

THE
MOTOR
BOYS
ON
A RANCH



CLARENCE
YOUNG



THE MOTOR BOYS



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ON A RANCH

CLARENCE YOUNG

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WITH A FUSILLADE OF REVOLVER SHOTS THE RAIDERS RUSHED TO THE ATTACK.

THE MOTOR BOYS ON A RANCH

OR

Ned, Bob and Jerry Among
the Cowboys

BY

CLARENCE YOUNG

AUTHOR OF "THE MOTOR BOYS SERIES," "THE JACK
RANGER SERIES," ETC.

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The Motor Boys on a Ranch

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WITH A FUSILLADE OF REVOLVER SHOTS THE
RAIDERS RUSHED TO THE ATTACK.

HE MADE GOOD WORK OF BROILING THE CHICKENS.

“THEY’RE NOTHIN’ BUT BOYS AND TENDERFEET AT
THAT!”

“GO SOME” TURNED AND RUSHED AT THE
PROSTRATE, MOTIONLESS FIGURE.



NED, BOB AND JERRY ON A RANCH

CHAPTER I

DISAPPOINTMENT

“Might have known it would turn out this way if we let *him* manage things,” grumbled Ned Slade in disgusted tones as he slumped down on one of the forward lockers of a motor boat that was drifting slowly in the middle of a blue lake. “Why didn’t you look after the details yourself, Jerry?”

“Why, Bob said he would see that everything was all right and——”

“Yes! And this shows how much he ‘saw.’ A chap with compound astigmatism in both blinkers could see better than Bob Baker!”

“Oh, come now,” protested Jerry Hopkins in soothing tones. “Aren’t you a bit rough on our fat chum,” and he glanced toward a stout chap who was bending over the motor of the boat, tinkering with its various parts in an endeavor to set it going again.

“Rough on him?” expostulated Ned. “I should say not! I’m like a piece of silk compared to a bit of sandpaper when I think of the things I could say—and haven’t the heart.”

“Don’t stop on my account!” snapped the heavy-weight, over his shoulder. “Get it out of your system and maybe you’ll feel better.”

“I won’t feel better until you get the engine started, so we won’t have to stay out in this broiling sun. And to think there’s a fine feed waiting us at the other end of the lake if we could only get to it! I should have thought you’d have had common sense enough, Bob, where the eats were concerned, to make sure of getting to them.”

“Say! Look here!” and Bob turned fiercely on his tormentor. He tried to seem angry but the effect of a smudge of oil on one cheek, with a daub of black grease on the end of his nose, while one eye appeared as though it had come off second best in a fistic encounter, caused his two companions to laugh, which altogether spoiled the effect of the vigorous protest on which the youth had started.

“How did I know this was going to happen?” he asked, waving a grimy hand at the engine, while, with the other, he beat a tattoo with a monkey wrench on

the nearest cylinder. "Could I tell she was going to break down as soon as we got out in the middle of the lake?"

"Break down nothing!" scoffed Ned. "You're out of gasoline, that's what's the matter. You didn't have sense enough to see that the tank was full before you started."

"Huh! I s'pose *you* never overlook a little matter like that?" sneered Bob.

"Of course not," and, having spoken thus loftily, not to say superciliously, Ned turned away and gazed across the blue waters of Lake Carmona, now sparkling and rather uncomfortably hot under the June sun.

"Guess you don't remember the time you invited the girls out in the car and got stalled on Mine hill just because of the same little old fact that you forgot the gas?" asked Bob. "How about that?"

"There was a leak in the tank," defended Ned.

"It takes you to tell it."

"Oh, dry up and get started!" exclaimed the other.

"Easy, boys," counseled tall Jerry Hopkins. "This won't get us anywhere. Is the gasoline really gone, Bob?"

"I guess it is," answered the stout lad. "I did forget to have 'em put some in the tank, but I thought there was enough for the trip. Anyhow, you needn't worry about starving. I put in a little sort of snack, as I thought we might get hungry on the way."

A smile replaced the frown that had come over his face during the contention with Ned, and Bob brought forth from a locker a large box wrapped in paper.

"Look what he calls a little snack!" mocked Jerry, laughing. "There's enough for a whole day's rations."

"Oh, not quite," declared the stout lad. "This lake air gives me a wonderful appetite."

"Never knew you to be without an appetite," commented Ned, and his voice was more friendly. "I'll take back some of what I said, Bob. But for the love of sulphur matches, what are we going to do? Eating, pleasurable as it is, isn't going to move the boat."

"I've a little gasoline in the can that I use for priming the cylinders," returned

Bob, after rummaging in the engine locker. “That might take us a little way.”

“Pooh! not a hundred yards,” scoffed Ned.

“Anyhow, lack of gasoline isn’t the only trouble,” went on Bob. “One of the cylinders doesn’t work. It began missing a while back, before the gas gave out. Even with a tank full I couldn’t run the boat until that’s fixed.”

“You get out!” advised Ned. “You forgot the gasoline and that’s all there is to it. And you wanted to have charge of all the arrangements on this little cruise. Well, you’ve had your way, but you won’t again if I know it.

“There’s nothing to do now but row,” he went on. “Not another boat in sight and there isn’t any likelihood of any coming up to this end of the lake to-day. They’re all down at those races. We’re booked for a row, and we ought to make you do it all, Bob Baker.”

“I’ll do my share,” offered the smutty-faced, fat engineer.

“Break out the oars!” cried Jerry. “Never say die! It might be worse. It’ll give us an appetite—rowing. It might be a whole lot worse.”

Ned went aft to where, in a space along the locker tops, the emergency oars were kept. He turned to Jerry and said:

“It couldn’t be!”

“Couldn’t be what?” the tall youth asked in some wonder.

“Any worse. There aren’t any oars!”

“No oars?” cried Jerry.

“Nary an oar!”

Both lads gazed at Bob. He regarded them with a crestfallen countenance.

“Aren’t—aren’t they there?” he asked falteringly.

“Look!” and Ned pointed to the vacant space.

“Hang it all! I did take them out when I was at the dock,” Bob admitted. “I couldn’t get at what was in the locker with the oars on top, so I laid them on the wharf. I meant to put them back again, but——”

Ned groaned and pretended to weep with his head hidden in his arms. Jerry smiled grimly. Bob scratched his head in perplexity.

“Well, I guess the only thing to do is to let the boat drift and wait for someone

to come along and give us a tow,” sighed Jerry. “Meanwhile, there are the eats. Break out the grub, Bob, and we’ll solace ourselves with that.”

“This is the limit!” complained Ned. “If ever I come out with you again, Bob Baker, you’ll know it!”

“And if ever I ask you I’ll kick myself all around the campus,” was the retort.

For a time Ned refused the tasty sandwiches which the stout lad had, with prudent foresight, stowed aboard the motor craft. But the appetizing odor was too much for him and he capitulated, but in no good spirits.

“Cheer up,” advised Jerry. “You’ll get indigestion if you eat with such a sour face, Ned. We’ll get there some time.”

“Yes, and find that my father and Bob’s have gone on with their trip and we have missed seeing them. Dad was going to bring me some dough, too. And I need it,” he added as he turned his pockets inside out. “Not a nickel left, and I want to get tickets for the show to-night.”

For a time the spirit of gloom seemed to settle down over the motor boat and her occupants.

The three chums, Ned, Bob and Jerry, had set off early that afternoon from Boxwood Hall, where they were students, to cross Lake Carmona. They were going to Haredon, a small town on the other side of the body of water, and there Ned and Bob expected to meet their respective fathers who were on a business trip together, and had written that they would stop off to see their sons, and have dinner with them, before resuming their journey.

The boys had hired a large motor boat, as their own, the *Neboje*, as well as their automobile, had already been shipped to Cresville because of the approach of the summer vacation, and started on the trip. The details of the expedition had been left to Bob. Jolly and good-natured, Bob never thought very far ahead, and the double calamity of not having had the gasoline tank filled and having taken out the oars, by which the boat could have been surely, if slowly, propelled, had left the boys becalmed in the middle of Lake Carmona on a hot day.

Owing to the fact that there were some races being held on this day, nearly all the other students had gathered at the lower end of the lake, as had most of the craft of persons living on the shores. This made the middle and upper end deserted of the usual flotilla; so there was scant chance of the boys getting a tow.

They ate for a while in silence, and then Bob had an inspiration.

“I believe it will work!” he cried.

“What now?” asked Ned. “Have you found some way of getting ashore and buying some gasoline?”

“No, but we can put up a sail,” Bob went on. “Here’s the boat hook, and the canvas cover of the engine is stuffed away in the stern.”

He scrambled aft, hauled out a bundle of canvas, and then got the boat hook. For a few seconds Ned and Jerry watched him. Then the tall lad said:

“I believe it will work at that. Bob, you’re not so worse.”

The motor boat, being heavy, did not move very fast under the small sail area the boys spread. But at least they did move, and it was better than being becalmed under a hot sun.

They sailed on for perhaps two miles when they spied another motor boat which was evidently going to pass near them.

“Hail him!” suggested Ned, and they attracted the attention of the lone skipper by toots on the electric horn. The man was a baker who made the round of the shore resorts delivering bread and pastry. He agreed, for a small sum, to tow them to Haredon and, several hours after they had expected to arrive, the boys reached the hotel where Mr. Baker and Mr. Slade had promised to meet them.

“Your fathers aren’t here now,” the clerk told them. “They waited until the last train, then said they’d have to go. They left a note for you, however,” and he handed over a long envelope.

“It’s for you, Ned,” said Jerry, reading the superscription.

“But there’s something in it for each of us,” Ned declared, opening the envelope.

“Mine’s a letter from mother,” Jerry remarked, as he recognized his parent’s handwriting. Mrs. Hopkins was a widow.

“Mine’s from dad—short and to the point,” chuckled Bob. “He says he reckons I took so much time to eat that I missed connections and couldn’t arrive on time. They’ll be here again next week, though.”

“That’s what my father says,” sighed Ned. “Well, it’s a disappointment,” he went on, turning over the paper in his hand, “especially as I did need that money.”

“Maybe he left some for you with the hotel clerk,” suggested Bob. “Ask, and, if he didn’t, I can lend you some.”

“Thanks,” returned Ned. “I’ll ask.”

The hotel clerk was apologetic enough, but, unfortunately, no money had been left for any of the boys. Ned turned away, disappointment showing on his face. As he was debating with himself what was best to do he saw, on the floor, half concealed by a time-table rack near the front desk, a folded paper.

Half mechanically, he picked it up, unfolded it and, as he glanced over the first few lines of writing, uttered an exclamation of surprise.

“What’s the matter?” inquired Jerry. “Did you find some money after all?”

“Not quite as good as that,” was Ned’s answer. “This seems to be a letter to my father from his ranch foreman. Dad must have dropped it from his pocket when he was standing here paying his bill. And it’s got *some* news in it, fellows! Listen to this!

“Rustlers have been stealing cattle from the ranch, and the foreman suggests that dad come out in a hurry, or else send someone, to take quick action, as they haven’t been able to get the thieves. This is bad business sure enough!” and Ned’s face took on a serious look.



CHAPTER II

HINT OF A MYSTERY

“What’s that?” asked Jerry Hopkins, sharply. He had been reading over again a portion of his mother’s letter, and had not quite caught what Ned had said. The latter repeated his statement.

“Cattle rustlers! Plain thieves, in other words; eh?” exclaimed Jerry. “That’s no joke out West, I believe. In the early days ranch owners used to suffer big losses from the acts of rustlers, but I thought it had all died out.”

“It doesn’t seem to have done so—not on dad’s ranch,” went on Ned. “This letter from the foreman must have been quite a shock to him. He got it a day or so ago, I guess,” and Ned glanced at the date.

“I didn’t know your father was interested in a Western ranch,” remarked Jerry.

“It’s a comparatively new venture for dad—going into the cattle business,” Ned replied. “He figured, though, that with the price of beef as high as it is, and going higher, he could make money. But I guess if this sort of thing keeps up he’ll come out the little end of the horn. I’ll read the letter to you.”

And while Ned’s chums gather around to hear the letter, which he prepared to explain, I will take just a moment to give my new readers, who may meet Ned, Bob and Jerry for the first time in this volume, an idea of the books that precede this.

Under the name, “The Motor Boys,” our three heroes made their first bow to the public. The boys lived in Cresville, not far from Boston, and had many good times together. Jerry Hopkins was the son of Mrs. Julia Hopkins, a wealthy widow. Aaron Slade, Ned’s father, was a prosperous department store keeper, and Andrew Baker was president of the largest bank in the city where he lived.

The boys’ first experiences with gasoline vehicles had to do with motorcycles, but it was not long before they had an automobile, and in that they took many trips, overland, into Mexico, over the plains and home again. Then the motor boys went in for boating, and sailed not only on the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans but in strange waters.

On many of their trips the boys were accompanied by Professor Uriah Snodgrass, and he did not balk even when they went in for airships, in which line of locomotion they were very successful. Professor Snodgrass—at present an instructor in Boxwood Hall—was a great seeker after queer forms of insect life and his zeal sometimes got him into odd predicaments.

I had the pleasure, in a number of volumes, of telling you of the activities of the motor boys until it seemed there were no more worlds left for them to conquer. But they heard the call of the under sea, and, venturing into a submarine, they found life beneath the waves fully as remarkable as above, if not more so.

The parents of the boys began to think the lads were getting too much idle fun. They wanted their sons to have a better education. So our three heroes had been sent to a boarding school. “The Motor Boys at Boxwood Hall, or, Ned, Bob and Jerry as Freshmen,” the volume immediately preceding this, tells of new adventures for Ned Slade, Bob Baker and Jerry Hopkins.

Of the merry times they had, and how they were instrumental in “putting Boxwood Hall on the map,” in athletics, you may read in that book. This present story opens with the boys coming to an end of their first year in the place, with the prospect of a long summer vacation, and at this moment we find them puzzled over the foreman’s letter to Mr. Slade.

“He says,” began Ned, reading the missive again. “He says——”

“Who’s he?” demanded Jerry.

“Dick Watson, foreman of dad’s Square Z ranch,” explained Ned.

“Square Z ranch—what does that mean?” asked Bob.

“Guess you’ve forgotten all the western lingo you used to know, haven’t you?” Ned asked. “The brand on dad’s cattle is a Z in a hollow square, and his ranch is named that.”

“Cut out the explains,” begged Jerry, “and get down to facts. What about the cattle rustlers?”

“Well, Dick writes dad that a lot of his choice stock has been run off the ranch,” went on Ned, reading the letter and summarizing the information he gathered from it. “It isn’t the first time, it seems, for the thieving had been going on before dad bought the place. Dick was foreman then and dad kept him on,” Ned explained. “He’s one of the best there is, so all reports of him say.

“But he writes that never before were the cattle thieves so bold or so successful. They have wiggled out of every trap set for them and seem to laugh at the cowboys. Dad’s ranch isn’t the only one that has suffered either, for Dick tells of others. He ends up his letter by warning dad that he’ll have to do something if he doesn’t want to lose all he invested in the place.”

“And something ought to be done!” declared Bob. “Think of all the prospective roast beef that’s being stolen! Those cattle thieves ought to be—they ought to be——” and Bob paused to consider a punishment to fit the crime.

“They ought to be kept on a vegetable diet!” laughed Jerry. “That would leave so much more roast beef for Bob—eh, Chunky?”

“Well, I’d like a chance to chase after ’em,” declared the fat lad. “What’s your father going to do, Ned?”

“I don’t know. This is the first I have heard about it. I suppose I’d better send this letter back to him. He may want it to refer to.”

“Too bad we missed him—and my dad, too,” put in Bob. “I’m sorry I forgot about the gas, but——”

“Oh, well, there’s no use worrying about it now,” was Ned’s philosophical comment. He was now in better humor. “If I only had some of the money I’m sure dad would have given me——”

“Here!” cried Bob, eagerly producing a few bills. “Take half of this until you can get yours. I sha’n’t need it. Besides, I’ve got credit with the proctor.”

“I haven’t—worse luck,” grumbled Ned. “Well, I’ll take this, and make you an I. O. U. later. Thanks. And now let’s have a real meal. Ah, I beat you to it!” he exclaimed as he saw Bob about to make the same suggestion. “We’ll eat and go back to Boxwood. Then I’ll write to dad and send him this letter.”

The meal progressed merrily. It was a holiday at the school, the occasion being the regatta on the lower end of the lake, and the boys, having already missed the racing, were in no haste to return.

“Make sure you have plenty of gas this time, Bob,” advised Ned, as the three went down to the dock where the motor boat was tied.

The trip back was uneventful, if we except the fact that Bob nearly fell overboard when making a sudden grab for his hat that had blown off.

“Yes, this sure is queer business,” said Ned, musingly, when the three chums

were gathered in his room, which adjoined the apartments of Bob and Jerry.

“What’s queer?” the tall lad questioned, rather absent-mindedly.

