more,” urged the professor.

This time they produced a result, for, down the road they could see Jones come to the door of his shack and peer out. Thereupon they waved their hands to him, and in a few minutes the colored man was standing as close as he seemed to dare to come to their shelter.

“Is yo’ all daid?” he asked in awed accents.

“Not quite all of us,” answered the professor, “but we will be unless you come in and hoist the ladder for us.”

“Did th’—th’ ghost knock it down?” asked Jones.

“It did,” replied Bob, solemnly.

“I knowed it! I knowed it! Maybe you’ll believe me next time. Golly! I ain’t goin’ t’ stay here,” and Jones was about to run off down the road.

“Here! Come back!” commanded the captives, and the colored man reluctantly did so.

“I doan laik t’ stay round yeah!” pleaded the negro. “‘Tain’t no ways healthy. What yo’ done want, anyhow?”

“We want you to hoist the ladder for us,” said the professor. “Come now, don’t be silly. The only ghost there was, and we saw it, was an old white mule with a chain on its neck.”

“Co’s e it were! Dat’s de form it took when I seed it!” cried Jones. “But it can take on any shape, dat ghost can. Next time it’ll be a lion er a tiger er a elephant. Monstrous terrible things, ha’nts is. So de ghost done knocked de ladder down! I knowed it would do suthin’.”

Amid a show of genuine fear the colored man entered the cabin, and after replacing the cistern cover cautiously raised the ladder. Then he ran out as if the ghost were after him.

“I guess we’ll never be able to convince Jones that there isn’t a ghost here,”

said Jerry as they came down and started down the road toward the colored man's cabin, where they were to have breakfast.

"Here's something that may prove to him that the mule was the ghost," spoke Ned, picking up a horse shoe, which was on the cabin floor.

They showed it to the negro, but he only shook his head.

"It looks like a hoss shoe, dat I admit," said Jones, "but it's enchanted. It'll turn inter a snake er a tiger er suthin' terruble 'fore long. I don't want nothin' t' do with it," and he cast it into the bushes by the side of the road.

The excitement of the night had taken none of the travelers' appetites away, and they made a good meal. Then, once more they took the road, disappearing in a cloud of dust, while Jones, his wife, and the seven children stood and stared in wonder.

They traveled all that day with only an occasional glimpse of civilization in the shape of some house or cabin. No villages were reached, it being a centre of vast grazing lands, where only a lonely herder, or, perhaps two, remained to guard the cattle. That night they camped in the open, and found it rather uncomfortable, for it began to rain about midnight.

"I wish we were back in the cabin, with the ghost-mule and everything else," muttered Jerry, as he tried to find a dry spot to lie down on.

But troubles can not last forever, and morning came finally, bringing a clear day and a bright sun which was very welcome.

Breakfast over they took the road once more. About noon they came to a small town that boasted of what was called the "Imperial Hotel."

"I suppose we'd better try the Imperial," suggested Ned. "It don't look very scrumptious, but you can't always tell by the appearance of a toad how far he can jump."

The auto drew up in front of the inn with a noise that brought a score of men from the barroom.

"Jumpin' Gila Monsters and rattlesnakes!" cried one of the men, evidently a miner from his dress. "I've read about them Satan go-carts, but I never believed in 'em. Sakes alive, but they do look funny without a hoss in front."

He and the others gathered about the car, asking so many questions that it took all the boys and the professor as well to answer them. When curiosity had been

partially satisfied the boys went into the hotel. While there was nothing to make a weary traveler glad he had found it, the place was not as bad as many where the Motor Boys had stopped. They had a good meal, and decided to rest a few hours before proceeding.

It was along about three o'clock. The crowd of men in the barroom had become larger as new comers arrived. It was also noisier and loud voices, and occasional threats to shoot, made the travelers think it was about time to move on.

They were about to go to their machine when they were approached on the porch where they were sitting, by the miner who had first remarked about the auto. He had evidently been drinking more than was good for him, and was in a quarrelsome mood.

"If you don't want to play with me you needn't," he called, evidently to some one inside. "I can find some one to shuffle the cards with me. Here, you kid"—to Jerry, "you come an' we'll have a little game."

"Thank you, I don't play," said Jerry quietly.

"What's that?" came the sharp return.

"I said I didn't play."

"Why hang my buttons! You got to play when I tell you to," cried the miner. "Pete Simmons ain't used to bein' told no. Here, sit down to this table an' deal the cards," and he grabbed Jerry by the arm, and attempted to force him into a chair.

"Let go my arm!" exclaimed Jerry.

"You do as I tell you or I'll make you!" exclaimed the brute. "I'm used to havin' my way!"

"Take your hand off!" commanded Jerry, drawing back his fist, for he was strong and hot tempered.

"Now be nice, be nice!" sneered the man.

"Let go of him!" exclaimed Ned coming forward and standing beside his chum, while Bob also ranged up alongside. "We'll all take a hand in this if you force us to."

"I can tackle the three of you with both hands tied behind my back," cried the miner, flushing with anger at being defied by the boys.

“Count me in too,” spoke Professor Snodgrass, joining the lads. “I don’t want to fight, but I will if I have to.”

Now the professor, though a mild man, was, by reason of his out-of-door life, in fine physical condition, and no mean antagonist, which fact the miner saw.

“Oh well, I was only foolin’,” the ugly chap remarked with a poor attempt at a smile. But his face showed his rage. He moved away in a few seconds, and shuffled to the end of the porch, where he soon fell asleep on a bench.

Bob looked over and saw him, as the boys were discussing the program for the remainder of the day.

“Let’s play a trick on that brute,” said Bob.

“What kind?” asked Jerry.

“You watch,” replied Chunky. “You’ll see some fun.”

Now it happened that the professor had among his collection of specimens several large stuffed snakes, for he was an expert taxidermist. There were also several horned toads and big lizards. Bob got several of the ugliest ones and, with the aid of the scientist, who entered into the plan to pay a well deserved lesson to the miner, arranged the things about the sleeper, on the bench and on the floor of the porch.

By this time most of the crowd at the hotel was aware what was going on, and, as few of them had any too much love for Simmons they waited the outcome with interest. When the reptiles were placed in a circle about the sleeping miner, one of the men fired his revolver in the air. At the sound Simmons awoke.

At first he did not notice the reptiles, as he was on his back, staring up at the sky. Then he suddenly sat up, and caught a glimpse of the ugly looking things. For a moment he seemed to be in doubt as to what he beheld. Then he let out a yell that could have been heard almost a half mile.

“Wow!” he cried. “Take ’em away. I’ll never drink another drop! Honest I won’t! Oh! Oh! the horrible snakes! I’ll shut my eyes so I can’t see ’em!”

But when he opened them again the reptiles were still there.

“Oh! Oh! I see ’em still!” he yelled. “Take ’em away, somebody, please do. Oh I forgot! They ain’t real! I only imagine I see ’em!”

He got up on the bench and was dancing about in terror. Then he drew his revolver, and was about to fire into the midst of the snakes.

“He’ll ruin my specimens!” cried the professor.

One of the men ran forward, and began collecting the reptiles. Simmons saw them being gathered up, and noticed that they were not wiggling. Then the truth of it dawned on him, and he knew he had been fooled. His companions laughed loud and long. But Simmons, unable to stand the jokes and jibes he knew would be poked at him, leaped over the porch railing and ran down the road as fast as he could go.

“Serves him right!” was the general verdict.



CHAPTER XV

THE STORY OF LOST LAKE

The trick Bob had played seemed to be much appreciated among the crowd of miners and herdsman who were gathered at the hotel. They laughed loud and long over the sight Simmons had presented.

“I guess he’ll know better than to fool with the next lad that comes along in one of them choo-choo wagons,” was the hotel proprietor’s comment.

Bob gathered up the specimens that belonged to the professor and they were put in the car, together with a fresh supply of provisions that were purchased at the village store.

“I guess we’ll be traveling,” suggested the professor. The boys agreed with him, for though they knew the pleasures of sleeping beneath a roof, yet the character of the men who stayed at the hotel was so rough that they feared further rows. So, in spite of the entreaties of the hotel keeper they started off, having inquired the best roads to take.

Through the afternoon they bowled over a well elevated table land. The air was fine and bracing. Off in the distance to the west could be seen the first ranges of the big mountains.

“That’s where our mine is,” said Jerry, his eyes shining.

“Maybe it isn’t ours after all,” put in Bob.

“Now there you go, Chunky. What do you want to call up unpleasant subjects for?” asked Ned reproachfully. “Anyhow it’s our mine until some one takes it away from us, and I guess they’ll have quite a fight, with Nestor on guard.”

The others thought so too. Jerry, who was steering, was sending the auto forward at a fast clip, when the professor, who always had his eyes open called out:

“What’s that just ahead of us? Looks like a bear.”

“Where?” asked Ned.

“Right in line with that big rock,” went on the scientist, who had very good

eyes and could see a long distance.

“It’s only a tree stump,” spoke Bob.

“I didn’t know tree stumps could move,” went on Mr. Snodgrass, “for this one is certainly coming toward us. It’s not a bear after all,” he continued, now that the object was nearer. “It’s a bull! That’s what it is! It looks as if it meant to go for us!”

The boys could now see that the beast was one of the big, long-horned western cattle. It had evidently strayed from the herd, or had been made an outcast because of a bad temper and a perpetual desire to fight. The latter seemed more likely, for, as the auto proceeded, and the bull came on, lessening the distance between the two, a defiant bellow of rage sounded.

“I hope he don’t try to ram us,” spoke Jerry. “We don’t want any more collisions.”

“See if you can’t run away from him,” suggested Ned.

By this time the bull was about one hundred yards away. It was coming straight for the auto. Jerry opened the muffler and at the sound of the explosions the bull stopped short.

At this point the road ran in a sort of depression, with hills rising on either side. It was rather narrow, so there was no chance to turn to one side. Jerry had to bring the machine to a stop or else run the risk of hitting the bull. He thought the animal might run away if it saw the machine coming toward him, but there was nothing sure about this.

“Well, this is a regular hold-up,” said the professor. “I wonder whether the bull wants to collect toll?”

The animal seemed to be growing angrier and angrier every minute. It bellowed loudly, pawed the earth with its hoofs, and shook the lowered head, armed with sharp horns. Occasionally the keen points would tear up the ground.

“I wouldn’t want him to strike one of our tires,” remarked Ned. “It would be all up with it.”

“Hurrah! I have it!” cried Bob at length.

He dove beneath the rear seat and pulled up a shining object.

“The ammonia squirt gun!” he exclaimed. “The same we used on the hold-up tramps. Give the bull a dose of it!”

“Good idea,” commented Jerry.

The bulb of the automatic pistol was still filled with the fiery liquid, for the boys kept it loaded in readiness for use. Bob handed it over to Jerry. The latter took careful aim, and pressed the rubber. A fine stream of the powerful stuff struck the bull full in the face.

With a bellow that fairly shook the ground near-by the bull reared up in the air, and coming down on all fours snorted with rage, shook its head to rid its eyes of the terrible burning, and then dashed madly away.

“Now I guess we can get past,” remarked Bob, “and get some supper. I’m as hungry as a bear.”

A good fire was soon started and Ned began to prepare the meal. While the others were setting out the dishes, or getting ready for the night camp, since it seemed there was no place for shelter in the neighborhood, the travelers were startled by a voice:

“Evenin’ strangers,” called a tall, thin man who strolled down the slight hill at the foot of which the party were encamped. “Have you got a bite to spare?”

“Plenty,” replied the professor cheerfully. “Come right along. Supper will be ready in a little while. Are you hungry?”

“Hungry? I should say so. I haven’t had a bit to eat for two days, except what berries and old nuts I could gather.”

“What’s the matter? Get lost?” asked Jerry.

“Exactly,” replied the stranger. “My name’s Johnson,” he went on. “I was prospecting up in the hills, and got lost there.”

“Anybody with you?” asked Ned.

“Nary a soul; I’m all alone. I used up the last of my grub in trying to find the trail, and I guess I’d been looking for it yet if I hadn’t heard the noise of your steam engine here, and smelled the cooking. I s’pose you’re huntin’ for it, same as me.”

“Hunting for what?” asked the professor, struck by Johnson’s manner.

“Why Lost Lake, to be sure. Nobody comes out this far unless they’re huntin’ for the lake, but you’re the first to come in a steam car without rails.”

“Well, it’s a free country,” remarked the scientist, wishing to evade giving a

direct answer, in the hope of learning something. "I guess we have a right to hunt for the lake."

"Of course, of course you have, strangers," went on Johnson. "No offense. Have you struck a trace of it yet?"

"Not yet," replied Mr. Snodgrass. "To tell you the truth," the professor went on, "we don't know much about this lost lake."

"Nor no one else," said Johnson. "I'll tell you all I know, which isn't much. I've been looking for it 'most a year now."

"Suppose we have supper first," suggested the professor as he noted the eyes Johnson was casting at the food. "We can talk afterward."

"That's the best word I've heard in a good while," said the newcomer.

He ate with a rapidity that left no doubt about his hunger. Nor were the others far behind him, as the crisp air of the mountain region had given them all famous appetites.

"Now for Lost Lake," spoke Jerry when all had their fill.

"It's supposed to be in those mountains over there," began Johnson, pointing to the range off in the west, now dimly discernible in the dusk. "It's said to be a beautiful sheet of water, with high peaks all around it. It was discovered forty years ago by a prospector, and he came to the nearest village with the news. But when he went to lead a party back they couldn't find the trail. Ever since then people have tried to find Lost Lake, but no one has ever succeeded. Many have been killed trying."

"But why does any one want to find a lake hidden in the mountains?" asked Mr. Snodgrass.

"Yes, tell us?" asked Ned.

"Why, for the gold on its banks, of course," said Johnson. "Didn't I say that? I meant to. The man who discovered it said there were pebbles of gold on the shores. He brought back a pocket full to prove it. I got the fever quite a few months ago, but nothing has come of all my efforts, and this time I nearly died. It was terrible up in the mountains. There's not a soul there I believe."

"And you didn't even get a glimpse of the lake?" asked Ned.

"Nary a look, young man. But I'm sure it's there. I'm going back to town, get a new outfit and some provisions, and have another try."

He was another example of how the gold fever grips one.

“Maybe we’ll come across the lake, though we’re not looking for it,” said Jerry.