“This cattle-stealing out on dad’s ranch,” and Ned glanced over the foreman’s letter again.

“Seems to interest you,” observed Bob.

“Sure! Why wouldn’t it? What gets me, though, is why the foreman or some of his cowboys on the ranch haven’t been able to get on the trail of the thieves. Watson seems to think there is something of a mystery about it.”

“How mystery?” inquired Jerry.

“In the way the rustlers cover their tracks after they run off a bunch of choice steers. There’s something queer about that. I may have to take a trip out there myself, and help clear up the mystery,” and Ned assumed a whimsical air of importance.

“Mystery; eh?” cried Chunky. “Say, I wouldn’t mind taking a chance at that myself!”

“Not so bad,” came drawlingly from Jerry Hopkins. “We haven’t made our vacation plans yet, and trying to find and frustrate a band of mysterious cattle rustlers might not be the worst way of having a good time.”

Something seemed to startle Ned Slade into action. He folded the foreman’s letter, slapped it sharply on the edge of the table and cried:

“Fellows, I’ve got the greatest idea ever! If we three——”

There came an imperative knock on the door, followed by the command:

“Come on! Open up there!”

Startled, the three chums looked at one another.



CHAPTER III

WHEN THE WHEEL CAME OFF

“What was that?” asked Bob, and when it is added that he whispered the question it may better be understood what a hold the finding of the letter had taken on the boys. Already they seemed to be within the mystery at which it hinted.

Then Jerry realized the futility of Bob’s query.

“It *sounded* very much like a knock on the door,” and his tone was humorously sarcastic.

“Say! are you going to keep me here all day? What’s the matter in there? Open up! I’ve got news for you!”

“It’s Jim Blake!” exclaimed Jerry, now recognizing the voice of the person on the other side of the door.

“Of course it is!” came the reply. “What’s the matter? Is Bob Baker giving one of his spreads? If he is, let a fellow in on it, can’t you? Open the door!”

“Come in; it isn’t locked,” called out Jerry. “But there’s nothing doing in the eats. What’s up?”

“I don’t know,” answered Jim Blake, whose ability to control a slow and fast ball had gained for him the honor of ’varsity pitcher. “I don’t know what it is, but there’s something doing all right.”

“In what way?” Jerry asked, as Jim slumped down in an ancient chair, the joints of which squeaked in protest, thereby moving Jerry to utter a caution.

“Oh, I won’t break it,” said Jim. “But say, do you fellows know that Professor Snodgrass is on his way to pay you chaps a visit?”

“We didn’t know it,” said Bob, coming back from a quiet trip to his own room, meanwhile munching some chocolate, which he generally kept on hand to use in cases of emergency. “No, we didn’t know it, but he’s none the less welcome.”

“Oh, I know he’s quite friendly with you boys,” went on Jim, “but I thought

maybe he had it in for you this time.”

“What makes you think so?” asked Ned.

“And how do you know he’s coming here?” was Jerry’s question.

“I’ll answer the last first, like working out some of those tough back-handed problems,” laughed Jim.

“Black-handed, did you say?” came from Bob.

“Pretty nearly that—yes. But the reason I happen to know the professor is coming here is that I passed him in the laboratory hall a few minutes ago. He held something tight in his hand, and he was awfully excited. His clothes were covered with mud, his hat was dented in, his collar torn and his coat was split up the back. He was hurrying along, talking to himself as he often does, and what he said was:

“I must get to Ned, Bob and Jerry at once! This is terrible!”

The three motor boys looked at one another, surprise plainly showing on their faces.

“What——” began Jerry.

“How did he——” Ned commenced.

“Maybe he’s been——” And that was as far as Bob got, for Jim interrupted with:

“I thought maybe you fellows had been up to some game or trick with him, which would account for his condition. And from what he said I thought maybe he was on his way here to have his revenge, one way or another. So I cut on ahead to warn you. Better lock your door and keep quiet. I’ll slip out and——”

“You’ll do nothing of the sort!” exclaimed Jerry. “And we won’t lock our door against Professor Snodgrass. He’s welcome to come in any time he likes.”

“Oh, well, if you’ve made up your minds to take your medicine, why that’s a different proposition,” said Jim with a shrug of his shoulders. “Only I thought I’d tip you off so you could——”

“Thanks, it’s kind of you,” murmured Jerry. “But, as a matter of fact, we haven’t been up to any mischief.”

“But what put the professor in this condition?” Jim demanded. “I know he’s always on the lookout for queer bugs and such things, and that he’ll do almost

anything to get a rare specimen. But I never saw him quite so badly off as this before, and he seemed very much in earnest about getting to you. Still you know your own business, I s'pose. Hark!"

They all listened. In the corridor outside the sound of rapidly approaching footsteps could be heard.

"There he is!" exclaimed Jerry, as he opened the door.

In the doorway a queer sight stood revealed. A little bald-headed man gazed unblinkingly through the powerful lenses of his spectacles at the four boys. His condition was just about as Jim had described, and the three chums noted the tightly-clenched hand of the "bugologist," as the delightful scientist was dubbed behind his back, though with no disrespect attached to it, for the boys were very fond of him.

"Ah, Ned, Bob and Jerry, I am very glad to find you in," began Professor Snodgrass, with a little jerky bow.

"It's a good deal better than being found out, sometimes," murmured Jim. The professor, not having heard the comment, nodded in friendly fashion to the pitcher.

"What has happened?" asked Ned, as he pushed forward a chair for the little man. The teacher seemed rather out of breath and considerably excited.

"What's the matter?" chimed in Bob. "Is everything all right?"

"Well—yes—I think so—perhaps." Professor Snodgrass was not quite certain about the matter, it seemed. "At any rate, I have him," he went on.

"Who?" Jerry gasped. "The person who is responsible for your condition?"

"Oh, no—er—my condition? Oh, I see," and for the first time the scientist seemed aware that he was greatly disheveled. "I—er—I *do* seem a bit mussed," he admitted. That was putting it mildly.

"But I got him," went on the professor. "Have you a strong box that you aren't using?" he asked.

The latter, guessing what was coming, produced one that met the professor's requirements. Then, sliding back the cover, he held his clenched hand over the box and dropped into it something that fell with a thud, like that an inert toad or frog might produce.

"There you are!" exclaimed the scientist, quickly slipping the cover into place.

“The finest specimen of a one-spot lizard I have ever caught! I certainly *am* in luck!”

“One would hardly believe it to look at you,” said Jerry with a laugh. He and his chums were on terms of more or less familiarity with the professor.

The scientist had known the boys a number of years and had made several trips with them. To some his actions might seem grotesque when he was anxiously searching for some rare animal or insect, but the boys knew him well enough to think little of what, to others, might be absurdities. And no one would ever think the professor foolish when once they knew of his attainments. He had written many books, which were authorities on their special topics, and he had more honorary degrees from different schools of learning than he could recall, off-hand.

“You say you caught the lizard, but it looks more as though he had caught *you*,” laughed Jerry.

“He gave you a pretty good tussle, at all events,” remarked Ned.

“Oh, you are referring to my clothes—and—er—my general condition, I suppose,” said the professor with a smile. “Well, it is not altogether my fault this time. I had little or no difficulty in capturing this lizard, but my appearance is due to what happened when the automobile lost a wheel.”

“Lost a wheel?” chorused the boys. “Were you in an automobile catching lizards?”

“No, I had already captured this fine specimen, and I was riding back with it to the college in the machine, when the wheel came off.”

“What made the wheel come off?” Bob queried. “Must have been a queer kind of machine. Did the wheel just roll off?”

“No, I think it was broken off the axle when the auto toppled down the hill,” said the professor calmly, as he opened the top of the box a trifle to take a peep at his specimen.

“Toppled down the hill! Did an automobile in which you were riding topple down a hill?” asked Jerry in astonishment.

“It did,” the professor answered. “It went over and over. I was made quite dizzy, but I kept tight hold of the lizard. And when we came to a stop, after crashing into a tree, I noticed that the wheel was gone.”

“Great Scott!” cried Ned. “When did all this happen—and where? Aren’t you hurt? Hadn’t you better see a doctor?”

“Ha! I knew there was something I was to remember! It’s a doctor!” cried Professor Snodgrass in triumph. “Your father wants you to send a doctor to him at once, Ned.”

“My father—wants a doctor?” faltered Ned. “What for?”

“Because he was slightly hurt in the same accident when the wheel came off the auto,” gently explained the professor. “It isn’t anything serious, though. He’s at the hotel in town and your father is with him, Bob. That’s what I came to tell you. But there is no need to worry.”

“Well, of all the——” began Ned.

“What in the world——” murmured Bob.

“Don’t stop to talk!” cried Jerry. “Let’s get a machine, hunt up a doctor, and go to the hotel at once. What does it all mean, Professor Snodgrass? No! don’t stop to tell me. You can explain later. Lively, fellows! Come on!”

“Anything I can do?” asked Jim. “Say the word!”

“You might get a machine for us,” suggested Jerry.

“I’ll get Charlie Moore’s,” offered Jim. “He isn’t using it.”

Out he rushed, leaving Ned, Bob and Jerry to get ready, for they had taken off coats, ties and collars on reaching their rooms. They dressed hurriedly, Jerry meanwhile asking Professor Snodgrass if the scientist himself were not in need of medical treatment.

“Not in the least, I assure you,” was the answer. “Fortunately, I was in the rear, among a lot of blankets and cushions, and they made a sort of buffer for me. Your father, Ned, and Mr. Baker were riding in the front seat.”

“But what in the world were they doing in an automobile around here?” Ned questioned. “They were supposed to be in a train making a business trip.”

“They said they had to change their plans, and they were on their way back to Haredon in the auto and, incidentally, they were going to stop off to see you,” explained Professor Snodgrass. “They picked me up along the road. Then the accident happened, and I told them I’d come on and let you boys know. Your father, Ned, said it was very important.”

“Auto’s waiting!” came the hail of Jim from the ground under the chums’ windows, and without waiting for Professor Snodgrass, the boys ran down the stairs.



CHAPTER IV

“WE’LL STOP IT!”

“I can’t understand it,” said Ned, as they swung along in the borrowed car, Jerry driving.

“Nor I,” added Bob. “What are our fathers doing around here now, when they were in such a hurry to be on their way that they couldn’t wait at Haredon when we were an hour or so late?”

The distance from Boxwood Hall to the town of Fordham, the nearest railroad station to the institution, was about two miles, and if speed laws were violated by the boys no one took them to task for it.

Dusk was just settling when they reached the hotel, and the clerk and those in the lobby looked up in surprise as the students rushed across the tiled floor toward the desk.

“Some of that hazing business,” ventured a drummer, as he got out of the way of the rush.

The clerk evidently thought the same thing, and was about to call for the hotel detective and a porter or two (for sometimes the Boxwood lads went in for rather strenuous times), when Ned, noting the looks cast toward them and realizing that their actions were being misconstrued, called out to the clerk before they reached the desk:

“What room is Mr. Slade in?”

“And Mr. Baker, too?” added Bob.

“Oh!” There was distinct relief in the clerk’s voice. “Are you the boys the gentlemen are expecting? Well, you’re to go right up. Front!” he called, and struck a bell which brought a diminutive boy, with two rows of brass buttons down his jacket front, up to the desk on a slide.

“Show these gentlemen up to Number Nineteen,” said the clerk, with a wave of his hand.

“Dis way!” drawled the hotel Mercury, and the three boys followed.

Ned and Bob were, naturally, worried about the physical condition of their fathers, and Jerry was anxious to know what it all meant—Mr. Slade and Mr. Baker coming back unexpectedly from their important business trip to visit their sons at Boxwood Hall.

“Why wouldn’t a letter or a telegram have answered?” Jerry wondered, and Bob and Ned would have wondered also only they were worried lest the accident might have been more serious than the professor had admitted.

A moment later Bob and Ned, with Jerry in the background, stood before the door indicated to them by the bell boy.

“Come in!” called a voice as Ned knocked, and he breathed a sigh of relief as he recognized his father’s tones, their usual vigor indicating that the injuries could not be very serious.

The boys entered to behold Mr. Slade propped up in an easy chair, one leg stretched out in front of him on a pile of cushions placed in another chair, while wound around his head were white bandages.

Mr. Baker sat in another chair, but his legs seemed intact. One arm was in a sling, however, and his face was adorned, or unadorned, if you please, with strips of adhesive plaster.

“Oh, Dad! For the love of football! what have you been doing?” asked Ned, as he advanced toward Mr. Slade with outstretched hand.

“Easy, Son, easy!” cautioned his father. “That leg’s badly bruised. Don’t touch it or inflict any new injury, for I’ll almost have it amputated before I let that doctor touch it again. But sit down, boys, and we’ll talk business.”

“How are you, Dad?” asked Bob.

“All right, Son. Only I’ll have to give you my left hand. My right is cut and scratched, but, fortunately, no bones broken. So you got the professor’s message all right, I see.”

“Yes, we got it—after a fashion,” said Jerry, grimly. “He began with a lizard, worked up to the broken wheel, told about the roll down hill, and finally admitted that you were hurt.”

“He told you by easy stages then,” remarked Mr. Slade. “We asked him not to alarm you.”

“He didn’t,” affirmed Bob. “But what’s it all about?”

“Yes, what?” chimed in Ned. “We can’t, for the life of us, guess. End the suspense, Dad!”

“I lost an important letter, somewhere between the hotel in Haredon, where we stopped to wait for you boys, and Leighton, where I had to make a business call,” explained Mr. Slade. “That is, I missed the letter when I got there.

“I thought possibly I might have left it in the room Mr. Baker and I engaged for a short time at the Haredon hotel, so I ’phoned the clerk and asked him to take a look. He did, he said, but there was no trace of the letter anywhere about the place.

“Then I concluded I might have lost it somewhere along the road, and, too, I had an idea that clerk didn’t make any too careful a search. So Mr. Baker and I decided to come back here, or, rather go back to Haredon. And as we were losing time, anyhow, we concluded we might as well lose more and stop off to see you. We were sorry we missed you, but as things were then we didn’t think we could wait.

“So we started back, hiring a machine to travel in, and—well, I guess the professor told you what happened. It was an unfortunate accident, but it might easily have been worse. Neither of us had any bones broken, though I don’t know but what a bruised leg, like mine, pains almost as much as a broken one. Now you have the whole explanation, boys, as to why we are here. We sent for you, thinking you would be able to help us. I want you, Ned, to go to that hotel and see if you can find the letter.

“It contained some important information that I must act on at once, and I need it to refer to. If you can find it——”

Ned interrupted his father by stepping forward with the missive he had picked up in the hotel lobby.

With surprise showing on his face, Mr. Slade unfolded the missive, and as he realized what it was he cried:

“Where in the world did you get it? Is this a case of mind reading, and did you know what I was coming back for, and go after the letter?”

“Nothing as occult as that,” laughingly answered Ned. “We simply picked it up where you must have dropped it as you paid your bill at the Haredon hotel desk.”

“That’s right!” admitted Mr. Slade. “I did pull out my wallet there to get

money to settle for our room and meal. The letter must have come out with it. I'm obliged to you, Ned. This is very important—how important you can hardly guess.”

“I can in part, Dad, for I took the liberty of reading the letter. I didn't realize what it was at first.”

“Oh, that's all right. I should have told you, anyhow.”

“But what about a doctor?” Ned asked. “The professor said you wanted us to get one for you, and that's why we came on with such a rush.”

“Oh, that was my fault,” explained Mr. Baker. “When we got clear of the machine, and were being brought on here by a passing motorist, I suggested that you boys had better be sent for and asked to get us a physician, as you would probably know best which medical man would suit your father, Ned, and myself. But, as it happened, we were both bleeding pretty freely, though not seriously, and the clerk here didn't want us to wait about having any special physician. He sent for Dr. Mitchell, who did very well by us, I think.”

“The very one we would have picked out!” cried Ned. “He's considered the best in town.”

“Glad to know we didn't make any mistake,” said Mr. Slade. “Well, getting back this letter simplifies matters. There's no need for you to make that trip to Haredon, Ned. Though you might, if you will, telephone the hotel clerk there and tell him I have the paper I was looking for.”

“I will, Dad. Sorry you're so battered up.”

“Oh, well, it might be worse. It's going to interfere with my plans, though, for no doubt I'll be laid up here a few days. I'm getting stiff now, and I know I can't travel to-morrow.”

“Did you count on going on out to your ranch, Dad, and trying to catch those cattle rustlers yourself?” asked Ned, eagerly.

“Well, I don't know that I was exactly planning to go myself,” answered Mr. Slade, slowly. “But something has to be done, and soon, too. I didn't tell you,” he went on, “but I happened to miss this letter when I looked for it after I received a telegram from Watson on my arrival in Leighton.”

“You mean he telegraphed you after he wrote this letter?” Ned asked.

“Yes, a little while ago. His wire was filed this morning, and was to the effect

that another choice bunch of my steers was run off last night.”

“Whew!” whistled Ned. “That’s surely bad.”