“Maybe you will,” assented the prospector. “That’s generally the way. The first man was not hunting for it, but he came upon it one night when the moon was shining. If you do find it, look out for the old hermit, that’s all.”



CHAPTER XVI

A LONELY CABIN

“What hermit?” asked Jerry.

“Why you haven’t heard half the story of Lost Lake,” went on Johnson. “There’s supposed to be a sort of wild man who lives on the shores of the lake, and he murders travelers. At least that’s the yarn they tell.”

“Was the hermit always there?” asked Ned.

“No, only the last few years,” replied Johnson. “He is said to be an old man with white hair. But I don’t believe that part. Let me find the lake and the gold, and I won’t worry about hermits.”

The prospector camped with the travelers that night. They were all up early the next morning, and, at the professor’s suggestion the boys gave Johnson plenty of provisions to last him until he could get back to civilization.

“Maybe you would like to go along with us and look for the lake?” suggested Bob.

“No, thank you,” replied Johnson. “I’m afraid your chances of finding it are slimmer than mine are. I’ll have another try all by myself. I’m much obliged for the help you’ve given me.”

Then, shouldering his pack, he started off down the trail, while the travelers, packing their things in the auto, set forward again.

The boys talked about little save the story of Lost Lake, but the professor was too busy arranging his latest specimens to join in the conversation.

“I’d like to find it and see the wild hermit,” said Bob.

“I don’t s’pose you’d care anything about the gold,” put in Ned.

“Of course I would,” replied Bob. “But we’ve got one gold mine now, what do we want of another?”

“It might be well to have a second in case we lose the first,” Jerry ventured. “Nothing like having plenty while you’re at it.”

“I wouldn’t like to be a hermit,” went on Bob. “Think of always being hungry.”

“Chunky is thinking of misers, I guess,” laughed Ned. “There’s nothing to prevent a hermit from living off the fat of the land. If it wasn’t for being lonesome I’d be a hermit for a while.”

“Stop the auto!” called the professor suddenly. “I just saw a fine specimen of a snapping turtle scoot across the road. I must have it. It’s worth about twenty dollars to me. Stop the car! I must get out!”

Ned, who was running the auto, shut off the power and the machine came to a stop. Before it had ceased to move Mr. Snodgrass had leaped out and was running back. He began a hurried but careful search over the ground. Then he was seen to spring forward.

“He’s got it, I guess,” remarked Jerry.

An instant later there came a howl from the scientist, who was hidden from sight by the tall grass.

“Help, boys! Help!”

“What’s the matter? Won’t he let you catch him?” cried Ned.

“He’s caught me!” yelled the professor. “Come quick and bring a knife to cut his head off with!”

The boys piled out of the auto in a hurry, Jerry stopping to grab up a big carving knife from the camp utensils.

When they came up to the professor they hardly knew whether to laugh or not. The turtle, which was a big one, had grabbed the scientist by the thumb, and was clinging so tightly that it was suspended in the air, swaying to and fro. Meanwhile Mr. Snodgrass was dancing about in pain.

“Why don’t you take hold of the turtle’s shell in the other hand, and you won’t feel the weight so much!” called Jerry.

“I can’t,” replied the professor. “I have a rare specimen of a toad in my other hand, and I don’t want to lose it. Oh boys! Hurry up, and pry the turtle’s jaws open, but don’t hurt him, for he’s valuable.”

“Can’t you put the toad in your pocket?” asked Ned, knowing the scientist had no scruples about loading his garments up with all sorts of things. “Then you would have one hand free.”

“I never thought of that,” said Mr. Snodgrass. “I can do that, can’t I?”

He did so, and, once the toad was secure he took hold of the turtle, which relieved his lacerated thumb from the dragging weight.

“He won’t let go!” exclaimed the professor, after a vain attempt to pull the turtle loose. “It is a genuine snapper, and they have a grip like a bull dog. I am glad I found it, in spite of the pain,” he added, though just then, the turtle took a fresh hold and the professor squirmed in agony.

“Here; I’ll cut its head off,” said Jerry, coming forward with the knife.

“No, no!” exclaimed the professor. “It is too valuable to spoil. Just take the point of the blade, and pry the jaws open while I hold it steady.”

Jerry tried to do this, but the turtle only seemed to grip the tighter, and the professor’s thumb was bitten through nearly to the bone.

“What shall I do?” wailed Mr. Snodgrass. “I don’t want to kill it.”

“I have it!” exclaimed Ned. “There’s a little puddle of water over there beside the road. Dip the turtle in it, and he’ll think he can swim. Then he’ll let go.”

“Good!” cried the professor as he proceeded to put the plan in operation. “Then I can save him alive.”

The scheme worked well. As soon as the turtle felt the water it let go, and started to swim off. But the puddle was too shallow, and the professor, watching his chance, grabbed the reptile again. This time he took care to catch it at the middle of the shell, where the turtle could not reach around and bite.

“I have it, after all,” remarked the scientist as he deposited his prize in a box, and proceeded to put some salve and a rag on his thumb. “It’s a rare specimen. I’m glad I got it.”

“And we’re all glad we didn’t get it,” spoke Jerry with a laugh in which the others joined. But the professor took it good naturedly. He was used to such accidents he said.

Resuming their journey, the travelers made only one more stop, that at noon, to get dinner. They had seen no signs of human habitation, and, as the afternoon wore on, and no house or cabin was seen, they began to feel that they might as well prepare to camp out again.

As they were descending a gentle, sloping hill that led down into a small valley, just as the sun was setting, they saw, about a mile ahead a lonely cabin.

The sight of smoke coming from the chimney told them there was some one at home.

“I hope whoever lives there can accommodate us,” remarked Chunky. “My appetite’s getting the upper hand of me again.”

“It don’t look large enough to hold us all,” observed Jerry.

“There’s a barn, or some sort of building, in the rear,” remarked Ned. “Some of us can use that if the man or woman lets us.”

A few minutes later the auto came to a stop in front of the cabin, which was indeed a lonely one, not another dwelling, large or small, showing in the whole valley.

“Good evening,” greeted an old man, with snow-white hair falling over his shoulders. He came to the door of the shack, and seemed to regard the coming travelers as a matter of course. “I am glad to see you,” he went on. “You are just in time.”

“Time for what?” asked Mr. Snodgrass.

“For the great final and successful experiment,” proceeded the aged man. “The test is about to begin. Come in and see me make gold from common earth. At last I have found the long-lost secret!”

The eyes of the lonely man glowed with a strange light, and he seemed so excited that the boys did not know what to do.

“Humor him,” advised the professor in a whisper. “He is probably a harmless lunatic. Let him have his way, and pretend to agree with all he says.”

“Will you come in?” went on the old man. “I must proceed with my work.”

“We’ll be glad to,” went on the scientist. “That is, if we will not disturb you at your labors.”

“My labors are now ended,” the man said. “I have worked for twenty years on the secret of making gold from the baser metals. At last I have the correct method. I will be a millionaire in another month. But come in! Come in!”

The boys, obeying Mr. Snodgrass’s advice, went in, the scientist following them. They saw that the cabin, though small, was neat and clean. Nearly all of the first of two rooms was occupied by a large, rudely made furnace, while on a table near it stood all sorts of chemical apparatus. On the furnace a pot was boiling furiously.

“Now for the last act in the drama of life,” said the aged man. “See, I place in the pot these pieces of brass,” and he showed the travelers some chunks of the yellow stuff. He put them in the pot, from which arose a cloud of steam.

“Next I throw in this powder, which I have labored on for years. It is the secret that men would give their lives for.”

He threw the powder into the pot, which boiled more furiously than before, and a white cloud of steam arose. Then it died away, and the pot seemed to cool off.

“Now for the gold!” exclaimed the chemist.

He lifted the pot from the furnace, and, holding it with some thick cloths poured the water off into a hole in the ground floor of the cabin. Out toppled the pieces of brass which had been thrown in, but while they had been dull before, they now glittered with the yellow gleam of gold.

“The test! The test!” exclaimed the old man in a voice that trembled with eagerness.

He placed one of the yellow pieces on the table, and put a few drops of gold-testing acid on it. There was a little hissing sound, and then, on the shiny surface of the piece of metal there came a dull black spot. The old man uttered a despairing cry.

“Another failure!” he exclaimed. “It is brass still. I thought it would turn to gold! I must have made a mistake in mixing the powder.”



CHAPTER XVII

THE INDIAN AND THE AUTO

For a few moments the scientist who hoped he had discovered the fabled power to transmute metals stared at the result of his latest trial. He appeared lost in thought. Then he seemed to recollect that there were strangers present.

“I am sorry my experiment did not succeed,” he said in a more quiet voice than he had yet used. “I hoped to show you what I can do. Well, I must try again. I think I know where I made the error. I had too much soda in the powder. I will use less next time.”

“We are sorry to interrupt your experiments,” put in the professor, “but we are travelers, and our object in stopping here was to find out if you could take us in for the night.”

“Gladly,” replied the old man. “There is a barn in the rear, but it has not been occupied in years; not since I came here. You are welcome to use that. Some of you can spend the night in the rear room. As for me I shall not go to bed. I must start at once and make up some fresh powders.”

“I think perhaps we had all better sleep in the barn,” said the professor. “Then we will not disturb you at your labors.”

The truth of it was Mr. Snodgrass saw that the aged man was not altogether right in his head, and he preferred not to be too near in case the fellow should suddenly become violent.

“Just as you like, just as you like,” was the reply to the professor’s decision, and the chemist seemed to be dreaming over some problem he was trying to solve.

“May we cook some of our food on your stove?” asked Jerry.

“Why certainly. I beg your pardon for not mentioning supper,” spoke the man, “but you see I am so used to getting a bite whenever I need it, so as not to interrupt my work, that I forgot there is such a thing as hospitality. Make yourselves at home, and, if you find anything in the cupboards help yourselves. Meanwhile please excuse me if I do not join you. I must go out and gather some

roots and herbs I need in my experiments.”

He left the cabin, and, after bringing in some provisions from the auto, having first ascertained that there were few in the cabin, the travelers proceeded to make a meal.

“Do you suppose he can be the hermit of Lost Lake?” asked Bob.

“Well, he’s certainly a hermit,” spoke the professor, “but I don’t believe there’s a lake of any kind about here. Certainly if he was the hermit of the lake he would not be away off here. No, I am inclined to think we shall never see the lost lake or the hermit either.”

“Do you think it will be safe to stay here all night?” inquired Chunky.

“I think so,” was the professor’s reply. “You see we will be out in another building, and we can fasten the door. If he tries to get in, which I am sure he will not, he will make noise enough to awaken us.”

“We could mount guard,” suggested Ned.

“It will not be necessary,” Mr. Snodgrass said.

Nor did the travelers find it so. After their meal, having left a good supply of victuals for the old man in case he came back, they retired to the rear building where they slept soundly.

After breakfast, which the old man did not spend more than five minutes over, the travelers prepared to resume their trip.

“You had better stay one more night,” urged the owner of the cabin. “I feel sure that I shall be successful to-night. I have discovered a new root. See, I call it gold threads,” and he held up some bulbs that had been dug from the ground. Clinging to them were small yellow fibres or roots. “I found them last night, down in the hollow by the mineral spring,” the man went on. “I am sure they are just what I need. Please stay; won’t you?”

But the professor told him, as gently as possible, that they must keep on. So, after bidding the gold-seeker good bye, and wishing him success, the boys and Mr. Snodgrass proceeded, the auto puffing along at a good rate.

The weather continued fine and the air was bracing and cool, for they were well up among the foothills now. During the morning the road led up a gentle slope, but at noon they camped on a sort of ridge that marked the divide. On the other side was a vast plain, bounded at the further side by tall mountains.

It was well along in the afternoon, when having descended to the plain, the travelers found themselves bowling along a fine road, on either side of which were rolling fields. Mile after mile was covered, everyone enjoying the trip very much. The professor, however, was beginning to show signs of uneasiness. He fidgeted about in his seat, and seemed unable to remain quiet.

“What’s the matter?” asked Bob at length.

“To tell you the truth,” said the scientist, “I want to get out and get some specimens, but I did not like to ask you, for I do not want to delay the party.”

They all voted that the professor should be given a chance to get as many specimens as he wanted. Accordingly Jerry brought the car to a stop, and the boys and the scientist got out.

As the engine had not been running as smoothly as was desirable Jerry did not shut off the power, merely throwing out the gear clutches. He said he wanted to have the cylinders warm up, and so the engine was left going, though the car itself stood still.

The professor was soon busy gathering insects of various kinds from the tall grass, and even crawling on his hands and knees over the ground. The boys walked some distance off, to stretch their legs, for they were a little tired of sitting still so long.

Suddenly Bob, who happened to glance back toward the auto, uttered a cry.

“Look!” he shouted. “Some one is stealing our car and going off in it!”

The others looked. The sight that met their eyes was enough to astonish any one. Climbing into the automobile was a big Indian, attired in gay colored blankets, a rifle slung across his back, while near him stood a Pinto pony, clean-cut and wiry.

While they watched they saw the red man seat himself comfortably at the steering wheel, reach forward to throw the gear clutch in place, and then the car moved off, taking the Indian with it.

“Here! Come back!”

“Stop that auto!”

“Get out of that!”

These were some of the things the boys yelled at the bold thief. But all of no avail. The Indian threw in the second gear, and the auto went faster than before.

“Come on! We must catch him!” cried Jerry, and he began to run in the direction the auto was fast disappearing in, down the road.

“We can never catch him,” called Bob.

“Yes we can! He can’t know anything about running an auto!” panted Jerry. “He’ll put on the brake or pull the wrong lever next, and the machine will stop!”

“That is unless he blows it up first or smashes it,” said Bob.

“What’s the matter?” asked Mr. Snodgrass, appearing at this juncture.

Bob was the only one left to tell him, as Jerry and Ned were running down the road at top speed. But it seemed that their race would be useless, for the auto was now running on third gear. And, strangest of all, [the Indian seemed to know how to operate it](#). He kept a straight course, and the puffing of the exhaust told Jerry that the engine was running to perfection, with a good supply of gasolene, and the spark coming regularly.

THE INDIAN SEEMED TO KNOW HOW TO OPERATE IT.
THE INDIAN SEEMED TO KNOW HOW TO OPERATE IT.

“Who—ever—heard—of—an—Indian running—an—auto,” panted Ned.

“Running—away—with—one—you—mean,” said Jerry, his breathing labored.