“It certainly is, Son! And it’s got to stop!”

“How did Watson know where to find you?” asked Ned of his father.

“He didn’t. He telegraphed me at my office, and as they knew my route they sent on the message.”

“I see. But what are you going to do?” and Ned’s voice had in it an eager note.

“Well, that’s one of the reasons we came on to Boxwood,” said Mr. Baker. “Watson suggested, in his wire, that I send out some New York or Boston detective to the ranch to see what he could do. The cowboys, though they’re all right at their own business, don’t seem to be much of a success as sleuths. I happen to know one or two New York private detectives, one of whom did some work for me a few years ago. So I’ve decided to engage him, and what I want you to do, Ned, is to go on to New York, explain matters to him, and hire him. I’d do it myself only I’m laid up, as you see, and Mr. Baker has other matters to engage him. I think you can attend to the detective end of the business as well as I. So, if you can arrange to make the trip, I’ll give you more details which you can pass on to Peck. That’s the detective’s name—Henry Peck.”

“Well, Dad,” returned Ned, slowly, “I suppose I *could* go to New York all right, but I don’t *want* to—to be frank with you.”

Ned’s chums looked curiously at him. It was not at all like their friend to object to his father’s wishes.

“You don’t want to go?” repeated Mr. Slade. “Well, Ned, of course I don’t want to take you away from your studies, but——”

“Oh, it isn’t a question of studies, Dad. I’m all through, as far as they are concerned. This is the last week. But I think you don’t need any New York detective.”

“Why not?” demanded Mr. Slade. “Don’t you suppose I want the thefts of my cattle stopped?”

“Sure you do,” and Ned smiled and winked at his chums, who themselves did not quite see his drift.

“Well, then get ready to go to New York and engage that detective,” and Mr. Slade spoke a bit sharply, for his leg pained him.

“Oh, Dad!” cried Ned, his eyes shining as he hurriedly arose from his chair. “Let the sleuth go! As for the stealing of your cattle, *we’ll* stop it!”

“Who’ll stop it?” repeated Mr. Slade, as if in a daze.

“We’ll stop it, Dad! We were just wondering where we’d spend our summer vacation and now we know. It will be out on your Square Z ranch solving the mystery of the cattle thieves among the cowboys! Hurrah, fellows! Off for the West once again!”



CHAPTER V

LAST DAYS AT BOXWOOD

Mr. Slade glanced across the room at his friend Mr. Baker. The latter returned the look, and, had one observed carefully, he might have seen the shadow of a wink pass between the two men. Then Mr. Slade slowly, but with an evident air of firmness, shook his head.

“What is it?” asked his son.

“I’m sorry, Ned; but we can’t consider your proposition—not for an instant.”

“You mean you won’t let us go out to the ranch to try our luck at discovering the cattle rustlers?”

“That’s it, Son. This is a business proposition—not a vacation lark, as you seem to think.”

“I didn’t say that, Dad. I mean business—we all mean business. Don’t we?” and Ned appealed to his chums.

“Of course we do!” chimed in stout Bob. “Why can’t we go out there and trace the cattle thieves as well as a New York detective who wouldn’t know a prairie dog’s burrow from a dried water hole? Come on, Dad, say something!” and he appealed to his father who, so far, had done little talking. “Let us go out West. We can get to the bottom of the mystery as well as any one. That is, if there is a mystery.”

“Oh, there’s a mystery surely enough,” said Mr. Slade. “There’s no question of that. The rustlers haven’t left the semblance of a trail to follow, if we can believe Watson—and I have every confidence in him. But I wouldn’t, for a moment, think of letting you boys try your hand at this. Why, there’s danger in it! Those rustlers are unscrupulous scoundrels—they shoot first and ask questions afterward. You can’t take any chances with men like that!”

Jerry and Bob saw their chum Ned give himself a little shake. They had observed the same action on other occasions—notably when Ned was at bat in a tight place in a ball game, or when he knew he was going to be called on to take the pigskin in a rush through tackle and guard to make a much-needed

touchdown. The same look Ned's face wore at such times was on it now. He was girding himself for some fray—albeit a mental one.

“Just one moment, Dad,” he said in a quiet voice. “I agree with all you say about this being a man's job, dangerous and calling for ingenuity. And I'm not going to urge this on you just for the sake of letting us have a little fun. We'll get some fun out of it—I don't mean that we won't—but it isn't going to be *all* fun. I'm in earnest when I ask you to let us have a try at this.

“Now give me a few seconds more,” he quickly said, as he observed that his father was about to speak. “As I said, I know it's a man's job. But I ask you if we three aren't equal to one man?”

He indicated by a sweeping gesture himself and his two chums.

“Well, yes, in general appearance, huskiness and ability to take care of yourselves under ordinary circumstances, I'd say you were any one man's equal, if not more,” conceded Mr. Slade.

“Two and a half, easily,” came from Mr. Baker, who seemed to be enjoying the situation.

“All right, you admit that then,” and Ned seemed to be getting ready for an argument, as he often did in some of the college debates. “Now for point number one. Do you remember, Dad, and you, too, Mr. Baker, how we made out that time we took the trip on the Atlantic in our motor boat? You didn't think, then, that we'd get what we went after; but we did.”

“Yes, you did,” admitted Mr. Baker, slowly.

“And after that,” went on Ned, like an attorney following up an argument in court, “we made an airship. You said, Dad, you didn't believe it would go up; but it did.”

“Yes, and we got the fortune in it, too!” added Bob, who had remained silent as long as was possible for him.

“That's right!” exclaimed Mr. Baker. “The boys certainly turned the trick that time.”

“And then,” went on Ned, relentlessly, “do you recall how we patrolled the border for Uncle Sam, and caught the Canadian smugglers, when nobody else could get a line on them?”

Mr. Slade scratched his head reflectively.

“Well, I do give you credit for that,” he said. “I never thought you’d do it. But _____”

“Well, if we caught those smugglers in the air where there wasn’t much of a trail to follow, why can’t we get after the cattle rustlers?” demanded Ned. “This ought to be a whole lot easier.”

“He’s got you there!” laughed Mr. Baker.

The tide seemed to be turning in favor of the boys.

“Just what is it you propose to do?” asked Mr. Slade at length. This much was a concession.

“Go out there, size up the situation, find out what the facts are and then—*act*,” was Ned’s prompt answer.

“Hum!” said Mr. Slade, musingly. “I admit, Ned, to be perfectly fair, that you boys have certainly done well in the past. But this is a new proposition. You’ve got to deal with cunning and unscrupulous men.”

“It won’t be the first time,” observed Ned. “Look at the trouble we had with our Western mine. It isn’t as though we didn’t know something of men and their ways, Dad, and of the West.”

“No, that’s so. You have been out there. Oh! I don’t know. What do you say, Baker?” and Mr. Slade turned suddenly to his friend.

“I leave it all to you, Slade. You’re more interested than I am. As far as Bob is concerned, if you want to let the lads try their hand, I won’t stand in his way. The more experience he gets the better off in after life—if he takes care of himself.”

“Trying to put the whole burden on me,” said Mr. Slade with a laugh. “I don’t know whether I told you or not,” he went on to his son, “but Mr. Baker has some money invested in this ranch. So he is losing, as well as I, when the cattle rustlers are active.”

“Then let us go out there and stop ’em!” cried Ned. “I’m sure we can do it. You’d go, wouldn’t you, Jerry?”

“Well, I’d like to make the attempt,” said the tall lad quietly, “though I don’t know that we can guarantee results.”

“But we’ll make a big effort!” exclaimed Ned. “Come on, Dad, be nice and say we may go.”

Once more Mr. Slade seemed to be thinking seriously. Then he slowly said:

“All right. As long as friend Baker is willing I’ll give in, though I have a sort of feeling it won’t amount to anything—your going out there.”

“Just you wait and see!” laughed Ned. “We’ll show results before you know it. Say, fellows, this is great! And I have another idea.”

“He’s full of ’em to-day,” commented Jerry, smiling.

“We’ll make the trip in our big car,” went on Ned, not noticing the interruption. “We’ve gone on long tours in it before, and it’s a lot more fun than riding in stuffy trains. We’ll take the auto, and send our airship on ahead of us, to be ready when we get there.”

“Better reverse the process,” suggested Mr. Slade. “If this business is going to be done by you boys, the sooner the better. The longer you wait the more of my cattle will be stolen. Better go on out in your airship, and use your auto when you arrive at Square Z ranch. I don’t believe I can afford the time to have you make the trip in your big car. It would take three weeks at least.”

“All right, we’ll take the airship,” conceded Ned. He and his chums would have agreed to walk to the ranch for the exciting pleasure they expected to have after they arrived. “We’re in just as much of a hurry as you, Dad, to get at the bottom of this mystery.”

“Well, then,” went on Mr. Slade, “I’ll wire Watson you’re coming, and give you a letter of introduction to him. And now one last thing. This is strictly business! I’m letting you go a little against my better judgment, but maybe you’ll produce results. But, remember, business before pleasure, though if you can get any fun out of the trip, why, have it. Only take care of yourselves. Now you had better get your affairs in shape. You’ll soon be through at Boxwood, you say?”

“Yes, we could start West to-morrow if we had to, Dad,” replied Ned.

“Oh, I don’t know that there’s any such rush as that. But the sooner the better. Now we’ll try to be as comfortable here as we can. Run over this evening if you get time. Ouch! but my leg hurts!”

“How did the accident happen?” asked Jerry, as he and his chums prepared to leave for Boxwood Hall.

“Oh, I was driving the car, and I made too sharp a turn in my hurry, I suppose. The first I knew the machine had left the road and was rolling down the hill. We were tossed out and did some separate rolling on our own account, which,

probably, saved our lives.”

The chums left, promising to return in the evening, and as the door closed on them Mr. Slade rang for the bell-boy and requested a telegraph blank.

“Going to wire Watson?” asked Mr. Baker.

“No, I’m going to wire Peck.”

“You mean the New York detective?”

“Yes. I think I’ll engage him.”

“But I thought you said you were going to let the boys try to solve the mystery. I was going to ask you, now that they are gone, if you think it wise. But _____”

“Oh, well, I’m going to let them *try*,” said Mr. Slade with a smile. “At the same time I think it’s a good thing to have two strings to your bow. I’ll send the detective on after the boys to sort of watch over them, and he’ll be there on the ground in case they fail. But don’t tell the boys.”

“I won’t,” promised Mr. Baker with a smile, as the bell-boy took the dispatch Mr. Slade had written.



Out on the Boxwood campus bright fires gleamed. Around them circled chanting students casting into the flames various articles, from books, the study of which had ceased, to broken baseball bats, torn gloves and other tokens. The silence of the darkness was broken by more or less weird chants.

It was the closing of the term at Boxwood Hall and the time-honored observance of it was in full swing. It was several days after the accident to Mr. Slade and Mr. Baker. The latter was able to be out, and Mr. Slade had the promise that by the middle of the following week he could walk around on crutches.

Meanwhile, messages had gone to and come from Square Z ranch. The boys had started their preparations and then had entered with zest into the fun of the last days at Boxwood.

“Where are you fellows going to spend your vacation?” asked Tom Bacon of the three inseparables. “I’m getting up a yachting party, and I’d like first rate to

have you join.”

“Sorry; but we’re going on a Western trip in our big aeroplane,” said Jerry.

“Hum! That sounds good. Well, some other time then. Look! There goes Prexy for the final,” and he pointed to the figure of Dr. Anderson Cole, head of Boxwood, who, as was the custom, came out to the senior fire to deliver the ancient Greek ode composed in honor of the departing class.

“Mustn’t miss that!” cried Ned, as he, Bob and Jerry started to run toward the biggest blaze. All the other lads paid final tribute to the graduates in this form.

Jerry felt someone tugging at his coat, and, glancing behind him, beheld Professor Snodgrass.

“Oh!” cried Jerry. “I beg your pardon,” though he did not know just why he should say that. “You’re out late, aren’t you?”

“No, Jerry. You see the bright fires attract so many moths and other insects, that I am making a fine collection. I have all my boxes full, and would you mind letting me take your cap to keep this big fellow in,” and he showed his half-closed hand in which something fluttered.

“Sure! take it and welcome,” said Jerry, snatching the cap off. “And say, Professor,” he called back, as he sped away, “we’re going on another Western trip. Maybe you’d like to go along.” But he did not stay to hear the answer.

There was more news awaiting the boys when they went to the hotel that night after the closing scenes at Boxwood Hall.

“I guess, after all, you needn’t be in such a rush to get out to Square Z ranch,” said Mr. Slade, as he read over again a telegram that had recently been received.

“Why not?” asked Ned. “Don’t tell me all your cattle have been run off by the rustlers and there aren’t any left!”

“No, it isn’t as bad as that,” replied his father. “But the gang made a raid on a place not far from mine, and they were caught—at least some were. So Watson thinks there won’t be much more stealing done at our ranch, at least for a time. The rustlers will keep under cover, I fancy. So if you boys still want to go——”

“Want to go!” cried Ned. “Of *course* we want to go. We’ve made all our plans.”

“Well, you needn’t be in such a hurry,” went on his father. “You don’t need to take your airship. That is, I mean you won’t have to travel in it. Use the big car

as you originally intended, and forward the aeroplane if you like.”

“That will be fine!” cried Jerry. “Not that going in the airship wouldn’t be sport, but we can enjoy it more if we don’t have to hurry. Then we’ll just reverse our plans, and make an auto tour of it. I believe we can do it inside of three weeks, though it may take a little longer.”



CHAPTER VI

OFF FOR THE WEST

“Well, everything seems to be in pretty good shape.”

“It surely does,” agreed Jerry to Ned’s observation.

“Except I don’t understand what contraption this is,” and Ned kicked a box that an expressman had just delivered at the Slade homestead in Cresville. “Must be something pretty particular that Bob sent, for he’s marked it ‘*Don’t open until I get there.*’”

“Something to eat, I’ll wager,” declared Jerry. “He’s getting worse instead of better. Where’d he go, anyhow?”

“Why, we needed that spare part of the carburetor and he said he’d go to town for it.”

“That’s right. Well, it’s time he was back. Oh, here he comes now,” and Jerry pointed down the road, along which a motorcycle was approaching speedily.

“Come on, Chunky. Open it up and pass out the good things!” cried Ned as his stout chum approached, leaving the motorcycle at the side of the garage in front of which Ned and Jerry had been talking.

“Open what up?” demanded Chunky.

“This box of cracker dust, or whatever it is,” and Ned kicked the express package.

“Cracker dust nothing! That’s——”

“Something to eat, of course,” finished Jerry.

“That’s where you get left!” laughed Bob. “Here’s the spare carburetor part. Stick it some place where you won’t forget. I had trouble enough getting it—had to go to four places.”

“Well, the exercise will do you good. But we’re hungry, and we don’t mind admitting it, Chunky, though the failing is more yours than ours. However, be that as it may——”

“Oh, you want me to open that,” and Bob smiled at his chums. “Well, here goes.”

With a hammer he attacked the box, while Ned and Jerry sat on chairs on the shady side of the automobile shed and looked on.

“Just a little roast turkey, with dressing on the side, and a stalk of celery for mine,” suggested Jerry.

“Too much like Thanksgiving,” commented Ned. “I’ll have lobster salad with plenty of mayonnaise and peppers.”

“All to the bill of fare,” was Bob’s murmured response. “There!” and he took off the last board. “How’s that?”

To the disappointed eyes of Jerry and Ned was revealed a small refrigerator of a new style, made especially for automobiles. It was new and—absolutely empty.

Ned and Jerry swallowed hard. They were really hungry, for they had worked all morning going over the big touring car, not even stopping for a full meal at noon, as Mrs. Slade was away and there was no one to insist that they should do so.

“Pretty nifty, eh? What?” asked Bob, looking up at his chums.

“Well, it’s all right in the abstract,” assented Jerry, “but in the concrete it’s a flat failure. We were looking for something good.”

“This is one of the best auto refrigerators made!” was Bob’s indignant retort. “It uses little ice, and has a net low temperature of forty degrees on the hottest days. It will keep uncooked meat——”

“It wouldn’t keep a ham sandwich two seconds—not if I saw it first!” broke in Ned. “Come on, Jerry! If this advance agent for a patent fireless cooker wants to demonstrate the merits of his gas tank let him do it. I’m going on a tour of discovery along the route of the kitchen and the pantry. Come on!”

Bob took off the last of the papers from the miniature refrigerator, looked at it, then at his disappearing chums, and called:

“Hold on! I’m coming!”

“I thought he would,” chuckled Ned.

The boys had been home from Boxwood Hall about a week. Mr. Slade had

been able to travel back to Cresville with Mr. Baker, and the two had taken up their business matters again.

Preparations for the boys' trip West went on apace, and word had come from Dick Watson, foreman of the Square Z ranch, that those who were about to solve the cattle mystery should lose as little time as possible since another theft, this time a small bunch of steers, had occurred.

"We'll make good time when we get started," Ned declared.

They were to go in the big touring car in which they had made several extended trips. It was really a sort of traveling hotel, for it contained about double the room of an ordinary car, being of extra length. Storm proof curtains could be let down to the ground at the rear, and in this enclosed space cots could be set up, and cooking done on a solidified-alcohol stove of extra size. So that if the travelers found themselves at night far from a habitation they could be almost as comfortable as though in a hotel.

This car was now in shape for the long trip to Wyoming. When Jerry advised Bob to look at the map he meant that they would take from Boston a route to Square Z ranch that would not carry them near Arizona, a northern trend being followed.

They would cross the lower part of New York State, skirt through Pennsylvania and Ohio and on, running a pretty straight course through Nebraska into Wyoming. Square Z ranch was located in the Great Divide Basin, at the foot of the Green Mountains on Muddy Creek and about a hundred miles, in an air line, from the Medicine Bow Forest Reservation, one of the government wonder-spots. The Union Pacific Railroad ran about thirty miles from the ranch.

"But we'll be independent of that with our auto and airship," said Bob, as he finished the cheese and started to eat some cold roast beef Ned had set out for his chums.

The boys had completed arrangements to take one of their air craft. It was not the big, combined dirigible balloon and aeroplane, in which they had had some wonderful adventures, but a biplane which could carry four comfortably, and five when necessary.

This craft would be shipped to Bodley, the nearest railroad station, and there put together by the boys, who felt they would find good use for it over the Western plains.

"And I have a notion," commented Ned, as they finished the lunch and

prepared to resume work on the big automobile, “that the airship will be just what we need to discover the cattle thieves. We can circulate in the clouds and spy down on them when they drive off bunches of dad’s choice steers.”

“It sounds well,” remarked Bob. “What I’m counting on is having some choice steaks roasted over an open fire.”

“It’s a habit with him,” sighed Jerry. “He’ll never get over it.”

“Doesn’t seem so,” agreed Ned.

“Oh, well, it might be worse,” and Bob grinned at his chums. “We might not have anything to eat. I ought to be anxious!”

“Let’s get busy,” suggested Jerry. “We’re losing time. This isn’t exactly a fishing excursion. If the thieves keep on running off bunches of cattle, Ned, your father won’t have any ranch left for us to hike to. Come on!”

Another day saw the preparations completed. The big touring automobile had been put in shape for the long trip. New tires had been put on, and spare ones stowed away. An extra gasoline tank had been slung underneath. The bedding had been provided and Bob’s refrigerator, with a supply of ice that was guaranteed (in the advertisements) to last twice as long as congealed water in any other place, had been given a nook all by itself. To the stocking of the miniature cold storage plant Bob devoted much of his time. But his chums let him have his way.

The airship had been packed and started on its journey there to await the arrival of the boys. The big car was run out of the garage and the chums, looking keenly over every part, had assured themselves that it was never in better trim.

“But I guess he isn’t coming,” said Jerry, as he playfully lifted his mother off her feet and set her down again at her semi-indignant protest.

“Who?” asked Bob, who had given a final look at his patent refrigerator.

“Professor Snodgrass,” was the answer. “You know I invited him to make the trip with us, and he seemed delighted, as he said there were several new varieties of Wyoming bugs he wanted to gather. He promised to be here, but he hasn’t showed up and——”

“I’m afraid you’ll have to go without him,” remarked Mrs. Slade. “Your father is anxious to have you start, Ned, for he really thinks you may accomplish something. And he is so fussy since his accident, I think you had better go.”

“Of course we’ll deliver the goods!” cried Ned, breezily, if a bit slangily. “And dad’s right. We’ve got to get started. I suppose the professor may be circulating around the suburbs of Boston, trying to make a date with a new kind of mosquito. If he comes, tell him to take a train out to the ranch and we’ll see him there. Now it’s—all aboard!”

The respective parents and some friends had gathered at the Slade home to witness the start. And after a last look at everything to make sure that nothing was lacking, the boys kissed their mothers, shook hands with their fathers and friends, and, with Jerry at the wheel, the big car slowly gathered way.

“And whatever you do,” called Mrs. Hopkins after them, “don’t sleep in damp clothes.”

“We’ll dry ’em out in Bob’s refrigerator!” shouted back her son, with a laugh.

And then, amid farewells from the crowd on the Slade lawn, the Motor Boys started away.

“Ho for the West!” cried Bob, swallowing the last of a bit of chocolate he had munched so he would not get hungry. “The West and the cattle mystery!”



CHAPTER VII

THE STOWAWAY

“Like old times, isn’t it?” suggested Ned, who sat beside Jerry.

“It sure is,” agreed the tall lad. “After all, in spite of the fact that we’ve had some cracking good times in our motor boat, and in the airship above the clouds, there’s nothing like a good car for a change. She has great pulling power,” he added, nodding toward the hood of the automobile, where the powerful engine was chugging away. “Watch her take this hill on high,” he went on.

“She’ll never do it,” Ned retorted.

“Watch,” said Jerry, and he steered the machine up an incline on the main highway that led out of Cresville.

“She’s doing it!” commented Bob, who was in a rear seat.

“I take my hat off to you, Jerry,” admitted Ned, as the crest of the hill was reached. “You certainly know how to work her.”

“It’s all in the motor,” said the tall lad. “Having her gone over, and the valves reground, was just what she needed.”

“Well, we’ll need all the power we can crowd into her before we get to the end of this trip,” declared Bob. “We’ve never made such a long journey in this big car before.”

“That’s right,” assented Jerry. “But she’ll do it. And say, maybe we won’t have good times when we get out to the ranch! Your father says there are big level stretches of country there, Ned, just the place for starting and landing our airship.”

“Fine!” cried Ned. “We’ll whoop things up when we get out among the cowboys.”

“They may whoop things up for us,” commented Jerry.

“What do you mean?” asked Bob.

“Oh, nothing, only you know they may class us as tenderfeet, and start to put a

few tricks over on us.”

“I’d like to see ’em try it!” blustered the stout lad. “This isn’t our first trip West.”

“No, but they don’t know that,” laughed Jerry. “However, there’s no use crossing a bird in the hand until the well runs dry,” and with this misquoting of proverbs the tall steersman gave his attention to the business before him, which, at that particular moment, consisted in passing a heavily-laden truck at a narrow place in the road.

“Watch your step,” warned Ned.

Jerry nodded his head, but did not answer.

“Better give him a blast, hadn’t you?” suggested Bob. “He’s one of those road hogs, I guess, and there’s a bad dip on the side where we have to pass. Give him a toot.”

Jerry stretched his hand out and pressed the button of the electric horn. Its screeching tone filled the air but the driver of the big auto-truck ahead gave no sign of heeding. His machine chugged on its way.

“He isn’t going to give over,” said Ned in a low voice.

“Guess I’ll have to brush by,” came from the tall lad. “Hold fast everybody!”

With that Jerry pressed down on the accelerator pedal. There was a throbbing burst of speed as the motor took the increased flow of gas. Then Jerry opened the muffler and a sound ensued that was like a small Gatling gun in action. At the same instant, with a great burst of speed, the big car fairly shot past the offending truck, Jerry with steady eyes and hands guiding her neatly. There was, indeed, but barely room to pass, and it was such a close shave that there was but a bare six inches between the left wheels of the boys’ machine and the edge of the road which, at this point fell away in a sharp decline.

But Jerry did it, and as he passed the truck the rear luggage carrier on the touring car brushed the mud guards of the other vehicle. At the same instant Jerry gave a screech on the electric horn, and he and his chums as they rushed past gave a wild yell.

They had a glance of the startled face of the driver who must have thought a runaway locomotive had nearly run him down, for he swerved over to the right so suddenly that his wheels skidded and he had to jam on the brakes to avoid danger.

“Serves him right!” commented Ned. “Next time he’ll use only his half of the road. Good work, Jerry.”

The tall lad nodded grimly and then slowed down the pace. The boys were well out of Cresville now.

“Are we going to stop anywhere?” asked Bob, after a period of talk and speculation on what would happen when they reached the ranch.

“For what?” asked Ned. “Of course we’ve got to stop some time, but we’ve just got started.”

“I guess he means stop to eat,” chuckled Jerry.

“Huh! That’s where you’re away off!” laughed the stout lad. “We don’t need to stop to eat. I’ve got the little refrigerator well filled and there’s lots of other stuff, too. We can keep right on going and eat as we go. I’ll hand you fellows out something now if you want it,” he went on, and there was a trace of eagerness in his voice.

“That’s one thought for us and two for himself!” chuckled Jerry. “I guess he’s hungry again, though how he manages always to keep up an appetite gets me. His system would be worth a fortune to a doctor that had to give his patients a tonic to make them eat. Give us the combination, Bob!”

“I’ll give you a sandwich,” was the retort, and the fleshy youth began delving around in the rear of the car—that portion given over to the stowage of cots and other necessaries used when they camped out for the night.

“Hum! This is funny!” exclaimed Bob a moment later.

“What is?” Ned queried.

“Why, I put a package of sandwiches—some chicken ones mother made—and some of her dandy cookies back here just before we started, but I can’t find it now. You fellows haven’t been grubbing in here, have you?” he asked.

“Nary a grub,” declared Jerry. “Guess you ate ’em yourself, Bob, and forgot about it.”

“I did not! But I’ll take another look and—double-jointed mud turtles!” he cried a second later, while he tumbled backward into the rear seat he had left to delve in the after-part of the car.

“What’s the matter?” demanded Ned and Jerry, together.

“Something—or somebody’s—back there!” Bob sputtered.

“Somebody?” repeated Jerry.

“Back where?” Ned questioned.

“Back in there among the bunks,” was the answer. “I—I put my hand on a face.”

“A face!” cried Jerry. “What in the world is he talking about? Did that chocolate go to your head, Bob?”

“It was a face!” insisted the stout lad. “I—I felt the nose and—and spectacles. It was warm and soft and—and——”

At that moment there was a movement in the rear of the car, in the space behind the seats. Something—or somebody to be more correct—arose and started forward. The boys had a glimpse of a face—the face with a nose as Bob had described it.

And then, as Jerry brought the car to a sudden stop, with an application of the screeching brakes, the boys, looking back, cried in unison:

“Professor Snodgrass!”

“At your service!” beamed the little scientist as he yawned and rubbed his eyes. “I must have fallen asleep,” he added, casually.

“Fallen asleep!” repeated Jerry, wonderingly.

“Where did you come from?” asked Bob.

“And how did you get there?” Ned cried.

“Well, I believe an explanation is due you,” said the professor in his gentle, classroom voice. “You remember inviting me to go with you on this trip, I suppose?” he continued, and it was exactly as though he was about to explain something difficult in a scientific way.

“Sure, I asked you to come with us,” admitted Jerry. “And when you didn’t show up we left word for you to follow us to Wyoming. But we’re glad you’re with us now. Only——”

“No doubt my presence here is puzzling,” went on the bald-headed collector of bugs. “But this morning, when I awakened, I had a very severe headache. I sometimes get them when I mix the chemicals with which I preserve my specimens. I have a headache remedy I use on such occasions, but I must have

taken a little too much this time, for when I reached here I felt so weak and faint that I was not able to go into your house.

“Then, too, I did not want to alarm your good mother, Ned. So, as I saw the auto here, and knew from past experience that there were cots in it, I thought it would be a good plan to go in and lie down until I felt better.

“I did so. The medicine stopped my headache, but it evidently threw me into a heavy sleep, for I did not realize anything until just now when I felt something fluttering over my face. I fancied it was a moth I was trying to catch.”

“That was me, feeling around for the sandwiches,” explained Bob, with a laugh. “I touched your face and it startled me.”

“Oh, sandwiches!” exclaimed the professor understandingly. “Some sort of package fell to the floor of the car when I stretched out here. I was too tired to see what it was. Perhaps that was what you were looking for.”

It proved to be, and the boys and the professor were soon eating sociably together, while Bob suggested that if the sandwiches were not sufficient there was a hotel a short distance ahead where they could stop.

“The professor might want to get something else for his headache,” suggested the stout lad.

“Oh, no, thank you. It is quite cured I am glad to say,” remarked the scientist.

“That fact won’t prevent Bob from wanting to stop at the hotel,” laughed Jerry, and it did not. In fact, the sandwiches were none too satisfying for the hungry youths, and even Jerry admitted that the prospect of a hotel meal was not displeasing. So they stopped, much to Bob’s delight.



CHAPTER VIII

A BREAKDOWN

During the meal at the hotel, Professor Snodgrass gave further details of how he had happened to become a stowaway in the big car. He had finished his work at Boxwood Hall and had made his plans to go on the trip with the boys. He had spent the night at the hotel in Cresville, for he had arrived there late, and he said he did not want to go to the Slade home and disturb their domestic arrangements.

But instead of going to bed in the hotel he sat up all night, as he had often done before, preserving his specimens and looking for signs of the rare moth he wanted to add to his collection. Then he went on to Ned's home in the morning, unconventionally getting into one of the automobile bunks where he fell asleep from the effects of the headache remedy, as described.

"Well, guess we might as well get under way again," remarked Jerry, at the conclusion of the meal. "Hoist up the anchor, Ned, and I think you'd better take the helm. I want a rest."

"All right, Cap. Where's Bob?" Ned asked, for the stout lad was not in sight. He came into the dining-room a moment later, carrying a bulky package, and there was a guilty look on his face as he saw his chums looking at it.

"Well, for the love of butter and eggs!" cried Jerry. "What have you there, Son?"

"This is bait for white-tailed night moths," Bob answered, grinning. "I got some from the chef to use in the traps the professor is going to set."

"He has you there, Jerry!" laughed Ned. "Go to it, Bob! I'll help eat 'em."

They found Professor Snodgrass eagerly looking along the shady side of the hotel, a large magnifying glass in his hand, and behind him stood a group of men observing him with puzzled eyes.

"I was looking for a small, rare bug, green in color, that I saw crawling on the side of the hotel," the professor explained. "I have only one in my collection, and if anything should happen to that I would be at a great loss. I saw it crawling here a while ago, but it must have gone down a crack. However, I won't delay

you boys, though I should very much like to have that bug.”

“Is this it?” asked one of the observers, making a sudden grab for something in the air. He brought what he had caught to the professor, and the latter’s eager glance gave way to disappointment when he saw a green grasshopper fly from the opened hand.

“Oh, pshaw!” cried the man. “He’s gone!”

“It wasn’t what I wanted,” returned the professor with a smile. “Thank you, though. I shall have to try again some other time. Now, boys, I’m ready to go on with you.”

The rest of that day passed uneventfully. Good time was made and when evening approached the boys and the professor had put about two hundred miles between themselves and Cresville, and were that much nearer Square Z ranch.

“What’s it going to be—camp out or sleep in a hotel?” asked Ned, who had remained at the wheel since dinner time. “That sign we passed a while ago said there was a hotel about five miles further on.”

“Let’s camp out,” suggested Bob. “It’s nice and warm, and this looks to be a good place,” and he indicated a little group of trees across some green fields that bordered the wood. “We could run the car up in there and be well out of the way.”

“I’m willing,” assented Jerry.

“Then we’ll go to it,” declared Ned. “Let’s see if we can get across the fields safely.”

They stopped the car and walked on a little way. They came to what was evidently a wagon road leading to the woods, and, after taking down the bars of the rail fence, the automobile was driven to the edge of the little patch of woods, being left for the night in a small clearing.

“And now for an old-fashioned camping-out time!” cried Bob, as he leaped from his seat. “We’ll have a fire and everything. I brought a couple of dressed chickens along, and we can broil them over the coals and——”

“Chunky, you’re a lad after my own heart!” cried Jerry. “Forgive all the fun we’ve poked at you.”

“Same here,” echoed Ned.

“Sure!” agreed Bob, good-naturedly. “Now for the fire!”

“I’ll get the wood,” offered Jerry, “and we’ll let you broil the chickens. You can make a better job of it than either Ned or I.”

“Well, I’ll do my best,” and Bob seemed modestly proud of the honor thrust upon him.

“I don’t fancy standing over a bed of coals turning a broiler,” whispered Jerry to Ned as the two set about collecting dry wood. “Let Bob do it.”

“Sure, he’s tickled to pieces,” and Ned chuckled.

To do Bob justice, [he made good work of broiling the chickens](#), as even Professor Snodgrass admitted, and he was a man who cared less about eating than any one the boys knew.

HE MADE GOOD WORK OF BROILING THE CHICKENS.

“Well, this is something like!” exclaimed Ned, as he and his chums sat about the glowing fire after supper and talked over the events of the day, speculating on what lay before them.

“You’ve said it!” agreed Jerry, leaning back comfortably against a tree.

The professor was wandering about with a small net and an electric flashlight, trying to gather bugs in the early twilight.

The tent had been put in place—that is, the curtains had been extended out at the rear and the folding cots had been set up. Two bunks were in the automobile proper and it was agreed that Professor Snodgrass should have one of these, the boys preferring to occupy the tent, in which four could sleep.