Further and further away from the pursuing boys the auto went. It seemed hopeless to keep after it, but neither Jerry nor Ned would give up. They realized what it meant to lose their machine, though they could not understand how an Indian, in all his wild regalia, would think of getting into an auto.

Suddenly there sounded down the road the patter of hoof beats.

“Maybe that’s more Indians,” said Jerry turning around and slowing up in his running.

“No,” he added, “it’s Bob on the Indian’s pony. I wonder you or I didn’t think of that.”

“He couldn’t catch up with the auto if he had two ponies,” growled Ned.

“The only chance is that the gasoline may give out, or the sparker refuse to work, or that he may run into a sand bank,” lamented Jerry.

“And there don’t seem to be much chance of either taking place right off,” put in Ned. “Hark! What’s that?”

From down the road sounded the *Toot! Toot!* of the auto horn.

“It sounds as if he was coming back,” said Jerry. Just then Bob caught up to them on the pony.



CHAPTER XVIII

LOST LAKE FOUND

“Let me past! I’ll catch him!” cried Bob.

“Wait a minute! Maybe that’s him coming back?” replied Jerry.

Sure enough the next instant the auto, which had been lost to sight by reason of a turn in the road, came into view.

Straight up the highway it came, the figure of the Indian, wrapped in his blanket, with his headdress of feathers, an altogether brilliant figure, seated at the wheel; a strange enough combination as any one will admit.

The red man acted as though he had been used to running autos all his life. He sat straight as an arrow, his hands grasping the wheel, which was sending the car straight for the boys.

“He’s just doing this to taunt us!” exclaimed Jerry. “I have a good notion to take a shot at one of the tires with my revolver and scare him into stopping.”

“Don’t do it! You might kill him,” said Ned, “and you wouldn’t want to do that. But what does he mean by stealing the car, and then bringing it back?”

A few seconds later the auto drew up in front of the boys, who had come to a halt. With an ease that bespoke long experience the Indian brought the machine to a stop, and then, while the lads looked on, so full of wonder at the whole occurrence that they did not know what to say, the red man grunted:

“Heap fine wagon. Ugh! Indian like um, he buy um! How much?”

“Look here!” burst out Jerry, so angry that he hardly took note of what the red man had said. “Do you know you are a—”

Then a strange thing happened. Wrapping his blankets closely about him, and drawing himself up to his full height of over six feet, the Indian said calmly:

“I really beg your pardon for the unwarranted liberty I took with your car, but when I saw it standing out here, so far from civilization, I could not resist the temptation to take a ride. I trust you will overlook it.”

For a moment the boys were speechless, for the Indian they had supposed one from the half-wild plain tribes, and whose every appearance indicated that, had spoken in English as cultured as that of a college professor.

“What—why—when—where?” stammered Jerry, and the Indian burst into a laugh.

“I see I must explain,” he said. “I am not what I seem.”

“Aren’t you an Indian?” asked Ned.

“A full blooded one, and the chief of a tribe,” spoke the red man. “But I am not the half dime library sort.

“You see,” he went on, “I have just come back from the school at Carlisle, where I am taking a post graduate course. I felt a sudden longing to don the dress of my ancestors, and roam the broad fields. I did so, starting from my home on the reservation this morning. I came along and saw the auto. As I said, the temptation was too strong to resist. I got in and took a little spin, as you saw. I am sorry if I caused you annoyance, or made you fear your machine had been stolen.”

The eyes of the Indian twinkled and, beneath the paint on his face, the boys could see a smile coming.

“But how in the world did you learn to run a car?” asked Jerry.

“Easy enough,” was the answer. “I acted as chauffeur for several months this vacation to earn money enough to continue my studies. I got to be quite an expert. That is a fine car you have.”

“Well I’m stumped!” exclaimed Bob.

“How do you like my pony?” asked the red man. “I think we made a sort of unfair exchange, though, in spite of the fact that the animal is valuable. Now let me apologize once more, and then I will take my animal and go home.”

“You are welcome to the ride,” said Jerry. “We were so surprised at first that we took you for a thief.”

“I don’t blame you,” spoke the Indian. “The sight of a red man in an automobile is enough to make any one wonder. Well, heap big chief, Whistling Wind in the Pine, must go.”

“Is that your name?” asked Ned.

“It’s my Indian one,” was the answer, “but at the school I am known as Paul Rader. Now let me bid you good day, and a pleasant journey.”

Then, before they could ask him to take a ride with them, the boys saw the Indian leap on his pony, from which Bob had dismounted, and ride away at a smart gallop, his blanket flying out behind him in the wind.

“Well, that’s the limit!” exclaimed Ned. “To think of a wild-civilized Indian playing a trick like that.”

“I certainly thought he was as wild as they come,” put in Bob. “I was afraid it was all up with us.”

Then the professor appeared and they told him the story.

“I wish I had met him,” said the professor.

“What for; did you know him?” asked Jerry.

“No, but he would probably be able to tell me where to get some fine specimens,” remarked the scientist.

In a short time they were all in the auto again, and were bowling along over the table land, the machine humming in a way that told that the cylinders were working well. They camped for supper, and then, as it was a fine moon light night they determined to continue on slowly, as they wanted to make up for lost time.

The moon rose early, a big silver disk shining among the trees, when the autoists started on their night journey.

“This is great!” exclaimed Bob, who seemed to have forgotten his desire for a bed under shelter. “Wouldn’t it be fun to have a lot of Indians chase us now?”

“It might if they were tame ones,” put in Jerry, who was steering, “but excuse me from any wild ones.”

The road soon began a gentle ascent, and the auto ran more slowly up the hill. The road, too, became narrower, winding in and out. The trees, which had been scattering, were thicker, and the travelers could see they were getting well up among the mountains.

“How late are you going to travel?” asked Bob of Jerry.

“Until nearly midnight,” was the answer. “The moon begins to go down then and it will not be very safe. But I think we ought to cover as big a distance as

possible while we can. We have had delays enough.”

The only noise, besides the puffing of the machine, were the cries of owls, the chirping of crickets and katy-dids, with, now and then, the howl of a wolf or fox. In spite of the number in the party, there was a feeling of loneliness about being so far from civilization among the wilds of the mountain region.

Up and up went the car, until the ascent became so steep that Jerry was obliged to run on the low gear. This made progress slow, and, because of the uneven road, so risky, that it seemed unwise to proceed further that night.

“I’ll slow up when we get to the top of this hill,” said Jerry, “and we’ll go into camp.”

But he reckoned without knowing what sort of a hill it was, nor did he calculate on the auto failing to stop as soon as he expected. For that was what happened. Reaching the summit of the slope Jerry shut off the power.

But something went wrong with the mechanism. The auto continued on, slowly to be sure, but with enough momentum to send it over the brow of the hill. Then it plunged down on the other side, gathering speed every minute.

“Is she running away?” asked Ned. “Seems so to me.”

“She’s not behaving as well as she should,” replied Jerry, “but I have her under control. The brake is working all right,” which fact he soon ascertained.

Faster and faster, however, in spite of the brake, did the auto plunge down the slope. Jerry kept his head, however, and was working to bring the machine to a halt. All at once Bob, looking up, saw where the road made a sudden turn to the left.

“Look out for that!” he cried, pointing.

Jerry tried to make the turn, but the steering wheel suddenly became a little stiff, so that, instead of the car being turned to the left, and around the bend, it kept straight on.

There was a crackling of brush and tree branches, and the big machine left the road and began plowing up the side of a slope, around the lower edge of which the road wound.

“Duck!” cried Ned, as a tree branch hit him in the face.

They all did so, and the next instant the big machine crashed through some briars, bending down several saplings in its journey. Then, having exhausted the

momentum, the auto came to a stop, at the summit of the little slope, and Jerry jammed on the brakes to hold it there, the band this time gripping the axle firmly.

“Look! Oh look!” cried Ned, pointing ahead and down below them.

There, in a sort of basin formed by high hills, lay a body of water, sparkling and beautiful in the moonlight, the shadows of tall black mountains reflected in its calm surface.

“It’s Lost Lake!” exclaimed Jerry, softly. “Boys! We have found Lost Lake! I am sure of it!”

For a few seconds no one spoke after that, for they were all lost in wonder at the beauty and strangeness of the sight. It was so quiet that it seemed almost as if it was but a picture painted by a master’s hand.

Suddenly Bob, who was staring intently at the upper end of the lake, grasped Ned by the arm.

“See,” he whispered. “What’s that? That thing in white?”

CHAPTER XIX

THE GHOST OF THE LAKE

They all looked to where Bob pointed. At first they could make out nothing, but Bob insisted that he had seen some tall, white object moving.

“It was just like the description of ghosts,” he said, with a queer little laugh.

“I see it,” said Jerry, softly. “Right by the big white birch.”

“Sure enough,” remarked the professor.

Then they all beheld a tall white form in the pale moonlight, gliding from tree to tree, on the shore of the lake.

“Look, it is picking up something from the shore,” said Ned. “Maybe it’s the hermit the miner told us about, gathering gold.”

“Nonsense,” said Jerry. “It’s probably a bit of fog, or it may be a white fox, or a wolf.”

“No fox or wolf is as big as that,” insisted Ned. “I’ll bet it’s the hermit.”

“Whatever it is, it’s gone now,” put in Bob.

And, sure enough, the object suddenly disappeared among the trees, and there was nothing in sight but the lake, the mountains and the moonlight.

“Well, we seem to have stumbled onto the lake,” remarked Jerry. “If the auto had not misbehaved we would have taken the regular road, and Lost Lake would still be lost. As it is we have found it.”

“I hope we find some of the gold, as well,” put in Ned. “We may need the yellow pebbles if our mine is gone.”

“Whatever we do, we shall stay here until morning,” said Jerry. “It will be a good place to camp, anyhow, gold or no gold.”

So they all busied themselves in preparing to stay there for the rest of the night. A fire was built and a midnight supper was soon in preparation. They had good appetites, and, tired with the day’s journey and events, they got out their blankets and slept soundly.

By daylight the lake was seen to be a large sheet of water, rather irregular in outline, with many small bays and coves. Shimmering in the sunlight the water made a beautiful picture.

“Here goes to see if there are any golden pebbles on the shore,” remarked Bob, with a whoop as soon as he had crawled from the improvised bed. He did not have to stop and dress for the travelers slept in their clothes.

Chunky climbed down the slope, along a rather rough path to the water. Some time later Jerry and Ned were about to follow, when they heard Bob yelling at the top of his voice.

“What’s the matter?” called Jerry.

“Have you found the gold?” cried Ned.

“Maybe the hermit has attacked him,” suggested the professor.

They all ran to the water’s edge. When they reached the shore Bob was nowhere in sight.

“Hi, Bob! Where are you?” cried Jerry looking around.

“Here!” exclaimed Chunky, suddenly, bobbing up from beneath the little waves about one hundred feet from shore.

“Did you fall in?” asked the professor, anxiously.

“No, I jumped in,” replied the boy. “I’m in swimming. Come on in, the water’s fine!”

“Good for you!” called Ned and the next instant he was undressed and splashing out toward Bob. Jerry soon joined them, and even the professor took a dip. The water was somewhat cool, but after they were once in it was invigorating, and they swam about for half an hour, greatly enjoying the luxury of a bath.

“Hark! What was that?” asked Ned, suddenly.

There came a whirring of wings and a rustling of the leaves of the bushes off to the left. Then a bevy of birds sailed through the air.

“Partridge, or some similar bird, I would say,” was the professor’s opinion.

“And there goes a big rabbit!” cried Bob.

“Yes, and there’s another!” exclaimed Jerry. “Say, we have struck a game country if we haven’t a gold one. I say, what’s the matter with having a hunt?”

“Good!” cried Bob and Ned.

“I think it would do no harm to replenish the larder with something fresh,” remarked the professor.

Accordingly, after breakfast, guns were gotten ready and the boys and the professor tramped off through the woods, taking care not to go too far from the lake, as the trees were thick, and, as there were no trails blazed, it would be easy to get lost.

Ned bagged the first partridge, and Bob came second, getting two in succession. Jerry had hard luck, for twice he missed easy shots. A little later, however, he bowled over a plump rabbit, and followed it up with a second. Then Ned got one, and Jerry succeeded in bagging a couple of fine birds.

Some of the game was served for dinner, which was eaten by a campfire, and very fine it was voted. Then some was packed away in salt, against a possible time when provisions might be hard to get.

“What do you say, shall we stay here another night or push on?” asked Jerry, about the middle of the afternoon.

“If you ask me,” said the professor, “I should say to remain here. I saw a number of fine and rare specimens I would like to gather.”

“The only thing is, perhaps we had better join Nestor as soon as possible,” remarked Ned.

“I think a few days’ delay can do no harm,” Mr. Snodgrass said. “From the tone of Nestor’s letter I would say there was no immediate danger of the mine being claimed by others.”

“Then we’ll stay,” said Jerry. “I would like to investigate the lake a little more. We did not go very far along the shore. Perhaps there might be an outcropping of gold somewhere around this locality.”

“And maybe we will see the hermit, or the ghost, or whatever it is,” added Ned. “Let’s stay.”

“Then we ought to rig up some kind of shelter,” went on Jerry. “It may rain in the night, and it’s not the most pleasant thing in the world to sleep in a mud puddle.”

“We can build a shack of boughs,” said Bob.

And this they did. They had often done the same thing before. Branches from

a pine tree, stacked up against a sapling cut to fit between the crotches of two trees, with the same sort of boughs for a roof and floor, made a very good shelter. Rubber blankets on top insured the rain being kept out, and with woolen coverings for inside, beds were made that were very comfortable.

When these preparations had been made it was growing dusk. While Bob and Ned were getting supper, and the professor was busy arranging his specimens gathered that day, Jerry removed one of the big search-lights from the auto.

“What are doing that for?” asked Bob.

“I’m going to try and find out what that white thing is,” said Jerry. “I’m going to rig up a lantern in front of the shack, facing the lake, and if the hermit or whatever it is, shows up, I’m going to flash the light on it.”

“Maybe it won’t come to-night,” suggested Bob.

But it did. It was along about midnight when Ned felt a light touch on his arm.

“What’s the matter?” he asked, sitting up.

“Come on,” whispered Jerry. “I see something down by the lake, and I want to investigate. Be careful, don’t make any noise.”