“Well, I guess I’ll turn in,” announced Bob, with a sleepy yawn, when their watches showed it was about nine o’clock. “We want to get an early start in the morning.”

“Yes, now that dad has given us the chance to catch the cattle thieves, we don’t want to waste too much time on the road getting to the ranch,” agreed Ned. “No telling what may happen when we’re not there.”

The boys had been up early that morning making arrangements for the start, and they were tired. So it did not take any of them long to drop off to sleep once they had stretched out. Professor Snodgrass said he would stay up a little longer on the chance of gathering some rare night-flying insect, but as he could get to his bunk through the front entrance of the automobile he would not disturb the boys.

Along about the middle of the night, Bob, who slept near the outer entrance to the tent, was awakened by feeling some heavy object fall across him, while a voice cried in his ear:

“I’ve got him!”

Only half awake the stout lad gave a yell.

“Grab ’em, boys! Grab ’em!” he shouted. “Cattle thieves! Grab ’em and hold ’em for the sheriff!”

“For the love of porous plasters!” exclaimed Jerry, sitting on his cot. “What is it?”

“Bob has the nightmare,” suggested Ned, disgustedly.

But as Jerry switched on the little flashlight near the head of his bed the gleam revealed Professor Snodgrass just arising from where he had fallen across Bob, and on the face of the little scientist was a look of triumph.

“I’ve got him!” he cried, holding up a hand which clutched the folds of a small net. “It’s the big white moth I’ve been after, and which I sat up all night to get! I caught him!”

“Oh, I thought you meant you had me!” exclaimed Bob. “It’s all right. No damage done. Guess I must have been dreaming we were out on the ranch after the rustlers.”

“It sounded that way,” commented Jerry with a cheerful grin.

“I’m sorry I disturbed you,” apologized the professor. “I was roaming about outside your tent when I saw this moth alight near the entrance. I didn’t want to miss it, so I made a jump for it, and I suppose I went right on through.”

“Like a fullback going through tackle for a touchdown,” commented Bob. “But there’s no harm done, Professor.”

To any one else the scientist’s actions would, perhaps, have been surprising. But the boys knew his anxiety to get a rare specimen would cause him to do almost anything. The call of science never was unheeded by Professor Snodgrass.

He apologized to the boys for disturbing them, but they made light of the matter, for he was such a good friend and such jolly company in spite of the fact that he was much older than they that they would have done almost anything in the world for him.

Exulting over the prize he had caught, the scientist was content now to retire, and the camp was soon quiet again.

All were up early the next morning, Ned and Jerry being awakened by the aromatic odor of coffee and bacon. They looked out and saw Bob engaged in the preparation of the breakfast at a fire he had kindled.

“Happy New Year!” he called to them as they stuck their heads out of the tent. “Come on! Seven o’clock whistle blew long ago.”

Seldom had a breakfast tasted better, they all agreed, and thus well fortified they again took up their journey.

“Looks like rain,” commented Ned at the wheel, after they had had dinner and saw, with satisfaction, that they had made good progress.

“So it does,” agreed Jerry, with a glance at the clouds. “But it takes more than rain to stop us. We’ll keep on.”

The automobile was well adapted for traveling through a storm, for it could be enclosed completely. It began to drizzle shortly after Ned’s remark, and this soon turned into a regular downpour. They were in a comparatively untraveled section of the country, and were a bit uncertain what road to take when they came to a fork. A man driving a wagon came along in the midst of their indecision, however, and answered their inquiry by saying:

“Both roads go to Falkenburg, but the right’s the shortest.”

“Then we’ll take that,” decided Ned, and once more they were under way. But the shortest way is not always the best, and they had not proceeded more than a mile before they ran into a stretch of sticky, greasy clay on which the car at once began to skid.

“Better put the tire chains on,” suggested Jerry.

Ned, who was steering, hesitated. It was no pleasant undertaking in the downpour.

“I think this bad stretch comes to an end a little farther on,” he said. “I’ll chance it.”

“Drive slow, then,” warned Jerry.

Ned cut down his power and the car proceeded. But it skidded worse than ever and Ned was on the point of stopping to get out and adjust the chains when, with a suddenness that none foresaw, the big vehicle swerved to one side as the brakes

were applied and, a moment later, the left rear wheel crashed hard against a big tree at the side of the road. There was a sound of splintering wood and the rear of the automobile sank down.

“Busted!” cried Jerry as he opened the side curtains.



CHAPTER IX

THE CATTLE BUYER

Dejectedly, and fearing the worst, the boys piled out of the automobile into the pelting rain. They did not stop to put on their slickers, so eager were they to see the extent of the damage. It was bad enough, for the wheel was smashed and the end of the axle bent.

“That means a lay-up,” said Jerry. “We’ve got a spare wheel, but we can’t get it on the axle until it’s straightened. Bur-r-r-r! This is some rain!”

“Guess this is up to me, fellows,” gloomily remarked Ned. “I should have put on the chains at the start.”

“Oh, well, it couldn’t be helped,” said Jerry.

“It was the fault of that fellow who told us to take this road,” Bob said. “If we’d taken the other we’d be going yet.”

“Oh, you can’t tell by that,” came from Jerry. “The other road might be worse in this storm. Let’s get inside out of the wet and talk it over. We’ve got to do something.”

“Better jack up the car to take the strain off the other end of the axle,” suggested Bob.

As they crawled back into the car again Professor Snodgrass, who was snugly ensconced in the rear, reading a book by the light of the electric lamp, looked over the tops of his spectacles and absent-mindedly asked:

“Have we stopped?”

“Didn’t you feel it?” asked Jerry in some surprise.

“Why, I felt a jar, a while ago, but I paid no attention to it. I forgot it immediately. You see, I was so engrossed in this book on frogs’ legs that——”

“Does it tell new ways to cook ’em?” asked Bob, eagerly.

“Cook what?” the professor questioned.

“Frogs’ legs,” went on Bob. “They’re great fried in butter, but if there’s

another way——”

“This is a book about the actions of frogs’ legs under the impulses of an electrical current,” replied the professor rebukingly. “I never eat such things.”

Leaving the professor to continue his reading, only half aware of what had happened, the boys set about making the best of a bad situation.

Attired in garments that defied the rain, which was coming down hard, they jacked up the fallen end of the car and removed the broken wheel. It had been badly smashed by the impact against the tree, but as they had a spare one this feature was not the worst. The axle was bent, and until it was either straightened or a new half inserted, they could not run. The rear axles of automobiles are in two parts, the differentials joining them, so to speak, for as each rear wheel must run independent of the other, to allow for different speeds when rounding corners, so the axles go at different rates.

“This is a job for a garage, if we can find one,” observed Jerry, as he contemplated the bent axle. “We’ll have to stay here all night, I reckon, and somebody will have to go on a scouting expedition.”

“I’ll go!” quickly volunteered Ned. “It’s up to me, anyhow.”

“I’ll go along,” said Bob. “I want the exercise.”

“To get up an appetite,” suggested Jerry with a laugh. “Well, go on, and I’ll get the place in shape for a night’s sleep. Tell the garage man what the trouble is, Ned, and maybe he can bring out a spare axle in the morning and fix us up.”

“I’ll try,” promised Ned; and he and Bob soon splashed off through the rain down the muddy road.

Jerry busied himself with arranging the curtains and getting the cots in position for a night’s stay in the open. The location of the car was not the most favorable or comfortable, for it was to one side of the road, tilted at an angle and jammed against a big oak tree. However, the last fact was rather an advantage, since the dense foliage furnished some shelter from the rain.

The ground was water-soaked though, and Jerry was contemplating this when he saw coming along the road a big auto-truck.

The machine stopped when opposite the stalled automobile, and the driver, leaning out from under his canopy, enquired kindly:

“Can I give you a tow?”

“Thanks, I’m afraid not,” answered Jerry. “One axle is bent, and we’ll have to tie up here. If you had a board floor for our auxiliary tent I’d buy that of you.”

“I’m afraid I haven’t got such a thing on board,” was the laughing answer. “But how would a bale of hay do? I’ll sell you one if you like, and you can scatter that on the damp ground the way they do straw at a circus when it rains.”

“Fine!” cried Jerry. “What is your craft, anyhow, a traveling farm?”

“No, but I happen to have a load of feed and grain on, and there is an extra bale of hay. I’ll tumble it off for you.”

He did so after naming the price, and when the wires had been cut Jerry, with the professor’s help, spread out on the damp ground several layers of the dry hay. It was almost as good as a board floor.

“That’s great!” Jerry said as he paid the man. “If you happen to see two fellows splashing along through the mud, looking for a garage,” he added, describing Ned and Bob, “you might give them a lift.”

“I will,” agreed the driver. “I’ll take them to the nearest repair shop, too.”

He was as good as his word, and about an hour later Jerry heard the chugging of an automobile. In it, returning with the garage men, were the two scouts who told of having been picked up on the road and taken into town.

“I thought I’d take a run out to see what the damage looked like before I started on the repairs in the morning,” said the garage man who had brought Ned and Bob back with him. “Yes, I guess I can fix you up all right,” he said as he finished his inspection. “I’ll have you under way again by ten o’clock.”

This was good news, and the boys, when the portable stove was going and they were gathered about it eating supper, felt their spirits raised several degrees. True, they did not relish the delay, but they would not lose many hours, and they did not intend to do much night driving anyhow.

The weather cleared with the rising sun and with it came the repair gang who did good work in putting in the new axle. Then, having wired for another spare wheel to be awaiting them on their arrival in the next large city, the travelers were once more on their way. But as the clay road was in bad shape, they went back to the dividing fork and took the longer route, which they found safer.

This accident seemed to be the end of the boys’ bad luck, at least for a time. For from then on they struck good roads and the weather was all that could be desired. They even made three night drives with a full moon to show them a safe

way, and so they were a little ahead of their schedule when they reached Des Moines.

There they found awaiting them letters from home, since they had arranged to get them at this stopping place in Iowa. They planned to stay here one day to enable their automobile to be gone over thoroughly by a garage man. They also needed to get some supplies.

“Well, so far so good,” remarked Jerry, when they had left their car to be inspected and were on their way to the hotel.

“Yes, we’re over half there,” commented Ned, “and only one accident worth mentioning.”

“Knock wood,” advised Bob. “We’ve got a long way to go yet.”

The boys had been in Des Moines before, but it was a new place for Professor Snodgrass. He rather bewailed the fact that such bugs and insects as he caught glimpses of were so common that they were not worth collecting. But when, after registering at the hotel with the boys he saw on the book the name of a fellow scientist he was happy.

“I shall not lack for occupation now,” he said beamingly. “I want to have a talk with Professor Bowden, a long talk. He has written the only authoritative book in existence on the markings of horned toads and it will be a great pleasure for me to compare notes with him, for I have made some observations of those creatures myself.”

This was true enough, for the professor on his trip to Mexico had had excellent chances to note the habits of these curious reptiles, which look much fiercer and more dangerous than they really are, for in spite of their horny spines they may be picked up and handled without danger. Though called “toads,” they are really a form of lizard.

“Well, that disposes of the professor,” observed Jerry. “Only we mustn’t forget him when we start off again. He’s likely to stay up all night talking bugology. And now for a little recreation. Let’s go to the movies.”

They passed an enjoyable afternoon, and were sitting in the hotel lobby, waiting for the supper hour, when a flashily-attired man, with a big diamond in his scarf and another on his left hand, dropped into a chair beside Jerry and remarked:

“Strangers in town?”

“Well, not exactly,” was the answer, Jerry not altogether relishing the appearance of the man. “We’ve been here once or twice before.”

“That’s what I thought. You didn’t look like greenies. I’m not altogether a stranger here though I don’t know many folks. Cattle buying is my business. I’m on my way farther west. Just stopped off here to do a little business. Like to have a game of cards?”

“We don’t play,” and Jerry’s suspicions began to rise.

“Oh, well, no offense. Lots of good people play and lots of good ones don’t. How about billiards?”

“Not now, thank you,” was the answer. “I guess it’s about time to eat, anyhow.”

“Well, see you after supper,” said the bediamonded man, not a bit abashed by his cool reception. “No use being lonesome,” and he strolled over to the cigar counter as the boys got up.

“Who is he?” asked Bob.

“You know as well as I do,” was Jerry’s answer. “He said he was a cattle buyer.”

Jerry said this as he was passing the hotel clerk’s desk. The man made a motion as though he wanted to speak to Jerry, and when the latter leaned forward the clerk said:

“Don’t get into any games with that man. I don’t know him, though I’ve seen him around here the last few days. I think he’s a professional sport and gambler.”

“He’s dressed the part,” answered Jerry. “Thanks for the tip. We’ll steer clear of him.”

As Jerry and his chums turned to go into the dining-room they heard the man who had tried to scrape an acquaintance with them talking in loud tones to someone near the cigar counter.

“Yes, cattle buying is my business,” he was saying, “though I have a couple of side lines. I’m on my way now to a place in Wyoming where I expect to do a good trade.”

“Wyoming!” was the reply of the other. “I’m from there. What ranch did you say yours was?”

“I didn’t say, but I expect to buy some cattle from the Square Z outfit.”
Jerry, Ned and Bob stood still in surprise.



CHAPTER X

A MIDNIGHT ALARM

“Did you hear that?” asked Ned in a whisper of his two chums.

“Sure,” nodded Jerry.

“What about it?” Bob said. “Hasn’t he got a right to buy cattle where he pleases?”

“Yes, but that’s dad’s ranch—his and your father’s,” went on Ned in low tones. “Maybe this man knows something about the stealing of the stock.”

“Well, don’t go up and ask him if he does,” returned Jerry, quickly, for Ned evinced a desire to approach the stranger.

“Huh! Think I’m as rash as that? But don’t you call it queer?”

“Hum! Well, maybe,” said Jerry, slowly. He was not prompt to jump at conclusions.

“But can’t we do something?” Ned demanded. “Wouldn’t it be great if we got on the track of the thieves as easily as this?”

“It would be, only it’s too good to be true,” said Jerry. “But wait a bit. As long as he’s talking as loudly as he is no one can call it impolite if we stand here and listen. Just see if we need any of these railway time-tables,” and he directed the attention of his chums to a rack of folders near the hotel desk. Taking out some of them, and pretending to look them over, gave a good excuse for lingering within hearing distance of the flashily dressed man who had announced he was a cattle buyer.

“So you’re going to get some of the Square Z stock; eh?” asked the man to whom the bediamonded one had spoken. “I do a little in that way myself, but the Square Z prices are too high for me. I can do better in other markets.”

“Too high! I don’t call what I pay too high!” boasted the speaker and he named a price “on the hoof” at which the other man exclaimed:

“Is that all you’re paying?”

“That’s all. I tell you it takes little ol’ Sid Munson to get the best of a deal!” and he patted his inflated chest in satisfaction.

“Munson, eh?” mused the other. “So that’s your name. I haven’t heard of you in the cattle business before. My name’s Johnson—Ed Johnson, and I’m from Omaha. But I want to tell you one thing, Mr. Munson, and I say it in all friendliness. If you’re only paying that much for cattle there’s something crooked somewhere.”

“Something crooked? What do you mean?” and the voice of Mr. Munson expressed an amazement as great as was the surprise of the boys who were listening near the time-table rack.

“Oh, I don’t mean you, so don’t get roiled,” was the quiet response of Mr. Johnson. “I mean that the price you mentioned is lower than the lowest market quotations on live cattle that I’ve ever known, and there must be an African gentleman concealed somewhere in the fuel heap, as the poet says. I mean, if they’re quoting that price to you they must have an object in it. Maybe the cattle aren’t A, number one.”

“But they are!” exclaimed Munson. “I know, for I sold ’em at a good profit.”

“I should think you could, at the price you say you paid. Then if it isn’t the quality of the beef it’s something else. They may be stringing you along to get the best of you in some other deal. I’d watch out, if I were you.”

“Thanks. But don’t worry. I’ll take care of myself. It takes a pretty early bird to get the worm if little ol’ Sid Munson is after it!” and once more the man with the diamonds patted himself on the back, so to speak.

“Did you hear that?” asked Ned in a whisper, as the two men moved away.

“Couldn’t very well help hearing it,” assented Bob.

“Sort of queer,” commented Jerry.

“More than queer!” declared Ned when they were in the dining-room. “It’s a clue, I think, to the cattle——”

“Hush!” exclaimed Jerry with a warning glance; and he spoke only in time for at that moment the two men who had been talking in the corridor entered. They did not notice the boys but went to a table at the far end of the room, whence came murmurs of their talk about the cattle business. But the three chums could overhear no more because of the general din around them.

“Don’t give yourself away to them,” advised Jerry in a low voice.

“That’s right, I should be more careful,” admitted Ned. “But don’t you think there’s something in this?”

“Maybe more than we can tell at present,” agreed Jerry. “We’ll talk it over in our rooms.”

“It’s a clue, that’s what it is!” declared Ned when they were by themselves. “Either this man is one of the thieves, or he’s buying cattle from them. No wonder they can afford to sell below the market price when they don’t have to do anything to get their stock but run it off dad’s ranch. We’ve got to follow this fellow.”

“Well, maybe not exactly that,” said Jerry, slowly, “but I think it might be wise to pump him a bit. He’s made some advances to us, and it won’t look suspicious if we come back at him.”

“You’re not going to gamble with him, are you?” asked Bob in surprise.

“I should say not! There are other ways,” and Jerry smiled. “I guess we haven’t traveled around for nothing.”

But their plan of having further conversation with Mr. Sid Munson was not destined to be carried out just then. For when they looked for him around the hotel he had gone, and the clerk said he had given up his room.

The man who had given his name as Johnson was in evidence, however, but a bit of judicious questioning by the boys, after they had scraped an acquaintance by asking directions for getting about the city, convinced them that he knew no more of Munson, and the cheap cattle, than they themselves had overheard in the talk.

“We might as well get on with our trip,” advised Jerry the next morning, when it became evident that staying in Des Moines would not advance their case. “The sooner we get out to Square Z ranch and look for clues, the better, I think.”

“Same here!” agreed Ned and Bob.

The big automobile had been put in shape to make the rest of the trans-continental trip, Professor Snodgrass was gently but firmly persuaded to break away from his scientific friend, and once more the motor boys were on their way.

There was plenty of excitement along the route. Once they came within a

narrow margin of toppling, car and all, over a high cliff while going along a narrow, perilous road. Again the professor went on a little side trip after some queer bug and became lost. They were a day finding him and he was quite exhausted and in great distress when he was found. So, taking it by and large, Ned, Bob and Jerry had plenty of adventures to keep them awake on the trip.

“And isn’t it just one dandy little refrigerator though?” asked Bob for perhaps the fiftieth time as he took some cold chicken from it one warm afternoon and proceeded to make sandwiches. “How would you like to be eating hot roast beef now?” and he looked at the thermometer which was creeping up toward ninety degrees in the shade.

“It’s certainly all right!” agreed Ned in a mumbly voice, for he was just then engaged in masticating one of the chicken sandwiches. “You didn’t make any mistake, Chunky. But I’m thinking we won’t need it much longer.”

“Why not?” asked Bob in surprise. “You’re not going to chuck it away, are you?”

“No, but we ought to be at Square Z in a day or so now, if our maps are any good. We’ll be in Medicine Bow by to-night, and it’s only about a hundred miles from there to dad’s place.”

“Good!” cried Jerry.

They reached Medicine Bow about supper time and put up over night. Early in the morning they were under way again, following the directions given them for reaching Square Z ranch. But they did not follow the directions closely enough and took the wrong trail. Consequently, when darkness was settling down they had not reached their destination and they decided they would have to wait until morning.

“But that needn’t worry us,” said Bob. “We’ve got fine shelter, even if it should rain, which it won’t. And the refrigerator——”

“Yes, one of us can crawl in there and sleep!” laughed Ned.

“Suppose we camp right here,” suggested Jerry, bringing the car to a stop. It was on a sort of wagon road that ran over a big grassy plain.

“This is as good as any,” agreed Ned. “I don’t see why we didn’t hit the ranch, though.”

They made their preparations for spending the night, not exactly in the open, for they had their shelter tent, but at least far from any habitation. There seemed

no need of setting a watch and after an hour or two spent around the campfire, they turned into their bunks and were soon sound asleep.

It was still dark when Jerry was awakened by hearing a movement outside the shelter curtains of their tent. It was as though some large body were being dragged over the ground, and there was a distant hum and murmur.

Then as the lad sat up on his cot to listen better he heard a voice saying distinctly:

“It’ll be easier to drive them over to the north I reckon. There aren’t many in this bunch and they’re quietin’ down.”

“Yes,” agreed someone else. “But for well brought up cattle these were as ornery a bunch as I ever seen. They’re all right now, though, an’ we can soon run ’em over.”

Jerry was out of bed in a hurry, and a second later had awakened Ned and Bob, but had prevented them from calling out by putting his hand over their mouths.

“Not a word!” he whispered in their ears. “But get up and put on some clothes. Also slip a gun in your pocket.”

“What for?” demanded Ned.

“Cattle thieves outside!” murmured Jerry.



CHAPTER XI

AT SQUARE Z RANCH

The startling announcement of “cattle thieves outside” galvanized Ned and Bob into action.

Outside the shuffle of countless hoofs could be plainly heard, and there was the murmur of men’s voices, though the words were not distinguishable. In a whisper Jerry told what he had heard, while he and his chums slipped on some of their clothes and got their revolvers.

“It’s the cattle thieves running off some of the Square Z stock as sure as mustard!” declared Jerry.

“Think we can catch ’em?” murmured Bob.

“Well, we’ll make a good try, anyhow. At least we can scare ’em so they’ll leave the cattle, and maybe we can round up the steers and save ’em.”

“What’s your plan?” asked Ned of his tall chum.

“Well, I guess it’s best to surprise ’em,” whispered Jerry. “That seems to be the only way now, for we don’t know how many of ’em there may be. Are you ready?”

“Ready,” assented the two others.

“Then out on the jump, fire in the air and give ’em the surprise of their lives.”

But that plan was not destined to be carried out, for just as the three boys, who had not awakened Professor Snodgrass, were about to leap outside their shelter there came a sharp hail and the sound of a shot. Jerry, who was at the flaps of the tent, saw a flash and sliver of flame cut the blackness of the night.

“Throw up your hands, you in there!” came the sharp command.

“What is it?” asked a second voice in the darkness, as the boys slid out of the tent.

“I can’t make out what it is, Gimp,” was the answer. “But I’ve got ’em covered. And I’m a two-gun man,” he added evidently for the information of the

boys. "I can shoot as well with my left hand as with my right, so be governed accordingly. Parson, you and Gimp ride up and see what that outfit is. If I ain't greatly mistook it's what we've been lookin' for, though how in the name of a chuck wagon they make use of that contraption is more than I can remonstrate."

"All right, Hinkee; but keep your big words for the round-up," was the laughing advice from somewhere out of the darkness.

The boys heard horses galloping toward them. The silence of the night was further broken by the uneasy movement of a large bunch of cattle that could dimly be observed off to the left.

"Take it easy now, whoever you are," was the advice given by one of the approaching horsemen. "We've both got guns that go off mighty easy, and Hinkee Dee back there's got two more."

"Isn't this rotten luck!" exclaimed Ned in disgust. "Just as we were going to get them they get us!"

"They haven't *got* us yet," observed Jerry, significantly in a low voice.

"Are you going to fight?" asked Bob.

"Not with guns, no. But let's wait and see who they are."

"Cattle thieves! Who else?" asked Ned, indignantly.

The tramping of the horses ceased. The boys saw two mounted figures confronting them as they stood outside the tent that was attached to the rear of their car. Then a match flared and they blinked in the glare.

"Sufferin' horned toads!" came the explanation. "[They're nothin' but boys, and tenderfeet at that!](#) Drop them guns, boys. It ain't healthy to play with men's tools that way in this country! Drop 'em!" and the command was not one to be lightly disregarded.

["THEY'RE NOTHIN' BUT BOYS AND TENDERFEET AT THAT!"](#)

Ned, Bob and Jerry let their revolvers fall into the soft grass at their feet.

"That's better," said the other man, who seemed to have lighted a small torch. It was a patent pipe lighter, as they learned afterward.

"They're sure enough young chaps," was this man's observation.

"That's right, Gimp," agreed the other, whom the boys guessed to be the one

who had been called "Parson." "It's all right, Hinkee!" he called to the unseen third. "We've got 'em, such as they are. Ride up if you can leave the cattle."

"All right," answered a voice from out of the distant gloom. "Are you and Fatty there?"

"Yes," was echoed.

"Well, look after the bunch. Don't drive 'em any more until I say so."

"There's quite a crowd of 'em," murmured Jerry.

"More'n enough to handle you—so be nice," drawled the Parson. "If you've got a light, maybe you'd better show it, and we can get this business over with quicker. My fusee won't burn forever."

"I'll light up," said Jerry, moving to enter the tent again.

"And don't light on a gun, whatever you do," was the warning given in ominous tones.

For an instant Ned and Bob thought Jerry was about to put into execution some plan either to escape or to capture their captors. And they were disappointed when he came out with a portable electric lantern that gave good light.

"Now then, boys, give an account of yourselves!" sharply exclaimed the third man who had ridden up. He seemed to be in command, though his small size, in contrast to his companions, and his not very dignified appellation of Hinkee Dee, seemed hardly in keeping with his leadership.

"Why should we account to you?" demanded Jerry, sparring for time.

"Because I said to!" was the curt response.

"Huh! This is a free country!" broke in Ned. "Besides, we're not in the habit of being ordered about by cattle thieves!"

The three men on their horses started and looked at one another.

"Cattle thieves!" ejaculated Hinkee Dee. "Cattle—huh!" and he seemed too surprised for further observation.

"That's what we're hunting for," went on Ned. "And we'd have had you, only you were too quick for us. But——"

"Say, who do you think you are?" demanded Hinkee Dee in contemptuous tones.

“I believe they really do take us for cattle thieves!” exclaimed another of the cowboys.

There was some laughter, and Hinkee Dee remarked:

“Well, then it’s an even guess, for that’s what I think they are. Who are you?” he shot out suddenly.

It dawned on Ned and his chums that they had, perhaps, made a mistake.

“Tell ’em who we are, and what we’re after,” suggested Bob, in a low voice. “They might shoot without giving us a chance.”

Thereupon Ned explained, saying that he was the son of one of the owners of the ranch, that they had come out to try to capture the cattle rustlers but had lost their way.

“You’re not so *very* much lost,” said Hinkee Dee, drawlingly. “You’re on part of Square Z ranch now and we’re part of the outfit.”

“Are you, really?” asked Ned. “Not that I mean to doubt your word,” he went on quickly, as he discerned a startled movement among the cowboys, “but it seems very strange—meeting you at night this way.”

“Your outfit struck us as queer, too,” said one of the night-riders. “We’ve sorter been on the lookout for rustlers, but we haven’t had any luck trailing ’em.”

“And I don’t believe *they’ll* have any better,” struck in the sarcastic voice of Hinkee Dee. “I s’pose you’ve got something to prove who you are?” he suggested, questioningly.



CHAPTER XII

EXPLANATIONS

For a moment Ned and his chums did not know whether or not to accept the word of the cowboys. They feared a trick. But, as the one called Hinkee Dee had said, the boys themselves might justly be regarded with suspicion, so explanations were in order.

Ned brought out the letter of introduction he carried to the foreman, Dick Watson, and when Hinkee Dee and the others had examined this, and heard the story of the young men the cowboys felt they had made a mistake.

“And I guess you did the same thing,” observed the one called Parson. “You took us for rustlers, eh? Well, maybe it does look queer, driving cattle off at night this way. But we wanted to avoid the heat, and then, too, the boss is in a hurry to have ’em shipped away. You’ll find we’re all right.”

“Oh, I’m sure of it,” said Ned. By the light of one of the electrical flashes he had made out the Square Z brand on some of the cattle that had strayed up toward the big automobile. “You see we’re strangers here, and——”

“So I decimated,” observed Hinkee, who seemed to have a queer fondness for using the wrong word, whether from ignorance or a sense of humor the boys could not decide.

“And so you come all the way out here to catch the cattle rustlers?” asked the cowboy called Gimp.

“To have a *try* at the mystery,” corrected Jerry.

“Well, it sure is a mystery all right, but I don’t reckon you can solve it.”

“There’s no harm in them tryin’,” added the Parson, who seemed to be more friendly than the others.

“No, I reckon not,” agreed Hinkee Dee. “Well, what’s to be done? If these tenderfeet are lost I s’pose it’s our duty to set ’em on the right trail. Tell you what,” he went on. “Gimp, you stay with ’em and see that they get to Square Z in the mornin’. The Parson and I can manage the steers. You ride back with the boys and show ’em how to keep on the trail.”

“All right,” agreed Gimp. As he spoke the flaps of the tent erected at the rear of the automobile parted, and the face of Professor Snodgrass peered out.

“Are we there?” asked the little man. “If we are I want to get up early, Jerry, and see if I can capture that specimen of a moth that only flies in the morning hours. I wish——”

The professor suddenly stopped talking and fairly sprang from the tent. Then it was observed that he was clad only in his pajamas and slippers. He made a dive toward Gimp, who quickly aimed his gun at the advancing figure, and then, though evidently fearing an attack, but seeing the professor was unarmed, the weapon was lowered, and Gimp murmured an apology.

“Oh, what a beautiful specimen!” exclaimed the scientist, gazing at something on the saddle in front of Gimp. “It is the largest I have ever seen. Where did you get it?”

“Get it? Get what? Oh, you mean *Lizzie!*” and he picked up a big horned toad. “Yes, she’s quite a pet of mine. A friend sent her to me from Arizona, and in warm weather she goes everywhere with me in my pocket. Guess she crawled out now to see what all the rumpus was about. You like horned toads?” he asked.

“I like anything in this line,” said the eager scientist as he picked up the unpleasant, but harmless creature and stroked its back. “So you call her Lizzie?”

“It’s a bit easier than *Iguanidae Phrynosoma,*” said Gimp.

“Oh, you know the Latin name?” beamed the professor, probably unaware of the queer figure he presented.

“That’s all the Latin I do know, so don’t tackle me on any more,” laughed the cowboy. “I wouldn’t have known that only it was writ on the box Lizzie come in, an’ I set up three nights learnin’ to say it without gettin’ a cramp in my tongue. Then I called her Lizzie for short.”

“She is a beautiful specimen,” murmured the scientist. “I see you have a love for nature.”

“Well, you might call it that,” assented Gimp. “I beg your pardon for gettin’ the drop on you just then.”

“You didn’t get anything on me,” the little bald-headed man said.

“He means covered you with his gun,” translated the Parson. “He had it aimed at you. He sure thought you was coming at him I reckon.”

“That’s what,” said Gimp. “’Tain’t healthy, out here, to jump at a man lessen he knows you some. But it’s all right.”

“I saw the toad and didn’t think of anything else,” explained the scientist. “I want to see if the markings correspond with those illustrated in Professor Bowden’s book.”

“This is Professor Snodgrass,” introduced Jerry, nodding toward him.

“Pleased to have met up with you,” said Gimp.

“Well, I guess introductions are in order,” commented Hinkee, as he handed back the letters. “From the outside these seem to be all right, boys, and if you turn out to be so, we’ll beg your pardon for bothering you. But we sure have to be careful. Now my name’s Jim Felton, and I’m assistant foreman, commonly known as Hinkee Dee. This here is Sam Jones, otherwise known as the Parson ’cause he’s so suburban like, and Tod Henderson never answers to anything but Gimp because he’s such a good dancer. Now you know us.

“Well, as I say, it may be all right,” went on Hinkee, “but for the sake of the ranch we’ve got to be careful. We sure did take you for cattle thieves when we saw your buzz wagon and camp over in this swale, though we couldn’t make out how in the world you used it to run the steers off the range. However, that’s all right now.”

The rest of the night was not long, and it was passed by the boys in quietness as the herd moved away, driven by the cowboys. In the morning, after breakfast, the start for the ranch house was made.

“Reckon I’ll ride with you lads,” said Gimp, as he untethered his horse. “I’ll let him amble home alone. I don’t want to push him too much as he’s been ridden hard lately. And I don’t often get this chance,” he added, as he glanced admiringly at the large automobile.

“But won’t somebody steal your horse?” asked Ned.

“I’d like to see ’em try. Blaze won’t let nobody but me come nigh him and he’ll find his way home all right. Cut along, Blaze,” he called as he removed saddle and bridle and patted the horse on the flank. The intelligent steed gave his master one look and then trotted slowly off. The automobile soon passed him, and for a time Blaze tried to keep up, evidently knowing his master was inside. But he soon gave it up and trotted at his own gait.

If the boys expected Gimp to make any observations on their elaborate

traveling car they were disappointed. He said little or nothing on the trip.

“Here we are!” he exclaimed as they topped a little rise, and the boys looked down into a valley divided by a small stream and holding a collection of dull red buildings which they rightly guessed to be the Square Z outfit.

“Well, I see you got here!” was the greeting of foreman Dick Watson as the big car came to a stop.

“Then they’re all right?” asked Gimp, plainly a little surprised at this welcome, without the letters being read.

“Sure. Didn’t you think so? By the way, how comes it you’re not with the bunch?”

Gimp explained.

“Huh!” chuckled the foreman. “Took ’em for cattle thieves, eh? Yes, I been expectin’ ’em for some time. The boss wrote me as how they was comin’. If I’d a thought you fellows would ’a met-up with ’em, I’d ’a tipped you off. But it’s all right. I never seen you before, but I guess I can call you by name right off the bat,” and he did, to the no small amazement of Gimp.