Bob and the professor were both sleeping so soundly that they did not hear Jerry and Ned leave the shack.

“Where is it?” asked Ned.

“There,” replied Jerry, pointing to a spot about three hundred feet away, and on the shore of the lake. “It was there a minute ago, but it’s gone now. Watch, it will come back.”

He busied himself over the search-light, making ready to light it quickly and flash the beams on the ghost or hermit, or whatever it should prove to be.

“There it is!” called Ned, in a hoarse whisper. “Right by that big rock that runs out into the water.”

“I see!” said Jerry, softly.

There was a hissing sound as Jerry turned on the acetylene gas, a snapping sound as he lit the match, and then a slight puff as the vapor ignited. The next instant a glaring shaft of light shot down toward the lake, glint on a strange object.

There in the glare of the white beams stood the figure of an old man. His hair

was snow white, and hung down long over his shoulders. He seemed bent with age, and this was made more pronounced because he bore a heavy bag on his back. He was right at the edge of the water.

The sudden glare had startled him, and he turned in surprise and fear to see whence it came. His face stood out in strong relief, and Jerry started, for he dimly remembered seeing some one who looked like that some time before.

Then, all at once the stillness of the night was broken by a shrill scream. Ned and Jerry were startled, and Bob and the professor, in the shack, were awakened.



CHAPTER XX

THE MYSTERIOUS WOMAN

“Look!” exclaimed Ned.

Then, as he and Jerry watched what took place in the circle of light, they beheld a woman, her long hair streaming down her back, run from the woods up to the old man. In her hand she held a big club, and with it she endeavored to strike the aged man. The latter dropped his sack, and seemed to engage in a struggle with the woman.

“He’s killing her!” exclaimed Ned. “This is the hermit we were warned against.”

“Come on!” cried Jerry. “We must see what it means.”

But, just as he started down the slope, the search-light went out, leaving the place in utter blackness, for the moon was under a cloud. When Jerry had succeeded in getting the light going again, the man and woman were nowhere to be seen.

“Well, that certainly was a queer sight,” remarked Ned. “I wonder what it all means?”

“I guess we’ll have to stay here until we find out,” said Jerry. “It looked as if there was going to be trouble, at one time.”

“What’s all the excitement about?” asked the professor, coming out of the shack, followed by Bob.

Jerry related what they had seen, and the professor agreed that it would be better to remain and make an investigation.

“I say, you fellows are mean to go off alone and have a cracking adventure like that,” objected Bob, in a grieved tone.

“We didn’t want to disturb your slumbers,” said Ned.

“Don’t eat so much supper next time, and you will not sleep so sound,” advised Jerry. But Bob was not to be appeased until promised that the next time Ned and Jerry went ghost hunting they would take him with them.

Having been so thoroughly aroused from their sleep the travelers decided to sit up a while and see if they could catch another glimpse of the strange man and woman. But, though they sat and talked for more than an hour, there was no further sign of the two queer creatures.

“I’m going to bed,” announced Bob at length, and the others decided to follow his example. They slept soundly until morning, though Jerry said afterward that he dreamed he was being chased across the frozen lake by a white haired man on a black horse. He got stuck in the ice, and was freezing to death, when he awakened to find that his blanket had slipped from him, and that a cold rain was blowing in through the cracks of the shack. Morning had dawned cold and dreary.

“Wow! This isn’t exactly pleasant!” exclaimed Jerry, as he poked his head out of the front of the screen of branches. “I wish there was a hotel handy.”

The others crawled from beneath the blankets, not in any too good humor at the dismal prospect.

“And I’ll bet there isn’t any dry wood to be had,” said Bob. “That means a cold breakfast.”

A search proved that he was right. Nor was there any charcoal, since the last had been used some days before, and they had been to no place where they could get more.

“Just when a fellow needs a hot cup of coffee,” went on Bob. “I never saw such beastly luck.”

Jerry said nothing. He seemed to be studying over some matter.

“I have it,” he exclaimed.

“What? Some dry wood?” asked Ned with much eagerness.

“No, but I know how to make some hot coffee,” was the answer.

Jerry lost no time in explaining. He first went to the auto where he got out rubber coats for himself and his companions. Then, ready to defy the rain, which was coming down at a good clip, Jerry hunted about until he found two large stones. These he set up a short distance apart, placing another each at the front and rear of the first two.

“There’s the stove,” he remarked.

“A heap of good it will do, with no fire in it,” growled Bob.

“Wait,” advised Jerry.

Taking the big search-light, which he had used the night previous, he removed the top, so that the flame could be used for cooking purposes. They prepared a good meal and enjoyed it.

It continued to rain, and to fill in time the boys went fishing in the lake. Luck was with them and within half an hour they had ten fine fish, and then, though they could have taken many more, they did not, as Jerry said they would have no use for them.

“Fish for dinner for me to-day,” said Bob, while the others laughed at his usual exhibition of how fond of eating he was. The fish did prove an excellent dish, fried in corn meal on Jerry’s improvised stove. Some bacon gave them a relish, and with hot coffee they felt they had as good a meal as many a hotel could serve.

“I wonder where the professor is?” said Ned, when the meal was almost over. “I forgot that he wasn’t with us.”

“He’s off gathering birds, bugs or reptiles,” said Jerry. “He’ll come when he feels good and hungry.”

“He’s more likely to forget all about being hungry if he gets chasing a fine specimen,” remarked Ned. “I think I’ll just take a stroll and see if I can come across him.”

“We’ll go along,” said Jerry and Bob.

So the three started off together. They could easily follow the professor’s trail, as he had broken through the underbrush, snapping off many twigs and breaking small branches. The boys wandered on for nearly a mile, but saw no sign of the scientist. They were about to turn back, and wait for him at camp, when Jerry held up his hand to indicate silence.

“Hark!” he whispered.

The others stood still, and, listening intently, heard above the patter of the raindrops, voices in conversation.

“That’s the professor,” said Ned.

“Some one is with him then,” put in Jerry. “They are coming this way.”

The sounds of persons advancing through the bushes could be heard. The voices also sounded plainer. A minute later the brush was parted and the

professor, followed by a woman, came out into the little clearing where the boys were. At the sight of the woman, Jerry started, for he recognized her as the strange person who had been with the old man the night previous. The professor seemed excited about something.

“Boys, this lady has just told me some strange news,” he said.

“What is it?” asked Ned.

“Beware of the hermit of Lost Lake!” the woman exclaimed suddenly. “Have a care of him. Many poor travelers has he murdered. He would have murdered you last night if I had not prevented him.”

“So that’s what it was all about,” said Jerry, half aloud. The woman heard him, and turned:

“Did you see him?” she asked. “Did you see me?”

“I—we—” began Jerry.

“You have been spying on me!” exclaimed the woman, growing much excited.



CHAPTER XXI

THE DEN OF THE HERMIT

“No, no!” said the professor calmly. “The boys were not spying. They happened to see a man and a woman on the shore of the lake last night, and they thought it might have been you.”

“It was me,” said the woman. “I was trying to prevent him from coming and killing you all in your sleep.”

The boys began to feel a queer creepy sensation run up their spines, as if some one had poured cold water down their backs.

“It’s true,” the strange creature went on. “I will tell you all about it. Listen to me,” and she sat down on a stump.

“Perhaps we had better go where there is shelter,” suggested Jerry, for it was raining hard again, though the boys and the professor in their rubber coats did not mind it. The woman was drenched.

“No,” she said. “I can go to no place save these woods. I am safe from him here.” She seemed nervous and excited, and her eyes seemed unnaturally bright.

“The old man is a hermit,” she went on. “He has lived near this lake for many years. He kills travelers and takes their money. He tried to kill me but I escaped from him because I can run fast. Since then he has been after me. Last night he started for your camp, but I got a big club and stopped him. Then he ran away.”

“What was in the bag?” asked Ned.

“What bag?” asked the woman.

“The one the old man had on his back?”

“Hush! Don’t speak about it,” was the reply. “He had a murdered man’s body in there, and he threw it into the lake.”

“Are you sure?” asked the professor, thinking the woman might, perhaps, be trying to scare them away.

“Positive,” she replied. “I saw him kill the poor fellow, but the hermit did not

know I was watching.”

“Where does he live?” asked the professor.

“He has a den in the darkest part of the woods,” was the answer. “He takes travelers there and kills them. He does not know that I know where it is, but I do. Would you like to see it?”

“Not if he is the kind of a person you say he is,” spoke Jerry. “I think we had better steer clear of him.”

“I can take you there when he is not at home,” said the woman. “Listen, once each week he takes a long trip over the mountain, to bury the gold he has taken from travelers. I can hide and watch him go. Then I could come and bring you to his den. Shall I?”

“It might be a good plan,” mused the professor. “If this man is a murderer he should be taken in charge by the authorities. Yes, come and let us know when he goes away. Perhaps we could capture him ourselves.”

“I’ll come,” said the woman. “Now I must go, for I hear some one coming,” and, rising suddenly, she ran off at top speed through the woods. The boys listened intently but could hear no one approaching, and began to think the woman must have been mistaken.

“Where did you meet her?” asked Jerry of the professor, when it was seen that the woman was not coming back.

“She saw me while I was gathering some specimens,” was the reply, “and she came up to warn me about the hermit. It seems that she lives not far away, and roams through the woods. Besides telling me about the old man, and to be on our guard against him, she showed me where to get some beautiful tree toads,” and the scientist opened his pocket and showed it full of the little creatures.

“Do you think she is telling the truth about the hermit?” asked Jerry.

“There may be some exaggeration to it,” rejoined the professor, “but I have heard of old half crazed men who lived in the woods as this one does, and who occasionally murdered lone travelers. We can’t be too careful.”

“Besides, it did look as though she was trying to prevent him doing something last night,” put in Jerry.

“Well, we’ll keep a good lookout,” suggested the professor. “That’s all we can do now, unless we decide to move on away from this place.”

“I would rather like to solve the mystery,” said Jerry. “I do not think we have much to fear. He is an old man, and I guess we four are a match for him.”

“Then we had better do as the woman says, wait until she comes to lead us to his hut, or cabin, or whatever it is,” the professor advised after a moment’s thought.

That plan settled on, they made their way back to camp and the professor was given his rather late dinner. But he did not seem to mind this in the least.

“Are you going to keep watch again to-night?” asked Bob of Jerry.

“Of course. I want to get at the bottom of this. There is a mystery somewhere, and I think the hermit, the lost lake and the strange woman, together, can explain it.”

The rain stopped after supper, though it remained cloudy, and Jerry again prepared the gas lamp. It was arranged that he and Ned would stay up on guard until twelve o’clock and that Bob and the professor would take the rest of the night. Whichever party saw the hermit was at once to notify the other.

Jerry and Ned began their vigil. Several hours passed and it seemed they were to have their trouble for their pains. At length, however, just as they were preparing to turn in and let the others take their turn, Jerry saw a movement in the bushes about five hundred feet away, and down near the edge of the lake. The moon, shining faintly through the clouds, illuminated the scene.

“Be ready to turn on the light when I say so,” said Jerry to Ned.

Ned was all alert. Jerry, with his eyes straining to catch the slightest movement of the underbrush, peered through the darkness. Something white attracted him.

“Now!” he whispered to Ned, and the light, that had been burning low, was suddenly turned on at full power.

In its glare the two boys saw again the white haired hermit stealing along the edge of the water, the big bag on his back.

“Call the others!” whispered Jerry to Ned. “I’ll keep watch!”

“All right.”

Ned softly went back to the shack where he awakened the professor and Bob. They were out in an instant, and made ready to go quietly down as close as they could to where the hermit was, while Jerry showed the way by the searchlight.

But again they were doomed to disappointment, for, no sooner had Jerry turned the light so that it shown full on the old man, than he jumped as though struck by lightning and made a dive for the woods, into the black depths of which he disappeared.

“I guess that’s the last we’ll see of him,” said Ned.

“He dropped his bag,” cried Bob. “Let’s get that and see what’s in it.”

At this the professor and Ned ran down to the edge of the water, and soon returned with the sack the old man had carried on his back.

“Open it and let’s see if there are any murdered persons in it,” said Jerry, with an uneasy laugh.

Ned untied the string, and, not without some misgivings, peered inside.

“Well I never,” he exclaimed.

“What is it?” asked Bob.

“Fish! Nothing but fish!” replied Ned. “Fine ones at that. I guess all we have done is to have scared the poor old man away from his fishing grounds.”

“Certainly there is nothing suspicious in having a bag of fish,” put in the professor. “I wonder if that strange woman could have been telling the truth.”

“We’ll know better if she keeps her word and comes to take us to the hermit’s den,” said Jerry.

There seemed nothing more to do that night, so they all went to bed, not being disturbed until morning. They were awakened by the sun peeping in through the chinks in the shack, and they got up to find a fine day had succeeded the rainy one.

The beams of Old Sol were bright and warm, and the first thing the travelers did was to go down and have a dip in the lake. Then breakfast was served, and when it was over Jerry and Ned started to overhaul the machine.

“For,” said Jerry, “we may want to leave at any time, and the car is in none too good condition since we plowed up the side of the mountain.”

Several minor repairs were made and the auto was run down to the main road, where it stood in readiness for a quick start. It was some time after dinner before all this was done, and along about three o’clock the four travelers stretched out under the trees and took a well earned rest.

“Now if that strange woman would—” began Ned.

“Hush!” cautioned the professor, “some one is coming.”

Hardly had he ceased speaking before the bushes opened and there appeared the figure of the queer woman, with her long hair hanging loose down her back.

“Hush!” she whispered, placing her finger on her lips. “I have come to keep my promise. The hermit has gone over the mountain. Come, and I will take you to his hut, and you can see where he has murdered travelers.”

The boys hardly knew whether to obey or not, but a nod from Professor Snodgrass, to whom they looked, indicated they were to do as the woman wanted. So they arose and prepared to follow her. The professor brought up the rear.

Through the woods their strange guide went, for several miles. At length she reached a thick part of the woods.

“It is very close now,” she said. “Wait until I take a look.”

The travelers halted, while the woman crept softly forward. She peered through the brush into a sort of clearing, and apparently seeing that everything was safe, she motioned for the others to advance.

They did so, and, a moment later emerged from the woods into a place where many trees had been cut down. In the centre of this space was a small log cabin, and toward it the woman pointed.

“There is his hut,” she said. “Come on, I will lead the way.”