“Your dad sent me pretty good descriptions of all of you,” he went on, speaking to Ned. “Well, you can tie your hosses—— Oh, shucks! I forgot you come in an automobile!” he laughed. “Well, we have a few out here but the crop ain’t very big yet. Come in and make yourselves comfortable.”

Frankly, the boys were just a bit disappointed by their reception and arrival. They had not created the furor they expected, and when dinner time came and half a score of cowboys flocked in to eat there was no curious crowd about the big automobile, as at least Ned had half expected. In fact, the arrival of the boys created very little impression.

“But wait until we get to work on the mystery!” murmured Ned.



CHAPTER XIII

A SENSATION

“Turned out all right, did it?” asked Hinkee Dee of Gimp when the former came back the next day from the cattle-driving trip.

“Yes, they was the goods all right. But shucks! what do you think of ’em, anyhow?”

“Huh! Well, you know my opinions regardin’ tenderfeet in general, don’t you, Gimp?”

“Sure do!”

“Then just depict it on these young chaps and you’ll have it individually so to speak. A lot of college Willies come out here to make us walk Spanish. Did you see a wrist watch on any of ’em?”

“Great jumping spiders! No! You don’t mean to tell me, Hinkee, that any _____”

“No, I didn’t say any of ’em *had* fallen so depressingly as that, but they’re that kind, I reckon. Catch the cattle rustlers! Oh, say, I’m glad I’m not in the habit of fainting.”

“That bald-headed bug isn’t so bad,” remarked Gimp.

“No, I reckon he’s a sort of keeper to ’em. Well, I should be anxiety. Give me the makings,” and he deftly rolled a cigarette from the bag of tobacco and the papers Gimp passed over to him.

“Anything happen while I was away?” Hinkee Dee next asked.

“No. The new ones sort of made themselves to home and they’re getting the run of the place. Maybe they’re not as green as they look.”

“Huh! Don’t talk to me! Tenderfoot sticks out all over ’em, Gimp.”

“I admit that. But they’ve been West before, accordin’ to their tell, and done some campin’.”

“With a hired cook I s’pose and a patent electric stove like the one in their

car,” sneered the assistant foreman.

“No, the real thing they say.”

“Yes, let them tell it.”

“Oh, I don’t say they can throw a diamond hitch, or anything like that,” went on Gimp. “But I’m only tellin’ you p’raps they ain’t as green as we first believed. I s’pose it’s up to us to be decent to ’em, seein’ as how their paws—at least the paws of two of ’em—own this shebang.”

“That doesn’t fit in my pipe,” sententiously observed Hinkee Dee, blowing out a cloud of smoke. “I’ll treat ’em decent, but blamed little of that. I don’t have to work here!”

“You seem sort of peeved,” observed Gimp, rolling himself a cigarette.

“Well, wouldn’t you be if you’d sat up nights thinkin’ up ways to fool these cattle thieves, and then had a bunch of mavericks, right off the baseball field, come along and want all the credit of it? Huh? I guess yes!”

“But you, nor none of us, didn’t solve the cattle mystery,” Gimp said.

“I know we didn’t. But I’m on the track of ’em. I’ve got a theory that I’m sure’ll work out all right— Well, what is it? You lookin’ for me?” he broke off, to speak to an approaching cowboy who was galloping up on a dust-flecked steed.

“They’ve gone and done it again, Jim!” the man called.

“Who’s done what?”

“Cattle rustlers—run off a nice bunch from the bottom lands last night!”

“Whew!” whistled Gimp, while Hinkee Dee scowled.

Gimp galloped off, and the news soon spread around the ranch that the cattle rustlers had made another raid. Several of the cowboys who were at liberty joined the posse that was quickly organized. Ned, Bob and Jerry, of course, heard what was afoot.

“Say, we didn’t get here any too soon; did we?” asked Ned.

“No, indeed!” agreed Jerry. “It’s lucky they didn’t start a raid while we were on the road, or, if we had heard of it, we’d have had to leave the auto and come on by train to satisfy your folks. The rustlers held off just long enough.”

The boys had been a little longer making the trip than they had counted on,

owing to a number of minor accidents, but they had made fairly good time. That there was a cattle raid the very night of their arrival was a coincidence that could be viewed in two lights. It was an advantage that the rustlers had held off this long, but, of course, it was unfortunate that Mr. Slade and Mr. Baker must suffer new losses.

“I guess some of the gang that was captured must have got loose,” said Ned, “or else they’ve had recruits. Well, they’re up to their old tricks and we’ve got to try to stop ’em.”

“And here’s a chance to get some first-hand information about how the thieves operate,” cried Bob. “Come on, fellows!”

“I don’t s’pose there’s any objection to us going along; is there?” asked Jerry of the assistant foreman.

“Yes, there is!” was the snapped-out reply. “I can’t be bothered with a bunch of tenderfeet around. There’s likely to be shootin’, too, and you might get in the way of a bullet.”

“We’ve been under fire before,” said Jerry, quietly. “Still——”

“Let the boys go along!” broke in the foreman. “That’s what they’re out here for—to try to help run down those thieves.”

“A lot they’ll do!” muttered Hinkee Dee.

The boys had been assigned horses as soon as they reached the ranch, and these were quickly saddled. Of Professor Snodgrass little had been seen since his arrival, as he went afield early in the morning armed with net and specimen boxes. He was in his element now.

Square Z ranch was a big one. It had the advantage of water as well as good grass, and it gave range to thousands of cattle divided into several herds which were quartered in various grass sections. When one was eaten well down the animals were moved to another to give the fodder a chance to grow again.

The bunch of cattle that had been run off the night the boys arrived had been kept on a distant part of the range. They had been moved there only a few days before, and after the cowboy guards had remained a short time they were withdrawn.

The cattle thieves, it seemed, had awaited their opportunity, and had made the raid just at the best time for them. A cowboy—one of several in charge of another herd—following up his runaway pony, had noted the missing bunch and

had come in with the news.

“Well, they started off this way sure enough,” decided Hinkee Dee, when he and his helpers had made a tour of the grazing ground. The boys went with them, keeping well out of the way, however, of the assistant foreman.

“Not that I’m afraid of him though,” declared Ned. “Only I don’t want a row right off the bat. If he tries to make me knuckle under to him he’ll find he’s got more than he can handle. Dad gave me a free rein on this business and I intend to have it.”

“This is the way they led ’em,” said Hinkee Dee, riding along and pointing to the ground.

“I think you’re wrong,” put in the Parson, quietly.

“Wrong? What do you mean?” demanded the assistant foreman, and his voice sounded threatening.

“I mean the signs show they went over there,” and he pointed in the direction of some low hills.

“Huh! that shows how much you know about it!” sneered Hinkee Dee. “There’s no grass left over there and these fellows have to have fodder to keep the cattle a week or more before they move to sell ’em. You’re wrong!”

“I think I’m right, Hinkee.”

“So do I,” chimed in Gimp.

“Sure he’s right,” said several others, and as there seemed to be no one to side with Felton, he shrugged his shoulders and said:

“Well, have your own way, then. But you’ll find I’m right.”

And it did seem so. For though the trail was plain—at least so the boys believed—for part of the distance along which Gimp and the Parson indicated, it became faint and uncertain when a patch of stony ground was reached where the foot hills began, and ended at the opening of a deep rocky ravine which was a sort of blind alley.

“What’d I tell you?” crowed Hinkee Dee. “Next time you’ll take my advice.”

“Well, there’s been cattle along here, that’s sure!” declared the Parson, and others said the same.

“Well, if they *were* here, why aren’t they here *now*?” asked Hinkee Dee. “You

can see there's no sign of a stolen bunch. What would be the sense of driving cattle over there, anyhow? You couldn't do anything with 'em once you got 'em here, 'ceptin' maybe coop 'em up in that ravine. They couldn't live there two days—no grass or water. These rustlers aren't fools!”

“Well, there was cattle here, and not long ago,” declared the Parson.

“I s'pose them rustlers drove 'em here and then jumped 'em over the mountain on the other side?” sneered the assistant foreman. “Now you've had your way, let's go back an' try mine.”

Shaking their heads over the puzzle, Gimp and the Parson rode back with the others. But though there were also signs of cattle having been hurried along the route Hinkee Dee pointed out, the animals themselves were not to be found, and none of the cowboys had the temerity to say, “I told you so,” to their superior.

“It's mighty queer what becomes of the cattle,” said Dick Watson, as he was talking to the boys that night after the return of the unsuccessful search. “If them fellows had an airship I'd say they rode 'em off in that, for all trails, traces and clues seem to disappear at a certain point.”

“Tell us how this thing started,” begged Ned, and the foreman told the story of the losses to date. It was getting serious.

The next day Ned, Bob and Jerry set off alone to see what they could find. They went to the place of the last disappearance of the cattle and investigated as best they could. But they came to the same baffling end as before.

“I wonder if there could be a way of getting the steers over the mountain?” suggested Ned.

“Of course not!” scoffed Jerry. “But it sure is a puzzle.”

“Well, let's stop, build a fire and have something to eat,” proposed Bob.

“His favorite remedy for all troubles,” laughed Jerry.

A week or more passed, and though no trace of the thieves was discovered, no more cattle were stolen. The boys kept up their search for clues, but without avail, and several times the cowboys laughed openly at them.

“They make me mad!” cried Ned. “You'd think we were a lot of children.”

“We ought to give 'em a surprise—startle 'em—get up some sensation to show we can do something,” declared Bob.

A cowboy came in with the mail, and among the letters for the boys was a postal. At the reading of it Ned gave a cry of delight.

“Now we can do it!” he cried.

“Do what?” Jerry demanded.

“Give these cowboys a surprise! Our airship has arrived at the railroad station. This is a notice from the freight agent. Come on, we’ll go for it!”



CHAPTER XIV

AN OLD ACQUAINTANCE

Ned in the lead, the boys were hurrying to their ponies in order to set off on a gallop for the railroad station, about thirty miles away, to arrange about getting the airship which had been shipped in parts. But half-way to the corral Jerry called a halt.

“Look here,” he said in that drawling tone he often used when he had not quite prepared his thoughts. “Have any of you fellows told the cowboys about the airship?”

“I haven’t,” answered Bob. “I was afraid, after what had happened, and the way they sort of looked down on us, that they’d laugh and make more fun of us than ever, if we told them we could navigate an airship.”

“Same with me,” admitted Ned.

“I haven’t mentioned it to a soul,” went on Jerry, “and I think the professor has been so busy catching bugs that he hasn’t spoken of it.”

“Well, what’s the idea?” asked Bob.

“Just this. What we want to do is to spring a surprise on Hinkee Dee and his friends—make them think we amount to something after all, even if we can’t spot the cattle thieves right off the bat. Now my notion is that if we could put the airship together in some out-of-the-way place and then, some day, come sailing over the ranch in it, and flop down out of the clouds, so to speak, it would make them sit up and take notice.”

“Say, Jerry, you’re right!” cried Ned.

“Good idea!” exclaimed Bob. “But how are you going to do it?” he added. “The airship is at the freight station, and Ned has a card saying it’s arrived. Somebody is sure to talk about it.”

“Not necessarily,” put in Ned. “This card I just got doesn’t say anything about an airship. It just says some crates and boxes have been received for us. And you know the way we packed up the wings and the engine in parts no one by looking at the outside of the boxes could tell what was in them.”

“That’s so,” admitted Bob.

“Then we’re all right,” came from Jerry. “Instead of riding in on our ponies we’ll take our car. By leaving out some of the fittings we’ll have plenty of room to carry the airship in about two trips I think, and no one will ever know what we have. Then if we can find some secluded place where we can put it together we’ll be all to the merry and we can spring our big surprise.”

“That’s the idea,” Ned declared.

So instead of galloping off post haste to the freight station, the boys proceeded to get their car in shape to bring back the parts of the airship. They left in the automobile only a few needful things, took along plenty of ropes and some food, for they expected to be away all day, since it might require some little searching to find a sufficiently secluded spot.

“We want to pick out some place in the woods where the cowboys don’t come,” suggested Jerry. “If one of them happened to spy the craft before we had her together it would spoil the surprise and we’d lose all the effect we want to produce.”

His chums agreed with him, and after a little judicious inquiry made of the foreman they got on the track of a place that they thought would just suit their purposes. It was in a clump of rather wild wood on the edge of a sandy plain. As the sand prevented the grass from growing, it was avoided by the cattle. In consequence of this there was no need for the presence of the cowboys in that vicinity.

“And it will be just the place for us,” Jerry said. “The sandy plain will be an ideal starting ground for the beginning of our flight. There’s no water near there and we’ll have to cart enough in the auto for the airship radiator, but we can easily do that. And now we’ll start.”

“Got ’em in there?” asked Hinkee Dee in his sneering voice as he saw the boys start for the railroad station in their big car.

“Got who in where?” Bob questioned before he thought.

“The cattle thieves!” chuckled the assistant foreman. “I s’pose you’ve got ’em hog-tied and all ready for the sheriff.”

“Not yet,” admitted Jerry, trying to be good-natured about it. “But we’re on their trail.”

“Oh, yes!” went on Hinkee Dee. “All you’re waiting for is a post card from

'em, givin' their address so's you can call for 'em. I've heard of such detective work before!" and with a jingle of his spurs he rode away at a fast pace, he and his pony being soon lost to sight in a cloud of dust.

"I don't like that man," said Bob, who was usually the most forgiving and good-natured of the three.

"He isn't very pleasant," admitted Jerry.

Two days later, had anyone chanced to pass the vicinity of a certain clump of trees, one would have heard some such talk as this:

"Pass that hammer this way, will you?"

"Yes, and heave over that monkey wrench. I never can find it when I want it."

"I say, which way does the steering wheel chuck face? I've tried it every way I know and it doesn't seem right."

"No wonder, you've got it adjusted upside down. Fat chance we'd have of sailing that way—more like loop-the-loop."

Then would come a period of silence broken by hammering, sawing or filing sounds and there would come another call for tools placed or misplaced.

The assembling of the airship was under way. The boys had successfully transported it from the freight station in its boxes and crates, and, so far as they could learn, no one of the cowboys was aware of what was afoot, or, it might be said, in the air.

The airship was much simpler than the big combined dirigible in which the motor boys had had many adventures, and they had often before taken it apart and put it together. When it had been shipped West the necessary tools had come with it, so now the boys had no difficulties in doing the reconstruction work.

Their workshop was under the trees, and as the weather was now settled, with little prospect of rain, they needed no shelter. Their absence each day from the ranch was easily enough accounted for—they gave out that they were looking about the country for traces of the cattle thieves, and, in a way, this was true enough. They were laying plans for the search.

Since the cattle raid the night of their arrival no more of Bob and Ned's fathers' stock had been run off, but there was no telling when the rustlers might again descend on Square Z ranch.

"Though as for them tenderfeet stoppin' 'em, I wouldn't give that!" declared

Hinkee Dee, snapping his fingers in scorn.

“Well, I don’t set such a great store by the boys myself,” admitted the foreman. “But it won’t do for me to say so. Mr. Baker and Mr. Slade likely thinks their sons is all right, and maybe can do detective work of this sort, and it isn’t for me to undeceive ’em. I’ll help ’em all I can. But when some of the best cattlemen in the country can’t get trace of the rascals I don’t see how a crowd of college chaps is goin’ to. But, as I said, far be it from me to open their eyes. They’re havin’ fun out of it, and that’s what they come out for—one of the reasons, anyhow.”

“Well, maybe they’ll surprise us, some day,” ventured Gimp, and his words came true sooner than he expected, though not just as he anticipated.

“Huh!” scoffed the Parson. “Them boys’ll never catch the thieves. That bald-headed professor stands a better chance, for he roams all over the ground and he goes slow and careful. I’ve watched him and seen him look over a space not more than a yard square for more than an hour.”

“That was because he wanted to find a pink grasshopper or a blue-toed snake,” laughed the foreman.

“Well, maybe. But he’s careful like, and that’s the way you got to be when you’re trailing cattle thieves.”

“Oh, well, give the boys a chance, I say!” exclaimed Gimp.

Meanwhile, Ned, Bob and Jerry were working on the airship. They had spent each day for about a week in the woods now, and the craft was nearly ready for flight. That it would sail the boys had no doubt for they had made many a trip in it.

“Yes, it’s beginning to look like an old friend,” commented Jerry, as he stepped back to observe the general effect. “I think——”

“Speaking of old friends, here comes one now!” interrupted Bob.

“Where?” exclaimed Ned and Jerry in a breath, for, so far, they had not been molested by man or beast in their little retreat.

“There!” said the stout lad, and he pointed to the approaching figure of Sid Munson, the bediamonded individual the boys had last seen in Des Moines.



CHAPTER XV

OUT OF THE AIR

If Mr. Sid Munson, as he had called himself, was at all surprised to see the boys under the present circumstances, he made no mention of it. From his manner and air one would have thought it was something he had expected all along, and that he would have been disappointed if he had not encountered them. Smiling, his diamonds sparkling in the sun, and his red tie matching the healthful color of his face he came on, breezily—airily.