She advanced with great caution, as though she feared to disturb some one. Closer and closer to the door she went, the others close behind her.

“He never locks it, so we can go right in,” she said.

By this time she was near enough to grasp the latch. She raised it, and was about to enter, when the door suddenly swung back, and the old hermit himself, stepping out, stood before the astonished travelers.

“There he is! There he is! There is the murderer!” cried the woman, pointing her finger at the hermit.

The old man did not appear greatly surprised. He looked from the woman to the boys and the professor, and remarked:

“To what am I indebted for the honor of this visit?”

“I we,—er—that is—we—er—I—” began the professor, finding it was hard to tell the truth.

“Oh, it’s poor old Kate,” went on the hermit. “She has probably been telling you some strange stories. Will you not come into my cabin?”

“Don’t go into the murderer’s hut!” cried the woman, as she turned and fled back through the underbrush, leaving the travelers in a somewhat queer situation.



CHAPTER XXII

A REVELATION

The professor did not know what to do. He and the boys expected to find the hut deserted, but, through some cause, the woman had evidently made a mistake as to the absence of the hermit. Nor did Mr. Snodgrass care to accept the invitation of the old man and enter the hut, not knowing what he might find there.

“You must not mind what Kate says,” the hermit went on, seeing that his unexpected visitors hesitated. “She means well, but she exaggerates a little sometimes.”

The professor thought that a rather cool manner in which to reply to accusation of murder, but, he reflected, if the hermit was as bad as the woman made him out to be, he would naturally, be rather a bold sort of person.

The boys, too, were somewhat embarrassed by their position. To come suddenly upon a man you expect to bind and hand over to the authorities as a criminal of the worst kind and then to find him calmly inviting you into his house, is something out of the ordinary. How much longer the travelers might have stood outside the hut, after the invitation to enter had been given, will always be a cause for speculation, because, the next instant something happened.

The professor, who had been glancing from the aged hermit to the hut, and then back to the old man, suddenly uttered an exclamation, and made a dive for the door.

“There he goes!” cried the scientist. “There is the one I’ve been looking for for nearly a month!” and, a second later, he had disappeared inside the cabin.

“What’s the matter? Is some one after you?” asked the old man hastening in the footsteps of the scientist, while the boys trailed in behind. “What do you want?”

“I have it! I have it!” called the professor’s voice. “It’s a beauty, and a rare one.”

“What does he mean?” asked the hermit, turning to the boys.

“It’s a pink-winged dragon fly,” cried the professor, coming back at that point and hearing the question. He had penetrated to the farther side of the cabin. “I saw the insect on the cabin door,” he went on, explaining to the old man. “Then I saw it go in. I knew it would not stay long, so the only thing to do was to make a jump for it, without waiting to explain. I am very glad I got it, for it’s worth at least seven dollars, and perhaps more. I must apologize for running into your cabin in that hasty manner,” the scientist went on, turning to the old man.

“I guess that was the best way of getting you into it,” said the hermit with a smile, which, the boys admitted, was a very pleasant one for a murderer. “But now you are here, do not be in a hurry to get out again.”

“If you have no objections I will stay until I have put away this dragon-fly specimen in a case,” said the professor, pulling out a small flat box in which he placed his precious specimens temporarily.

“Let me ask you to supper,” went on the old man, seeming to the boys to be very eager to have them remain. “It is so seldom that I have company that I appreciate it very much. Stay and have a meal with me.”

The boys and the professor hardly knew what answer to make. They did not want to stay, yet did not care to offend by saying no.

“I’m afraid we might inconvenience you,” began Mr. Snodgrass. “You know what it is when company comes unexpectedly, and the larder is empty.”

“Have no fears on that score,” replied the old man with a short laugh. “I have plenty for all of us,” and throwing open a cupboard he showed it well stocked with many victuals.

As no other excuse offered, the travelers could do nothing else but agree to stay, though Bob said afterwards that he kept his hand on his revolver, in his outside coat pocket, ready to draw it at a moment’s notice.

So, in a little while, supper was being prepared by the hermit, who seemed to be quite an expert cook. As he busied himself about the stove the boys had time to glance over the cabin. The first thing that impressed them was that the place was well planned for defense.

It was built somewhat like the old block houses the early settlers constructed, with the upper story projecting over the first, so that the Indians who besieged the place, could be attacked from above. Then the lads noted that the sides were pierced with small loop holes, while on the walls were several rifles, and belts full of cartridges.

“One might think that you were in an enemy’s country,” observed Mr. Snodgrass to the hermit, as he took note of the means of defense.

“I have to be on guard,” responded the hermit, quickly. “My life is not safe a moment. I do not know what minute I may be attacked. I am surrounded by spies on every hand.”

“It is a wonder that you let us in then,” said Jerry. “How do you know that we will not betray you?”

“I am too good a reader of human character as shown in the face to fear anything like that,” the old man went on. “I can trust you; I know I can.”

“Who are you in danger from?” asked the professor, wondering what sort of story the hermit could tell.

“All kinds of bad men,” was the answer. “They had me in their power once, but I got away. I came here because it was a place well hidden from general observation. I have lived here several years, and you are the first persons beside poor Kate, that I have been friendly with in that time.”

“Then why do you keep ready to repel an enemy if none has molested you in that period?” asked Mr. Snodgrass.

“Because there is no telling when the men will attack me,” replied the old man. “There are several who would like to get control of me, but I think I can prevent it. I will never let them get me into their power again, as long as I have a shot in the gun.”

Supper was ready by this time, and the travelers, not very much reassured by the talk of the strange old hermit sat down to the rude table. The food, contrary to their expectation, proved very good.

When the meal was over the hermit began to question the travelers about their journey and asked why they came to the lake, which, he said, was seldom if ever visited. They told him how they had unexpectedly found the sheet of water.

“That generally is the way in this world,” said the old man. “If you look for a thing you never find it, but if you do not, sometimes it comes to you in the most unexpected manner. I have sought something for many years, but I have not found it, and my heart will break if I do not succeed soon.”

“What is it you are looking for?” asked Ned, softly, as he saw the hermit was affected.

“I can not tell you now,” was the answer. “Later I may, and perhaps you can help me in the quest.”

“We would be glad to,” said the professor. “But I think we must be going now. It is getting late and we must get back to the automobile. Besides, I am afraid we will have trouble finding our way through the woods.”

“Have no fear,” said the hermit. “I will call Kate and she will take you back, just as she brought you here.”

“But I thought she was—” began Uriah Snodgrass.

“That is only a notion of hers, that I am a murderer,” spoke the hermit, with a smile. “Kate pretends to be very much afraid of me, but she will come to me when I call her. Probably you are wondering who I am, and why I live out in these lonely woods. If you care to I will tell you my story briefly.”

They all said they would be glad to listen, so the hermit began by saying, for reasons of his own, that he would not tell his name.

“I do not want it to be known who I am,” he said. “But, as I said, I was once in the power of a number of bad men. I used to be a prospector, and made considerable at it, until trouble came. Then I came to this lonesome place. I had heard the legend of Lost Lake, and the gold supposed to be on its shores, but I never expected to find this body of water. However, I did come across it, though I never have found any gold. I have been here ever since, and that is about three years. I manage to hunt and fish, and so get enough to live on. Occasionally I go to the nearest village, and sell a few articles I make out of wood, and so get a little money.”

“I should think you would be very lonesome at times,” said Bob.

“I am glad to be alone when I think of all I suffered from those men,” was the reply.

“Would you mind telling us about the woman?” asked Mr. Snodgrass. “She seems a queer creature.”

“She is,” answered the hermit. “She is harmless enough, except when aroused, and her great trouble is in thinking that I am a murderer.”

“What makes her think such a thing?” asked Jerry.

“Because she is slightly crazy,” said the hermit. “She was in these woods when I came here, and, in time we grew to be good friends. It seems that years

ago her whole family was killed by the Indians, she alone escaping. It turned her brain, and ever since then, she imagines that nearly all men are murderers. I wonder she has not accused you of the crime,” and the hermit smiled a little.

“She certainly acted queer,” admitted the professor, “but I thought it was because she took you to be—er—”

“Oh, I don’t mind having you refer to it,” put in the old man. “She often accuses me of the crime to my face. I humor her, and admit sometimes that I am a desperate criminal, and that I am going to give myself up to the authorities. It sort of calms her down.”

“What did you mean by saying that she would come whenever you called her?” asked Jerry. “Is she near by?”

“She stays in a little cabin I built for her, not far off,” replied the hermit. “When I want her to go on an errand for me, for she is very swift and reliable, I merely blow this horn,” and he showed a big conch hanging on the wall. “I will call her to show you the way back to your camp when you are ready.”

The professor and the boys thought it was about time to leave. They promised the hermit they would come and see him again, and then the old man, taking down the horn, unbarred the door, and, stepping out blew three shrill blasts that reverberated through the woods. It was just getting dusk, and the echoes, ringing back from the distant hills, sounded weird in the gathering darkness.

For a few seconds no answer came, then, from far off in the woods sounded a faint cry.

“Here she comes,” said the hermit. “She will take you the shortest way.”

In a little while the crackling of the brush could be heard, and, a few seconds later Kate appeared. She did not seem surprised not to find the travelers all murdered.

“Will you show them the way back to camp?” asked the old man.

“Yes,” said Kate, simply. “Follow me,” she added, turning to the boys and the professor.

They started off after the strange woman, and, at that instant the old hermit uttered an exclamation.

“Some one is coming!” he cried. “It may be some of my enemies!”

A moment later he turned and fled into the dark woods!



CHAPTER XXIII

SEARCHING FOR THE HERMIT

“Let’s go to his help!” exclaimed Bob.

“Come on!” cried Ned.

“You had better not,” said the woman, in a calm voice. “It is probably only the police after him for the many murders he has committed, and we had better not interfere. Besides if you want me to take you to your camp you had better come, as I have my house work to do before sunrise.”

She started to lead the way, and, though the boys felt inclined to follow and see what became of the hermit, they concluded it would be better to go back to camp.

Kate seemed to have lost much of her excited manner as she led them through the woods, over a scarcely discernible path. Neither the fast gathering darkness nor the maze of trees seemed to confuse her. She made better progress than did the boys or the professor, as they were not familiar with the ground.

“Well of all the queer adventures we’ve had,” remarked Ned to Jerry, who had lagged somewhat in the rear with him, “this is the worst. Think of going to capture a murderer and then being led home by an insane woman! I wonder what will come next?”

The journey to camp took some time, as the path was hard for the boys and professor to follow, and several times Kate had to wait for them to catch up to her. At last, however, she brought them out near the little open place where the auto stood, and the boys breathed a sigh of relief.

“Our car is safe, anyhow,” said Jerry. “Now for some sleep.”

“Ain’t we going to have something to eat first?” demanded Bob in an aggrieved tone.

The others laughed at Chunky’s sorrowful voice.

“We’ll see,” said Jerry. “Perhaps you would like a cup of chocolate,” he went on, turning to Kate.

“No, thank you,” she said. “I must not stay here. I want to see if they have captured the murderer, so I will go back,” and, turning suddenly, she returned over the path they had come, her footsteps growing fainter and fainter.

“Come on, let’s make the chocolate,” said Bob, when Kate had gone.

Jerry soon had the beverage in preparation, and they all enjoyed it. Then they fixed up the beds in the shack, and soon were slumbering, too tired even to post a guard, though, as events proved, there was no need for one.

“Well,” remarked Jerry, after breakfast had been eaten, “I suppose we may as well push on for Arizona. No use staying here since the mystery is solved.”

“I don’t believe it is solved,” spoke Professor Snodgrass, suddenly. “I’m not altogether satisfied about that hermit.”

“You don’t think he’s a murderer, do you?” asked Ned.

“No, but there is something odd about him. I can not get over the feeling that I have met him before, or some relative of his. Yet I can not recall it clearly. He has certain queer little actions that remind me of some one. I would like to see him again.”

“If you want to, I think I could find our way back to the cabin in the day time,” spoke Ned.

“I took pretty good notice of the trail when we went over.”

“I wish you could,” said the professor, eagerly. “I want to have a talk with that old man. Besides, I think I can get some more specimens at his hut. I saw a fine lizard around the door step in the afternoon.”

So it was decided they would pay another visit to the hermit’s cabin. Accordingly they started off after dinner, and, led by Ned, followed the trail. They went astray several times, and had to search about for the path, but finally they came to the place where Kate had halted them the day before to go forward and peer at the hut.

“Shall we go right on now?” asked Ned, pausing to see what the rest wanted to do. “The cabin is just ahead.”

“Go on,” said Mr. Snodgrass.

They came out into the little glade, in which the cabin stood. As they emerged from the woods they saw Kate standing in front of the hut, crying.

“What is the matter?” asked the professor.

“They have taken the poor old man away and killed him!” sobbed the woman.

“It’s another of her imaginations,” said Ned, softly. “Probably the hermit is inside.”

But when they looked he was not to be seen, and his bed showed that it had not been slept in that night.

“Will you help me hunt for him?” asked Kate.

“Certainly we will,” answered the professor.

“Then follow me!” exclaimed the woman, striding off into the woods.

She led the way, explaining in disjointed sentences, yet so that she could be understood, that the old man frequently imagined some one was after him. At such times he would go to one or another of his hiding places, of which he had a number in the different parts of the woods.

But this time he was not to be found easily. Place after place, including caves and deep ravines, were visited by the searchers, but there was no sign of the hermit.

“I am sure he has been killed,” said Kate in a sorrowful tone. “And he was the kindest man that ever lived.”

“I thought you said he was a murderer,” spoke the professor, wondering in what strange channels the woman’s mind ran.

“So he is!” exclaimed Kate, “but he is a good murderer, and not one of the bad kind.”

“Poor woman,” sighed Mr. Snodgrass. “Her mind is hopelessly gone.”

Kate started off in a different direction, and the boys and the professor followed her. She went at a rapid pace, and soon the travelers were aware that they were going up hill. The trail became more steep as they advanced, until they were panting from their exertions. Yet the crazy woman did not seem to become exhausted by the hard pace in the least.

“There is the hill!” she exclaimed at last, pointing upward, and the boys saw ahead of them a big half round mound, at the very summit of which was an immense tree.

“He sometimes stays in that tree,” spoke Kate, as they neared the big forest

giant.

“In the tree? I presume you mean he has a sort of platform built among the branches,” said the professor. “A number of Indian tribes live that way.”

“He lives right inside the tree what little time he does live up here,” replied Kate. “The trunk is hollow, and he crawls into it, and hides until all danger is past. We will soon see if he is there.”

An examination of the hollow trunk, however, showed that the hermit was not within, nor did the place disclose any signs of his having been there recently. Kate showed the despair she felt and the professor and the boys could not help feeling disappointed. For a while they stood beneath the spreading branches, wondering what would be best to do.

All at once the professor, who had been intently gazing up into the leafy branches, gave utterance to an exclamation.

“There it is!” he cried. “A regular beauty! I must secure that if I never get another. Keep quiet, every one.”

“It’s another specimen,” said Jerry. “Can’t you forget them for once, professor?”

“This seems to be a sloth or an ant-bear,” replied the scientist, as he made preparations to climb the tree. “It has long white whiskers, a black body and no tail. Wait until I crawl up and get it.”

“Never mind coming up, I’m coming down,” spoke a voice, seeming to come from the animal, the capture of which the professor was intent upon.

“Bless my soul, it’s a combined sloth and parrot!” exclaimed the professor. “That is a rare animal-bird. I must secure it at all hazards. Help me, boys.”

But there was no need for help, as, the next instant, two dangling legs descended from the lower branches of the tree, to be followed, a little later by a body, and then came a mass of white hair and whiskers.

“It’s the old hermit!” cried Bob.

“Yes! It’s him! it’s him!” cried Kate. “He is safe! We have found him.”

“Be quiet!” cautioned the old man, when he had reached the ground. “There may be spies all around, though I think I have escaped them for the time being.”

“How did you get here?” asked Kate.

“I ran as soon as I heard the noise of men coming after me,” replied the aged man. “But I did not dare get into the hollow trunk, for fear of being seen. So I just crawled up into the branches, and there I’d be yet if the professor had not mistaken me for a specimen.”

“You can come down in safety,” said Mr. Snodgrass, “as there seems to be no one in the neighborhood but ourselves.”

“That’s good,” was the rejoinder, “but there is no telling when some one may come. I think I will go back to my own cabin.”

The hermit started off with Kate, the others following. He had not proceeded far when he uttered an exclamation:

“There is one of them!”

At the same instant a roughly dressed man appeared in the narrow path, as if by magic. At sight of him the hermit turned and fled back into the woods.



CHAPTER XXIV

THE HERMIT'S IDENTITY

“Catch him! I want him! Bring him back!” exclaimed the stranger as he saw the hermit disappearing into the depths of the forest.

“What do you want of him?” asked the professor, not liking the man’s looks.

“What’s that your business?” inquired the stranger. “Trot along now, and don’t bother me.”

“I’ll do nothing of the kind,” retorted Mr. Snodgrass. “That old man is a friend of ours, and we’ll see that no harm comes to him.”

“Well, I’m going to catch him,” replied the rough looking man, “so stand aside.”

He made as if to go in pursuit of the hermit, but Kate, with flashing eyes and defiant gestures, stood in front of the stranger.

“You let him alone!” she exclaimed. “If you go after him I’ll scratch your eyes out!”

And she looked fierce and strong enough to put her threat into execution as she stood her ground.

“Mind,” she went on, “don’t you dare to stir a step after him!”

“So that’s the way the land lays, eh?” sneered the fellow. “Well, we’ll see about that.”

Putting his finger to his lips he blew a shrill whistle. Hardly had the echo died away than two more men, more roughly dressed, if possible, than the first man, made their appearance from behind bushes where they had evidently been hiding.

“I’ve found him,” said the first man to his companions. “Now these people want to interfere.”

“Knock ’em out of the way,” growled one of the late comers.

“Look here!” began Jerry who was beginning to get angry. “If there’s any

knocking to be done I guess we can do our share.”

“When did you leave home?” asked the first man, with a sneer. “Look out, young tenderfoot, how you mix up in this matter.”

“What right have you to follow this old man?” asked the professor, for he began to believe the strangers to be some of the enemies of which the hermit had been fearful.

“That’s none of your affair,” was the answer. “We want that man and we’re going to have him. He got away from us once, and we’re going to take care it does not happen again. Come on, boys. Let’s trail after the old chap. He can’t have gone very far.”

The three turned and were about to take after the hermit when Kate, who had stepped aside, made a sudden spring, and confronted the leader of the three men.

“Don’t you dare go after that poor old man!” she cried. “There! Take that!”

And before the man could raise his hand in defense Kate gave him a forceful push. It was followed by a curious happening.

The three men were standing on the very edge of the knoll, upon the summit of which was the tree where the hermit had been hiding. So steep was the descent that when Kate shoved the man he toppled over backward. Right behind him were the other two men, and falling against them, their leader bowled them down like the remaining pins in a game of skittles. All three of them went slipping, sprawling, tumbling head over heels down the steep slope, vainly trying to dig their hands into the earth and so save themselves.

“There!” exclaimed the woman, as she saw the men roll down. “I guess they will not defy me again in a hurry!”

“I don’t believe they will,” observed the professor drily.

In fact the men seemed to have had enough of Kate for, having rolled to the bottom of the hill, where they arrived somewhat the worse for wear, they got up, but made no attempt to return. Instead they shuffled off through the woods, contenting themselves with shaking their fists at the party on top of the hill.

“What had we better do now?” asked Ned.

“Go back to our camp,” spoke Jerry.

“I think perhaps we had,” counseled the professor. “I thought the poor old hermit was merely wandering in his mind when he talked about men being after

him, but, it seems he was right. Now that we have had an encounter with these men, and incurred their hate, it would be best if we did not leave our automobile unguarded. There is no telling what will happen in the next few hours.”

“What can we do to save the hermit?” asked Bob.

“Nothing right away, I fear,” replied Mr. Snodgrass. “We could not find him in the night, for it will soon be dark, and I think he can look after himself better than we can, for the present.”

“I think so too,” put in Kate, who seemed to have calmed down after her attack on the men. “We will go back to your camp, and take up the search tomorrow.”

It was getting dusk now, and the travelers made the best speed they could, following Kate’s guidance, back to their shack near the lake. They found the camp undisturbed and soon were preparing a supper, which the woman shared. Then she bade them good night, and promised to come in the morning.

“I guess we had better post a guard to-night,” said Jerry, as he and the others were thinking of turning in. “There may be a lot of those men after the hermit, and they will not feel any too friendly toward us for what we have done. What do you say, Professor?”

Uriah Snodgrass thought the scheme a good one, and, lots having been drawn, the first watch fell to Ned. He got out his rifle, and, having provided a quantity of wood for the fire, and making the search-light ready so it could be set going quickly, he prepared to spend part of the night on guard.

It was rather lonesome, especially as the others soon fell asleep, as was evidenced by their heavy breathing and an occasional snore. But Ned knew that perhaps the lives of his comrades might depend on his vigilance, so he fought against the feeling of dread, as well as the inclination to sleep, for he was very tired. As the night wore on a stronger feeling of dread took possession of the lad. He started at every sound, and the bark of a fox, the howl of a distant wolf, and even the hooting of an owl was enough to make him jump.

He was very glad, therefore, when his trick was up and Jerry took his place.

“Did you see or hear anything?” asked Jerry.

“Nary a thing except the wild animals,” replied Ned. “There’s a regular menagerie around here, by the sound in the woods.”

For several hours Jerry remained on guard. He was wide awake, for the sleep

earlier in the evening had rested him considerably. Part of the time he sat on a log near the fire, and again, he would get up and pace back and forth looking around anxiously.

Jerry replenished the fire and then, feeling somewhat chilly, began to walk rapidly up and down, pacing about ten feet in either direction from the blaze. Once, when he had gone a little further, and stood near a big elm tree he fancied he heard a noise among the branches. Glancing up he was startled by hearing some one utter:

“Hist! Hist!”

“Who’s—who’s there?” faltered Jerry, for he was taken by surprise.

“Sh! Not so loud! Have they gone?” asked a voice.

“Who?” asked the lad, wondering who was speaking.

“The men who were after me?” was the reply, and then Jerry recognized the hermit’s voice.

“Yes, they have gone. Come down, you are safe now,” said Jerry.

There was a scrambling among the branches and soon the white-haired old man stood on the ground beside the boy. His clothing was torn, and his beard was matted with briars and brambles. His face and hands were cut, and he bore the appearance of having raced through the thick underbrush.

“I had a hard time escaping them,” said the hermit. “Have you any water? I have not had a drink in several hours, and my throat is parched.”

Jerry ran to the water pail to get the hermit a drink. The noise he made aroused the others.

“What is it? Are they attacking us?” asked Mr. Snodgrass.

“No, the hermit has come back,” replied Jerry. “He was hiding up in a tree.”

The professor hurried out of the shack, and joined the old man, who seemed very glad to get back among his new friends. He said he had been wandering around ever since he ran away when the stranger appeared, and, at last, had determined to try and find the boys’ camp.

“Now you are here we will take good care of you, Mr.—er—Mr.—” stammered the professor, forgetting that the hermit had refused to disclose his identity. The old man noticed the hesitating tones.

“There is no reason why I should keep my name a secret from you any longer,” he said. “You probably never heard of me, and never will again. I only desire to remain hidden from my enemies, and I think you are my friends.”

“What is your name?” asked the professor.

“Jackson Bell,” was the reply. “I am an old gold miner.”

“Jackson Bell,” repeated Jerry, wondering if he had heard aright.

“Jackson Bell,” repeated the professor. “Where have I heard that name before?”

“Why you must be Tommy Bell’s father,” exclaimed Ned.

“What’s that!” fairly shouted the hermit. “Do you know Tommy Bell? Have you seen my dear son? Tell me quickly! Do not keep a poor old man in suspense,” and he seemed greatly agitated.

“I thought I had seen some relative of his somewhere,” said the professor.



CHAPTER XXV

ATTACKED BY THE ENEMY

“Are you sure the boy we have in mind is your son?” asked Mr. Snodgrass. “We do not want to raise false hopes. Perhaps you may be mistaken.”

“Something tells me I can not be mistaken,” exclaimed the hermit. “Tommy Bell is not a common name. Besides, I can describe my son, and then you will know whether he is the one you know,” and he rapidly gave a short description of Tommy.

“That’s him all right,” said Jerry, and the others agreed that the lad they had rescued from the hands of the rough men was, indeed, the son of the hermit.

“And I thought him dead,” said the old man. “After I had been abused by the wicked gang that got me in their control I lost sight of poor Tommy. As soon as I could I made a search for him, but it was of no use.”

“Tommy thought you had wandered away from him,” said Ned. “He told us his story after we had rescued him.”

“Then you saved his life, just as you have mine,” broke in Mr. Bell. “I have much to thank you for. But first I must find my son. Where did you leave him?”

“At a place called Las Cruces,” replied the professor. Thereupon he told briefly how they had taken Tommy from the hands of the lawless gang and left him with a friend.

“I must go to him at once,” exclaimed the old man. “I can hardly wait to start. To think that the boy I thought was dead is alive! And I suppose he thinks I am dead also,” Mr. Bell went on.

“He was going to search for you,” replied Bob, “but he did not know where to start. We can send him word now.”

“I’ll take him word myself!” cried Mr. Bell. “I’ll start as soon as it is daylight.”

“Then you had better get some rest and sleep now,” observed Mr. Snodgrass. “Come into the shack, and we will make you some hot coffee.”

The hermit begged them to go to no trouble on his account, but they insisted, and soon the coffee was boiling on the coals of the camp fire.

“I’m too excited to sleep,” remarked Mr. Bell, as he went inside the rough shelter to lie down. And so it would seem, for, every few minutes he would rouse up from his position, and ask some particular about his son. He appeared scarcely able to believe the good news. At length, however, he grew weary, and along toward morning fell into a doze.

The others were so tired and sleepy from being awake the night before that they slumbered late, and the sun was quite high when Jerry roused himself, and sat up, wondering what day it was.

He got up, took a plunge in the lake, and came back to start breakfast, finding that, in the meanwhile, the others in the camp, including Mr. Bell, had arisen.

“Now to start and find my son,” cried the hermit.

“You had better have something to eat first,” suggested Mr. Snodgrass. “Then perhaps we can think of some plan to aid you.”

Though impatient to be gone the old man consented to remain to breakfast. He did not eat much, however, and seemed ready any minute to start on the long search for Tommy.

“How would it be if we took you to the nearest town in our automobile,” suggested the professor, when the meal was over. “From there you can get conveyances and reach Las Cruces in a short time. If you need any money—”

“Thank you, I think I have enough for the present,” interrupted Mr. Bell. “I do not need much. When I find Tommy I will bring him back with me, and we will be together once more. It seems too good to be true!”

“What will become of Kate in the meanwhile?” asked Mr. Snodgrass. “Though she has queer ideas concerning you I think she is your friend. Will she be able to live in these woods all alone?”

“Kate is able to take care of herself,” was the reply. “She was in these woods before I came and she may be here after I am gone. But I will tell her where I am going, and that I expect to return.”

A trip was made to the hermit’s hut, and, after several blasts had been blown on the conch horn, Kate appeared. She was overjoyed to see the aged man again, and was told of the latest developments.

“You had better hurry up then, and get away from these woods,” said the woman.

“Why so?” asked Jerry.

“Because there are a number of strange men lurking about,” was the answer. “I think they are after this good old man. So be on your guard.”

“It is the same crowd,” said Mr. Bell. “They hate to give me up.”

“What do they want of you?” asked Jerry. “You said you might tell us the secret some day, adding that perhaps we could help you. Maybe we can help you now.”

“You can help me, and you have helped me,” said Mr. Bell. “I can tell you the rest of my story now. As I said I have long been in quest of some one. That some one is my son Tommy. I did not want to tell you of him before, as I was afraid the news would get out. Nor did I tell you why the gang wanted me in their power. It is because I hold the final title to a piece of valuable property, and they can not get possession of it until I sign off, which I refused to do!”

“Why so?” asked Mr. Snodgrass.

“Because I understand the property is now claimed by persons who, if not in the eyes of the law, are, still the rightful owners. If I should sign my rights away to the gang they would take the property away from the innocent holders now. So I refused to sign, and they have ruined me for it.”

“Never mind,” said the professor, cheerfully. “We will get you out of their power, never fear.”

“I wonder if the gang that had Tommy is not the same one that had Mr. Bell in their power,” suggested Bob. “He told us about men wanting him to sign papers that would give them control of some land.”

“They must be the same,” commented Mr. Bell. “I will be on my guard now. Neither Tommy nor I will sign a single document. But now I must start.”

“Very well,” said Ned.

There was no further cause for delay, so Jerry got the automobile ready, and, the various belongings having been stowed away, the engine was started, after a somewhat longer rest than usual, and, puffing away in a manner that awoke all the echoes of the forest, the car started toward the village at the foot of the slope. From there, it was arranged Mr. Bell would go forward to Las Cruces by stage

coach, or whatever other means of travel presented themselves.

Once fairly on the road the spirits of all in the party rose. It was a fine day, and the fresh mountain air, crisp and cool, put new life into their veins.

They were bowling along the road at a good clip with Jerry at the wheel, when, suddenly in the air above their heads, there sounded a shrill buzz.

“That’s a new kind of a bumble bee,” cried Uriah Snodgrass. “I must have it for my collection.”

“I guess you wouldn’t want many of that kind,” said Mr. Bell, quietly.

“Why not? I like all kinds.”

“That was a lead one,” went on the old man.

“You mean a bullet?” asked Bob. “Is some one firing at us?”

“I’m afraid so,” answered the hermit.

Then came a distant report, followed by the peculiar buzzing sound.

“Speed her up!” cried Bob to Jerry. “Let’s get out of this danger zone. It’s too much like being on the firing line to suit me.”

The auto, all this while was speeding along, and, soon, the shooters, whoever they were, had been left far in the rear. The sound of the bullets was no longer heard.

“The reason they are doing it,” answered Mr. Bell, “is that they want to get me alive. If I was to be killed their last chance of getting me to sign the papers would be gone.”

“But there is your son, Tommy,” said Jerry. “He told us they wanted him to sign. If you were dead, he would be your heir, and his signature would be legal when he became of age. Perhaps the men could make use of it even before then.”

“I see! I see!” exclaimed Mr. Bell. “It is important then that I live so I can beat them at their own game.”

“Unless you don’t care about living on your own account or that of your son’s,” said the professor, grimly.

They kept on steady after this and at last reached the bottom of the mountain slope.

“Now for the village,” exclaimed Mr. Bell. “I shall soon see my boy!”

Faster and faster went the auto. The traveling was good, and Jerry speeded the car to the last notch. About six o'clock they rolled into town, to the surprise of many of the inhabitants, who had never seen one of the puffing, snorting things, though they had read of them.

A knot of curious persons gathered around the machine as Jerry brought it to a stop in front of the post-office. Several boys began to inspect every part. The travelers were about to alight when a shrill voice cried out.

“Hey, Jerry! And Bob! And Ned! Hey there! Oh, how glad I am to see you!”

For a moment the Motor Boys did not recognize the voice. Then Ned saw a lad trying to break through the crowd.

“It’s Tommy! It’s Tommy Bell!” exclaimed Ned. “Hey, Tommy! You can’t guess who we have with us!”

“Tommy Bell! Did you say Tommy Bell!” exclaimed the hermit. “Where is he? Let me see him!”

But Tommy had heard his parent’s voice, and [the next instant the boy had made a flying leap into the car](#), and was clasped in his father’s arms.

THE NEXT INSTANT THE BOY HAD MADE A FLYING LEAP INTO THE
CAR
[THE NEXT INSTANT THE BOY HAD MADE A FLYING LEAP INTO THE CAR.](#)

CHAPTER XXVI

ON THE ROAD AGAIN

“Where in the world did you come from?” asked Jerry of Tommy.

“How did you get here?” inquired Ned.

“How did you know where to find us?” Bob wanted to know.

But to all these questions Tommy turned a deaf ear. He was so overjoyed at seeing his father, and the hermit was so excited at seeing his son once more, that neither had eyes nor ears for anything or any one except the other.

The crowd looked on curiously, the interest divided between the automobile and the meeting between father and son. Finally, when Mr. Bell and Tommy had, temporarily, exhausted the theme of telling each other how glad they were at being united, the boys had a chance to get a word in edgeways, and Tommy answered a few of their questions.

He told them that he had remained for several days with his friend in Las Cruces, and how a traveling miner had, in a general conversation, mentioned the lake and told of the queer hermit that lived on the shores.

Something in the description of this odd character impressed Tommy with the belief that the hermit might be his father, who had taken that method to escape the gang which wanted him to sign away his rights. Accordingly, the boy had started from Las Cruces and made his way to Deighton, the town where Mr. Bell expected to start in search of his son.

“I got here this morning,” said Tommy, “and I found a little work to do to earn some money. I was going to start up the mountain to-morrow and try and find the lake.”

“Now you don’t have to,” said Mr. Bell. “Well, it certainly is a queer world.”

The travelers spent the night at the Deighton hotel, and, in the morning, after a good breakfast, assembled to talk over their plans for the future.

“Do you intend to go back to Lost Lake, Mr. Bell?” asked the professor. “If you do, you and your son can ride that far in the automobile, since we are going

back in that direction.”

“Where are you going after you leave Lost Lake?” asked Mr. Bell.

“To Arizona,” answered Jerry. “We have a mine there, and we must go to see how things are getting on.”

“That’s rather odd,” commented the hermit. “I have an interest in some mining property in Arizona, though I don’t suppose it is anywhere near yours. But I have made up my mind not to go back to Lost Lake, except to bring away a few things that I left in the cabin. I would also like to provide for poor Kate. After that I think Tommy and I will go to Arizona and try our fortunes over again.”

“Then why not go with us?” spoke Jerry. “We have plenty of room in the machine, and we’d be glad of your company.”

“I would like to very much,” said Mr. Bell, “if I thought I would not bother you.”

He was assured that he would be very welcome, and then he consented to go. A new stock of provisions was purchased, together with some ammunition and some other supplies for the auto. Then, amid the cheers of more than half the populace of Deighton, the travelers began their journey toward Lost Lake again.

Mr. Bell had made arrangements with a family in the town to take charge of Kate whom he promised to send to them, for he knew he could depend on the woman to obey him and make the journey alone.

Lost Lake was reached on the second day, for the travelers were delayed by a landslide, and had to camp out one night. They found the camp and the hermit’s hut undisturbed.

“I guess none of the gang has been around lately,” remarked Jerry.

“I hope we have seen the last of them,” put in Mr. Bell. “They certainly caused enough trouble.”

A few blasts on the horn brought Kate, and the poor demented woman was overjoyed to see her friends again. She made much of Tommy, who, she said, looked enough like his father to be recognized on the darkest night.

At first the crazy woman objected to being sent to Deighton, but Mr. Bell knew how to reason with her, and after some argument, she consented to go. She started away on the second morning, and, as the travelers learned later, eventually reached the family that had consented to care for her. Under skillful

medical treatment Kate partly recovered her reason, and continued to live in Deighton for many years.

“Now,” remarked the professor, when they had seen Kate started off on her journey, “I suppose it is time for us to move. So let’s get started toward our mine, for I’m sure Nestor must be quite anxious to see us.”

“Onward it is, then!” exclaimed Ned. “All aboard, and may we have a safe trip!”

With Ned at the steering wheel the auto was started off. The way was rather rougher than any they had yet traveled over, and for some distance the ascent was steep. But with a new set of batteries and spark plugs, and with everything on the car well adjusted, matters went along smoothly, though no very great speed could be attained.

Mile after mile was covered, the auto mounting higher and higher amid the mountains. There were no signs of human habitation, not even a deserted miner’s hut being passed the first two days of the trip.

Of course there was no shelter to be had, and nights were spent in the open. But as the weather was mild, and as it did not rain, this was considered more a pleasure than a hardship.

The third day they began to see signs that told them they were approaching a town. Now and then cabins and huts would be passed, mostly the lonely homes of solitary miners, who were prospecting for gold. Sometimes they would pass quite good sized camps, and about noon of the fourth day they were invited to come in and have a meal, which they were glad to do.

The miners told them the nearest town was Sleighton, seventy-five miles away, and that it was the centre of activity for a large area of country round about.

“And I wouldn’t advise you folks to speed that there machine of yours when you strike the village,” said one of the miners.

“Why not?” asked Jerry.

“Because the marshal is very strict, and he ain’t got no very great hankerin’ fer choo-choo wagons.”

“We’ll look out,” promised Jerry. “We are in too much of a hurry to want any delays.”

“I wonder if we’ll hear anything more of that gang,” said Ned as they rode away from the mining camp. “It seems queer that they would drop the thing when they seemed so anxious to capture Mr. Bell.”

“We’ll hear of them again, and in a way we won’t like, I’m afraid,” said the former hermit. “We’ll have to be on the lookout.”



CHAPTER XXVII

TROUBLE AT THE MINE

Several days' travel brought the party over the line into Arizona. They passed through a small village one noon, and, on inquiring their whereabouts were told that they were well within the borders of the state where their gold mine was located.

It began to rain shortly after this, and their trip was rather unpleasant, but, well wrapped up in rubber coats, they managed to keep fairly dry. As for the auto it did not seem to mind what kind of weather it was.

They camped that night under a clump of pine trees which served as a partial shelter, and it was so wet that no fire could be built. Jerry resorted to the stove made from one of the search-lights, and made some hot chocolate that warmed them all up.

The next day dawned clear, however, and with a better feeling the travelers took up their journey again. The way was becoming familiar to them, and they recognized many landmarks they had observed in their great race across the continent to secure the gold mine before Noddy Nixon and his crowd could win the claim, as told in detail in "The Motor Boys Overland."

That night they stayed in the town where the government assay office was located and to reach which there had been such an exciting brush between the two automobiles, the one run by Noddy, and that run by the Motor Boys. They saw several men whom they knew slightly, and who appeared much surprised to see them again.

"Well, well, well, where in the world did you come from?" asked the proprietor of the hotel, as the auto drew up in front of his place. He had been quite friendly with the boys while they stayed at the mine, and had sold them many supplies.

"We've been down to Mexico for a change of air," said Jerry.

"I suppose it didn't agree with you, or you wouldn't be coming back so soon," went on the proprietor.

“Well, we thought our mine needed looking after,” Jerry remarked.

“Looking after? I should say it did,” the proprietor continued. “Jim Nestor was here the other day and he said if you didn’t come back pretty soon and do something, there wouldn’t be any mine.”

“Is that right?” asked Ned, thinking the man might be trying to scare them for a joke.

“Straight as a string,” was the answer. “It seems that the title to the place is in doubt.”

“I know, Nestor wrote us about that,” put in Jerry. “But he is still in possession, isn’t he?”

“Can’t say,” replied the hotel man. “He was very anxious the last time I saw him, and that was a week ago. If I was you I’d look after it the first thing in the morning.”

“We will,” said Jerry. “I wonder if the government office is closed.”

“Long ago,” said the proprietor of the inn. “Why?”

“I was thinking I could go there and find out what sort of claim there was against our property,” answered the boy.

“You’ll have to wait until ten o’clock to-morrow morning,” went on the man. “They’ve got a new official in charge and he takes more time off than he puts in. Some one ought to write to the President about it. There’s lots of kicks about the way he acts.”

Neither the boys nor the professor did much sleeping that night, because of worry over the mine tangle. They made an early breakfast and then started for their claim, which they expected to reach in about two hours unless something unexpected occurs.

The way was familiar to them, and recalled many old memories of the exciting times they had in locating and proving their claim. They pointed out to Mr. Bell the various landmarks as they passed them, but the former hermit seemed to have fallen into a sort of stupor. His eyes had a vacant stare and he took no interest in what was being said.

“I’m afraid he’s going to be sick,” said Jerry to the professor. “He has hardly spoken since we came into Arizona, and he used to be quite a talker.”

“I guess it is only the excitement wearing off,” said Mr. Snodgrass. “He will

be all right in a day or two. He has had a pretty hard life the last few weeks.”

Tommy was worried about his father, and sat beside him, holding his hand, now and then looking up into his face, as if he feared to lose his parent again.

As they neared the mine Mr. Bell seemed to become more dazed. Yet he appeared to be struggling to recall something that he had once known and forgotten.

Suddenly he stood up in the automobile, as the car passed a deserted and tumbled down hut and exclaimed:

“See! There it is! There is the place!”

“What place, father? What do you mean?” asked Tommy.

But Mr. Bell sat down again, and seemed to have forgotten that he had spoken. The professor could note, however, that there was a struggle going on in the old man’s mind.

“I hope he does not become raving mad, yet it looks bad for him,” the professor thought to himself.

“Ten minutes more and we’ll be there!” exclaimed Jerry, crowding on a little more speed. “I do hope Nestor is having no trouble.”

They were in the midst of a wild mountainous country now. On either side of the road were great bowlders, while a little further back was scrub timber which extended for a mile or more before the deeper woods were reached.

They were just rounding the last turn of the road to swing into the straight stretch that would take them to the mine when there sounded on the air the crack of a rifle. An instant later Mr. Bell gave a convulsive start and fell over in his seat.

“They’ve killed him! They’ve shot him!” cried Tommy, while Jerry suddenly brought the machine to a stop. Glancing across to the left a small curling cloud of smoke could be seen floating above a big stone.

“There’s where the shot came from,” said Ned.

“Is he badly hurt?” asked Jerry of Professor Snodgrass, who was bending over Mr. Bell.

“It is hard to say,” was the answer. “The bullet struck him on the head, but there is so much blood I can’t tell how bad the wound is. Push on to the mine.

Perhaps Nestor can help us.”

Jerry started the machine again. It had attained a good speed when, from the side of the road came a hail.

“Motor Boys, ahoy!”

“There’s Nestor!” cried Ned, pointing to a man who stood in front of a small shanty. “Hello, Nestor!” he called.

“Hello!” responded the miner, running down to the road. “Well, I am certainly glad to see you.”

“Quick, Nestor!” exclaimed Mr. Snodgrass. “We have a wounded man here, and must get him to the shanty at the mine as soon as possible.”

“We can’t do it,” replied Nestor.

“Why not?”

“Didn’t you get my letter?”

“Only the one saying there might be a possibility of trouble.”

“Well trouble came all right. I’ve been driven from the mine, and it’s in possession of a bad gang. So we can’t take the wounded man there.”

“What are we to do?” asked Jerry, seeing that Mr. Bell was bleeding badly.

“Bring him into my cabin,” said Nestor. “I came here after the gang drove me out. I can put you up, I guess.”

Jerry ran the car up close to the shanty and Mr. Bell, who was unconscious, was carried in and laid as tenderly as possible on the single bunk of which the place boasted.

“Now some warm water and clean clothes,” said Mr. Snodgrass. “I must wash the wound and see how bad it is.”

“I haven’t a bit of hot water,” said Nestor.

“There’s plenty in the radiator of the auto,” spoke Jerry. “Give me a pail and I’ll soon get some.”

He soon had a plentiful supply that was almost boiling, and, cooling it somewhat, the naturalist carefully washed the blood from the wounded man’s head. Then he examined the hurt.

“Will he die?” asked Tommy, as he stood around, tearfully.

“Not this time,” replied Mr. Snodgrass, cheerfully. “The bullet appears to have only grazed the scalp a bit, but it probably gave him a pretty hard knock. He’ll soon come around right I guess.”

Mr. Bell was made as comfortable as possible, and, as there was nothing to do but wait until he became conscious, he was left in charge of his son. Tommy was told to call as soon as his father showed signs of awakening, and then the others surrounded Nestor, eager to hear about the mine.

“I guess it’s gone,” said the old prospector. “As I wrote you, the title seems to have some flaw in it, and this gang, which came from somewhere to the southeast, found it out, and served papers on me. It appears that there is a man missing who holds the key to the situation, and who owns the majority of the mine, but he can’t be found, and so our title is no good.”

The news depressed the spirits of all. They had been hoping that the trouble was small and temporary and that Nestor would find a way out. Now they stood to lose the mine they had struggled so hard to get.

“Did you resist their claim?” asked Mr. Snodgrass.

“You bet I did,” replied Nestor. “I went to court over it, but the judge said though it was morally wrong to put me out, yet the others had the law on their side, and he had to decide against me.

“I didn’t give up even then, for I barricaded the place and defied ’em to get me out. But the sheriff came and said that was no way to do. He had the law with him, and he said it would be his duty to shoot me if I resisted. He advised going to a higher court, and so, rather than have any bloodshed I gave up, and decided to camp out here until you came. I’ve been here about two weeks now.”

“Then the mine’s gone,” remarked Jerry, sorrowfully.

“We can try the courts,” said Nestor, hopefully.

“It would take years to settle the case,” put in Mr. Snodgrass. “No, I guess you are beaten, boys.”

“I will not give up yet,” said Jerry.

“What are you going to do?” asked Ned.

“I’m going to town, hire the best lawyer I can get, and see what he says. There may be a way out of this yet.”

“That’s the way to talk!” exclaimed Bob. “I’m with you.”

Jerry lost no time. He hurried to the auto, and with Bob for company made the run to town in record time. He was directed to a lawyer's office, and, finding the attorney, who was a young chap, in, paid him a retainer and stated the case briefly.

"I just want to know how we stand, what sort of a claim there is against our title, and what we can do to perfect it," said Jerry.

"It's quite a lot of information to get at in a hurry," said the lawyer, "but I'll do my best. I'll be ready for you at four o'clock this afternoon."

"I'll call for you then," went on Jerry, "and take you back to Nestor's shanty, where you can explain the whole thing to us."

Then the boys, with a feeling of dread that their mine was gone forever, in spite of all they could do, went back to where the others were.



CHAPTER XXVIII

ALL'S WELL THAT ENDS WELL

They found Mr. Bell in much the same condition as before, though Mr. Snodgrass said the wounded man's breathing was a little easier, which was a good sign.

"And what about the mine?" asked the naturalist. Jerry told him the lawyer was coming.

"I'm afraid it will be of little use," said the professor. "Nestor says they had a big lawyer to represent the gang, and they also have a large force in charge of the mine, taking out gold."

"And it's our gold," exclaimed Jerry. "Oh, why didn't we get back sooner?"

"It wouldn't have done much good," spoke Nestor. "I did all I could, but the law was on their side."

"Of course, I didn't mean that you failed," Jerry hastened to add, for fear of hurting the old miner's feelings. "It's too bad, that's all."

After a somewhat gloomy dinner, which the professor tried to liven up by telling jokes and funny stories, Jerry oiled the machine, and, about two o'clock started back to town for the lawyer. He found the attorney waiting for him, with several big law books in a valise.

"Any luck?" asked Jerry.

"Not a great deal," was the answer.

"Well, don't tell us until we are all together," went on Jerry. "I don't want to stand it all alone."

When, on arrival at Nestor's cabin, the lawyer proceeded to tell what he had learned, there were six very attentive listeners.

The attorney went over the ground carefully, and told the boys, Nestor and Professor Snodgrass, much that they had already heard. How, because of a missing owner who held more than a half interest in the mine, the title was not good when the boys preëmpted it. In fact it was still the property of others,

though about to lapse.

“I don’t understand all them legal terms,” put in Nestor, “but didn’t we make a good claim to the government for that mine?”

“You did, as far as it went,” replied the lawyer. “Uncle Sam gave you a title, but did not guarantee that some one did not have a better one, which it seems is the case.”

“But that gang hasn’t a good title either, not if the owner of over half the shares is missing,” went on Nestor.

“No, but it seems, according to the records, that they have some sort of an agreement from this missing man that they are empowered to work the claim until he comes to demand his share.”

“If that’s the case I’m for going up there and driving them out with a gun!” exclaimed Nestor. “They haven’t any more right than we have, and we can at least make them go shares with us until this missing man shows up. What’s the matter with attacking them to-night.”

“If you’re going to resort to lawless means I’ll have to throw up the case,” said the attorney. “That is no way to talk.”

“Nestor doesn’t mean it at all,” put in Jerry. “Of course we will have no battle with that gang.”

“There are two ways we might proceed,” the lawyer went on. “There may be more, but they are the only ones that suggest themselves to me from what time I was able to give to the case.”

“What would you advise?” asked Mr. Snodgrass.

“You can apply to the courts for an injunction to prevent the working of the mine until the missing half-owner shows up.”

“But that would bar us as well as them,” put in Jerry.

“Yes, it would have that effect, if you secured the injunction, which is doubtful. It would be a long and costly litigation, I fear.”

“And what is the other plan?”

“You might try to find the missing man, and buy him out, or make some arrangement with him. From what I can learn he and the others have quarreled and are opposed to each other.”

“Where is the missing man?” asked Bob.

“That is something on which I can not be of the least help to you,” was the reply. “There is nothing to show where he is.”

“Then it would be like looking for a needle in a haystack to search for him, and as long and costly as the injunction means,” commented Mr. Snodgrass.

“I’m afraid it would,” was the lawyer’s answer.

“What is the man’s name?” asked Jerry.

“I have it here,” proceeded the attorney. “It is Mr. Well, no, that’s not it. Oh yes! Here it is. Bell, that’s it. Mr. Jackson Bell.”

“What?” fairly shouted the three boys at once.

“What name?” inquired the professor, wondering if he had heard aright.

“Jackson Bell,” repeated the lawyer. “Why, do you know him?”

“Know him?” went on Jerry, jumping up in his excitement. “Why he is in the next room this very minute! Well of all the strange pieces of luck!”

Then they all tried to tell the lawyer at once the story of the hermit and his son, making such a jumble that the attorney had to beg them to stop, while he listened to one at a time. Finally the tale was related, and the boys and the professor as well, greatly excited, paused to see what the lawyer would say.

“Then I don’t see any further trouble to your getting possession of the mine,” said the attorney. “If Mr. Bell is on your side, and you make a joint application to the court or even to the government agent, I am sure you will be given instant charge of the claim.”

“There is only one difficulty,” said Mr. Snodgrass. “Mr. Bell is wounded. His mind was not strong before the shooting, and it may be altogether gone when he recovers consciousness. In that case—?”

“In that case I’m afraid you are as badly off as before,” finished the lawyer.

The door to the inner room, where Mr. Bell was in the bunk, opened, and Tommy came out, looking worried.

“Is he worse, Tommy?” asked the professor.

“He’s acting very queer,” replied the boy. “He is sitting up in bed, and is trying to get something out from under his shirt. He’s talking something about a mine.”

“He is probably delirious,” said Mr. Snodgrass. “We must have a doctor. I’m afraid it looks bad for us, boys.”

At that instant the form of Mr. Bell, weak and tottering, showed in the doorway. He seemed greatly excited.

“There you are!” he cried tearing open his shirt and throwing a bundle, done up in oiled silk on the table. “There are the papers. There are the proofs to the mine. The gang did not get them after all!”

“Calm yourself,” spoke Mr. Snodgrass, in a soothing tone that one uses to sick children or fever patients.

“I’m all right!” exclaimed Mr. Bell. “Don’t think I’m crazy. I was a little off my head, but the wound the bullet gave me, and the blood I lost, accomplished just what was needed. There, I tell you, are the papers proving my claim to the mine.”

“What mine?” asked the professor, while the others waited in anxiety for the answer.

“The mine we were going to,” responded the old man. “From the description you boys gave of it I recognize it as the same one I have more than a half share in. All the way up here I was trying to recall when I had been here before. I recognized the places, but my mind would not serve me. I had suffered so much that I was almost crazy. Then came the shot, and I did not know anything more, until I just woke up in that room, and remembered all about it. Now we will beat that gang.”

“Hurrah!” cried Jerry, seizing Ned by the arms and starting to dance a hornpipe.

“Are you sure you can not be mistaken about the mine?” asked Mr. Snodgrass, for it seemed hardly possible that the old hermit, whom they had rescued, should turn out to be the much-wanted missing owner.

“There are the papers, you can see for yourself,” replied Mr. Bell.

The lawyer, at a sign from the professor, made a careful examination of the documents.

“They seem to be all right,” he said. “I have no doubt but that you can fully establish your claim, Mr. Bell.”

“It isn’t my claim, sir.”

“Why I thought you said—”

“Everything I have or own is the property of these noble boys and Professor Snodgrass,” went on the former hermit. “They saved my life, and that of my son’s. If I gave them a hundred mines I could not repay them.”

“But we do not want your share,” said Mr. Snodgrass.

“It don’t make any difference what you want, you’ve got to take it,” said Mr. Bell, firmly.

“We can settle that part later,” put in the lawyer. “The thing to do now is to get possession of the mine. If you wish I will act for you.”

“Of course we want you to,” said Jerry.

“Very well. I will take these papers, and go to court with them. If I am successful, as I have no doubt I shall be, I will apply to the sheriff to oust the crowd that is in charge of the mine. Then you and Mr. Bell can take possession.”

“That’s the way to talk!” fairly yelled Nestor, who was anxious to get back to the “diggings.”

The lawyer was hurried back to town in the auto. Nothing could be done that afternoon, as the court was closed. He promised to be on hand early in the morning.

The boys could hardly sleep that night. Mr. Bell seemed to have fully recovered, and, beyond a slight pain where the bullet had hit him, he did not suffer. It was late when they went to bed, and somewhat late when they arose.

“I’m going into town and see what’s doing,” said Jerry after breakfast.

“So am I,” cried Ned and Bob.

“Better not,” went on Jerry. “If I have to bring back the lawyer, and the sheriff and some of his deputies to read the riot act to the gang, I’ll need all the room there is.”

So Jerry went off alone in the car. He did not find the lawyer in, but the attorney’s clerk said he was at court.

“I’ll wait until he comes back,” said Jerry, and he sat down in the office. Two hours later, the lawyer came in.

“What luck?” asked Jerry.

“The very best. I have a peremptory order commanding that crowd to turn the

mine over to your party and Mr. Bell. Come on, we'll get the sheriff and finish the thing right up."

The sheriff was only too glad of a chance for some activity. He and three deputies, well armed, got into the car, and Jerry started off. To the boy the machine never seemed to move so slowly, but several times one of the deputies threatened to jump out if the auto did not slacken up a bit.

Arriving at the cabin, Nestor, the two boys, and Professor Snodgrass were found anxiously waiting.

"Now for the mine!" cried Jerry, as he rapidly explained the success of the mission.

"Wait till I get my gun," said Nestor.

"No shooting unless we have to," warned the sheriff.

Then they advanced on the mine. An eighth of a mile away they were halted by a guard. But an order from the sheriff, and a sight of the command from the court, made the guard give in, and he was sent back to the cabin, in custody of one of the deputies.

Then, without any warning, the party descended on the others of the gang, who were all gathered in the main cabin at dinner.

At first it looked as if there was going to be trouble. Several made an attempt to get their guns, but Nestor, the sheriff, and his man, had covered them, and they saw that the game was up.

"I'll read you this court order," said the sheriff.

"You needn't bother," spoke the leader, whom the boys recognized as one of the men who had held Tommy a captive. Others in the gang were recognizable as men who had tried to capture Mr. Bell at Lost Lake.

"We played a bold game, but we lost," said the leader, as he and his companions, gathering up their baggage, left the cabin, and made their way toward town. They did not go there, however,—since they feared further proceedings,—and were never heard of again.

"Hurrah, now we have our mine back again!" cried Jerry. "I wonder if it is paying?"

"Better than ever, by the looks of this stuff," answered Jim Nestor, picking up some newly-mined ore that lay on ground. "No wonder that crowd wanted to

keep possession of the mine.”

There followed a general jollification. The boys got up a fine dinner, at which the sheriff, his men, and the lawyer were guests. An arrangement was made whereby Mr. Bell should retain a large interest in the mine, while the other share was divided between our friends as before. The lawyer received a generous fee, and the sheriff and his men were not forgotten.

“Well,” said Jerry, a week later, “we came out all right, didn’t we? I presume our adventures are all over now.”

“Don’t be too sure,” put in Bob. “Something else may turn up soon.” And Bob was right, as we shall learn in another volume, to be called, “The Motor Boys Afloat; Or, The Stirring Cruise of the *Dartaway*,” a tale of land and sea.

The days to follow were busy ones for Jim Nestor and the boys. The mine was started up in better shape than ever before, new machinery put in, and extra workmen engaged. Letters were sent to the boys’ folks, telling of all that had happened.

“I want to say one thing,” said Jerry, one day. “And that is, that it feels mighty good to be back in the United States again.”

“Exactly what I say,” returned Ned.

“Right you are,” came from Chunky. He rubbed his hands together. “And as we are back, and all is well, why—er—let us have some dinner.”

And then, with a merry laugh at the lad who never wanted to miss a meal, the others followed Chunky to the table; and here as they sit down to a well-earned repast, we will take our departure.

THE END.

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