“Well, boys, how are you?” he exclaimed genially. “You look just the same as ever. Quite a change from the hotel where we first met, though. I’ll wager you didn’t expect to see me here.”

“No, we didn’t, for a fact,” answered Ned.

“And by the tone of your voice you’re not glad to see me,” went on Mr. Munson in no whit abashed. “Never mind. I’ll not give your game away.”

“How do you know we have a game?” asked Jerry, and, for the life of him, he could not keep the coldness out of his voice. Verily, neither he nor his chums were glad to see the flashy man.

“Everybody has a game—life’s a game,” returned the man. “I have mine, and I play it my own way. You have yours and you play it according to your lights. So, as I said, I’ll not give you away. Are you making this to sell?” and he nodded toward the airship.

“No, just for pleasure,” responded Bob. “And if you would just as soon we’d rather you wouldn’t mention it to anyone. We want it to be a surprise.”

“I see!” exclaimed Mr. Munson. “Now that’s the way to talk,” for Bob had spoken earnestly. “Well, I’ll keep mum about it. I suppose I’m near the Square Z ranch?” he questioned.

“Are you going there to buy cattle?” asked Jerry. Neither he nor his chums had mentioned to anyone on the ranch what they had overheard Mr. Munson saying in the hotel. They had regarded it as part of the stolen cattle mystery they were to solve, and they wanted to solve it in their own way. But the sudden

disappearance of the man they suspected had rather puzzled them. Now he had bobbed up again, most unexpectedly.

“Well, I don’t know—I might make an offer for some,” was the guarded answer. “I don’t know just what my plans are. I came on from Des Moines, stopping off at several places. I’ve been riding sitting down so much that I decided to walk for a change. I told the man who drove me over here from the station to set me down about five miles from Square Z and I’d hoof it the rest of the way. But I guess he wasn’t a very good judge of distance. I’ve walked five miles already and I don’t seem to have arrived.”

“It’s only about three miles further on,” said Jerry. “We—we are sort of stopping there and——”

“Oh, don’t bother to explain!” broke in Mr. Munson. “I don’t want to know anybody’s business, any more than I want them to know mine. It’s all in the game.”

“If you wait a while we’ll take you back in the car,” said Jerry, nodding toward the big automobile. “We want to finish work on this to have it ready for a flight as soon as possible.”

“And are you really going up in that yourselves?”

“Sure,” and Jerry’s voice was more cordial now. He had quickly formed a resolution, later shared by his chums, that they must, if necessary, placate this man. Though they suspected him of having dealings with the cattle thieves he might, or might not, be one of them to the extent of sharing in their ill-gotten gains. Of course, there was the benefit of the doubt to be given, Jerry reasoned, and if they wanted this man’s silence, as indeed they did regarding the airship, it would be best to have him on their side rather than against them. And he seemed inclined to be on their side.

“Well, I’ve seen some of them in the air, with fellows in them,” went on Mr. Munson, “but I never really had a chance to look at one close by, nor talk to anyone who had flown. I always supposed a chap had to be rather light and airy to go up in one, but you boys seem husky enough.”

“Oh, our machine can carry a good weight,” Jerry said. “We could even take you up, and I guess you’ll go over two hundred.”

“A little, yes. But you’ll never take me up—not if I know it!” and he shook his head heartily. “I’ll take a chance in your auto, but not in your airship. What do you expect to do with it, anyhow? Oh, I forgot—no questions asked—that’s part

of the game—forget it.”

Indeed, the boys were glad not to have to answer. They had hopes of accomplishing several things by giving an exhibition flight over the ranch. The chief was that they might startle the cowboys and cause them to become more friendly. For Jerry and his chums felt that the ranch employees could, if they wished, give better clues to the cattle thieves than had yet been forthcoming.

Mr. Munson, as indeed all casual visitors were, was made welcome by the foreman of Square Z ranch. The newcomer explained that he was on cattle business, but he did not go into details nor was he asked. He told of having met the boys on his way to the ranch. His tale ended there, and no mention was made of the airship.

At supper that night Hinkee Dee, in his usual sneering, chaffing way, asked:

“Well, have you got the cattle rustlers yet, tenderfeet?”

“We have their address,” answered Jerry, good-naturedly.

“What!” exclaimed Mr. Munson in real or simulated surprise. “Are you bothered with cattle raids here, too?”

“Sure. Haven’t you heard about it?” answered Mr. Watson. “But I forgot, you just arrived.”

“They’re a pest—those rustlers,” declared the Parson.

“They’re worse than that,” came from Gimp. “You never know when they’re going to hit you—it’s like the toothache. And they’re such ornery critters. Too lazy to do an honest man’s work, they make the other fellow work for ’em. I’d like to get a bunch of ’em within reach of my gun,” and he tapped his big revolver significantly.

“Cattle rustlers, eh?” said Mr. Munson, musingly. “I’m sorry to hear that. It may interfere with my business,” though he did not say in what way. “I heard rumors in several places where I stopped that they were up to their old tricks,” he resumed, “but I supposed you ranchmen had organized to drive them out of business.”

“We did once,” said Mr. Watson. “Back in ninety-two, when some of the small settlers around here got so bold in their cattle rustling that they’d run a herd off under your nose, we formed a small army, and started to round up the suspects.”

“That was the Johnson County Raid, wasn’t it?” asked Ned.

“Yes. But how’d you know?” the foreman questioned.

“I read about it,” Ned replied.

“Yes, we had quite a time then,” went on Mr. Watson. “We trailed some of the suspects to a lonely cabin and surrounded ’em. Two was killed and then the whole lot got roused up and they came back at us. We’d have been in a bad way ourselves only some United States troops heard of our plight and rescued us. But it stopped cattle rustling for a time. Now they’re at it again, and the worst of it here with us is that we can’t get a single clue.”

“That’s mean,” agreed Mr. Munson. “Well, I’m in no particular hurry and if I hear anything that would help I’ll let you know.”

“Oh, don’t tell us—tell these boys!” sneered Hinkee Dee, nodding at the motor boys. “They’re the only original cattle detectives.”

“Is that so? Are you really after the thieves?” asked Mr. Munson.

“Well, my father, one of the owners of this ranch, said we could try our hands,” replied Ned, “especially after these gentlemen had failed,” and he looked at the assistant foreman, who laughed.

“Well, you might stumble on the trail just as well as anyone else,” agreed Mr. Munson. “I wish you luck. It’s no fun to raise choice cattle and have them stolen.”

Jerry and his chums wondered whether the man would refer to his boast that he had bought Square Z cattle below the market price, but he said nothing, nor did they.

The next day when Mr. Munson had gone with the foreman to look over the round-up of some distantly pastured cattle, and when Professor Snodgrass had gone afield on his usual bug-hunting expedition, the three boys talked matters over.

“We want to make this airship flight impressive,” Jerry said.

“How are we going to do it?” asked Bob.

“Well, my notion is to start a discussion of it say to-night after supper. I understand most of the cowboys don’t believe in airships. Few, if any of them, have ever seen one, for they haven’t been away from the ranch in a good while. They may have read about long flights, but they don’t believe much of what they read. So they’ll be all the more surprised when they see us flying over their

heads. I think the best time to do it will be right after dinner some day, when they're sitting in the shade smoking and telling yarns. We can come along just then."

"Good!" agreed Ned and Bob.

To prepare the minds of the cowboys for the surprise, or, rather, to ascertain their feelings on the matter, Jerry started the ball rolling that night by reading from a paper something about a woman having made a particularly long flight.

"Don't you believe it!" declared Hinkee Dee. "No human bein' can fly through the air, and never will."

This suited the boys, as the assistant foreman was the chief one they wanted to impress. So Jerry kept the talk going by adding:

"You don't know what you're talking about! Of course, anybody can fly if they have the nerve."

"I suppose you think you have!" sneered Hinkee Dee.

"Yes, I have—we all have," was Jerry's quiet answer.

"Let me out of here!" laughed the man. "I—I feel sorter sick. You make me tired!"

"Just the condition I want him in," Jerry said to his chums as they went to bed that night.

Two days later the airship was ready for a flight. The engine had been tried and worked perfectly. The boys had gone off as usual in their automobile and now, as the hour of noon approached, they awaited the favorable moment for approaching and hovering over Square Z ranch.

"Well, let her go," said Jerry as he and his chums took their seats in the airship. The powerful motor hummed, the craft hesitated a moment and then shot swiftly over the smooth ground. Jerry turned on more gas, gave the control of the elevating rudder a shift and, as lightly and airily as a bird, the craft soared.

"Feels like old times!" shouted Bob in Jerry's ear, but the engine, muffled as it was, made so much noise that the tall lad barely heard. He nodded his head in answer.

"They're all there!" the lips of Ned formed as they came near the group of ranch houses. Looking down the boys could see the cowboys relaxing after dinner. Out of the air swooped down toward them the flying craft.



CHAPTER XVI

THE WRONG PONY

“What’s that noise?” asked Gimp, seated with the other cowboys, most of whom were smoking.

“What noise?” asked the Parson, lazily flicking the ashes from his cigarette.

“Sounds like a lot of firecrackers going off.”

The cowboys, roused from their noon-day *siesta*, had risen from benches or from sprawling positions on the grass, and were gazing about.

“I don’t see anything,” observed Gimp.

“Nor I,” said the Parson. “But I hear it. It’s a sort of crackling.”

The noise grew louder.

“Sometimes,” said Hen Dalton, still softly, “quick rifle fire makes that noise. Once I was in——”

He stopped suddenly. The Parson had looked up and his surprised gesture made the others do likewise.

In the sky was an object. It was growing larger. It was from this object that the noise seemed to come.

“Boys! Boys!” ejaculated Gimp. “Do you s’pose—do you s’pose it’s one of them—one of them—airships?”

“Huh!” contemptuously remarked Hinkee Dee. “More like a couple of turkey buzzards having a family quarrel.”

They were all standing with craned necks looking up at the object in the sky, momentarily growing larger. Now it began to circle about instead of keeping in a straight line.

“Maybe it’s a balloon,” ventured an old cowboy. “I seen one at a fair once and it busted and the feller come down head fust and——”

“Balloons don’t carry sewing machines to make a noise like that!” contemptuously murmured Gimp.

“Then what is it?” came a general cry.

“I’ll tell you in a minute,” was Gimp’s calm rejoinder. “She’s going to cash in right soon, I reckon.”

The object—the noise—came nearer. It was the airship of Ned, Bob and Jerry swooping down on Square Z ranch.

“It can’t be!” ejaculated the Parson.

“Huh!” was all that came from Hinkee Dee.

And then, with engine shut off, and on outstretched wings of varnished canvas, the airship volplaned down to earth.

As it came to a stop, under the application of the brake, after rolling over the ground toward the semicircle of amazed cowboys, the three lads leaped out, snatching from their heads the leather and steel helmets.

“Well—I’m—I’m—lassoed!” gasped the foreman.

“Just what I thought!” chuckled Gimp.

“It’s them!” murmured the Parson.

“Huh!” was all that Hinkee Dee uttered.

“We didn’t find ’em,” announced Jerry, stepping forward, and his tone was as casual as though he had announced his lack of success in looking for some lost chickens.

“Find ’em? Find who?” the foreman asked sharply.

“The cattle thieves,” went on Jerry with a smile. “We had an idea that they might have gone up in a balloon, seeing they didn’t leave any tracks anywhere. But they’re not up in the clouds.”

“Do you boys—do you mean to say you’ve been up there?” and Dick Watson pointed toward the blue sky.

“Well, not exactly *all* the way up,” was the answer. “But we hit about five thousand feet, just for a practice spin.”

“Would anybody else like to try?” asked Ned.

“Not on your life!” cried Gimp, as Bob stepped forward, and the cowboy backed away.

“Look here! look here!” and the foreman seemed laboring under the stress of

great excitement. “Do you—you gentlemen mean to say you really have been up in that thing? It isn’t one of these—er—slight-of-hand tricks, is it?”

“Hardly,” laughed Jerry, and he noted the difference in the tone of the foreman. “Here, we’ll show you how it’s done.”

In another minute the boys were back in their seats, and the airship, headed down a long, level stretch, was under way once more, the propellers flashing in the sun and the engine spitting fire.

Once more it arose in the air, like a great bird, and then, flying at a low elevation, so the cowboys could better observe them, Ned, Bob and Jerry circled about in the air over their heads. They did figure 8s, they looped the loop, going higher for this, of course, and then, shutting off the engine, they volplaned down, coming to rest in almost the same spot where they had first landed.

“Now do you believe?” asked Jerry as he and his chums advanced toward the marveling throng.

“By stirrups! We just can’t help it—that’s great!” cried the foreman, and the others murmured their assents.

“What do you think of ’em now?” asked Gimp of Hinkee Dee, as they went with the others to get a closer view of the airship.

“Huh! A bunch of stuck-up tenderfeet—that’s all they are! They maybe learned that trick in a circus and pulled it off on us to make us feel how little we know.”

“You couldn’t do it,” said the Parson, grimly.

“Well, I wouldn’t want to. A cow pony is good enough for me, or I can walk when I have to.” And with that Hinkee Dee stalked away.

But the others did not conceal their admiration and amazement at the feat of the boys. They crowded about, asked all sorts of questions, and some of the cowboys patted the parts of the craft as though soothing a restive horse of a new species.

“Well, I see you arrived,” remarked Mr. Munson, who came up when the curiosity of the cowboys was about satisfied.

“Did you know they were up to this?” demanded the foreman.

“Well, I did see ’em tinkering with some contraption over in the woods,” admitted the cattle buyer as he called himself. “But I thought I’d let ’em surprise

you.”

Professor Snodgrass, who had come back, his specimen boxes filled, saw the gleaming wings of the airship and called:

“Oh, boys, are you going to make another flight? I want to go up, for I have an idea there is a new species of high-flying butterfly in this region and I’d like to get a specimen.”

“We’ll take you up after we’ve had something to eat,” said Bob.

“Fine!” cried the professor. “I’ll get my long-handled net ready. Some of those butterflies are very shy in the upper air currents.”

“Do you mean to say you’re going up in *that*?” asked the Parson.

“Why not?” counter queried Professor Snodgrass. “I’ve done it before.”

There was a murmur of surprise, and it was easy to see that the professor had advanced greatly in the estimation of the cowboys.

The putting together of the airship, and its use by the boys made quite a diversion at Square Z ranch, where novelties were rare. The cowboys lost so much time from their routine work looking up at the clouds for a sight of the craft that Dick Watson finally requested the boys to make their flights at times when the employees were at liberty, or else keep from circulating over the cattle ranges.

Professor Snodgrass went up not once but several times, and made choice captures of upper air insects. Jerry and his chums tried to induce some of the cowboys to take a flight with them. But though Gimp almost allowed himself to be persuaded he finally backed out, amid the jeers of his fellows.

The boys were in high spirits for the airship accomplished all they expected it would in the way of gaining them more consideration. The cowboys treated them as more than equals. They could not ask enough questions about the workings of the airship, and few of them would believe that it was not like a balloon, and that, somehow or other, compressed gas caused it to rise.

Jerry tried to illustrate by scaling a piece of tin in the air, the flat surface corresponding to the surface of the airship’s wings, and its motion sustaining it, just as the motion of the airship, imparted to it by the propeller kept the machine up. As soon as the forward motion ceased down came the tin, just as down came the aeroplane.

But the cowboys were all incredulous in general, though Gimp and the Parson had some idea of the theories involved.

As for Hinkee Dee, while he was plainly impressed, he did not become at all friendly. Instead of being sarcastic, he was just plain mean and insulting.

“Well, we’ll get him yet,” declared Jerry. “He can’t hold off forever.”

“I wonder what makes him this way?” asked Bob. “Is he afraid we’ll discover the cattle thieves?”

“Looks that way,” replied Ned. “I guess he wants to solve the mystery himself. But he’d better get busy.”

“He hasn’t done anything that I can see—except talk,” put in Jerry.

“No,” agreed Ned. “It’s queer. But we haven’t done much ourselves. I say! let’s get busy, now we’ve had our fun in the airship.”

“All right,” assented Jerry. “We’ll take a trip to-morrow over to the place where we ran up against a stone wall last time.”

“In the airship?” asked Bob.

“No. Not this time. The ponies will do.”

It was boots and saddles early the next morning, the boys taking their lunch with them.

“Good luck!” called the foreman after them. “If you don’t find the rustlers, at least you’ve kept ’em away since you came, except for that one raid.”

When he went out to the corral a little later and observed a pony there he exclaimed to Gimp:

“Who’s horse is Jerry riding?”

“His own, ain’t he?”

“There’s his pony now,” said the foreman. “Where’s Go Some?”

“By stirrup!” cried the cowboy. “Jerry’s taken the wrong pony. That imp Go Some will turn wild after he’s been ridden a few hours—he always does. And the fellow that’s on his back—well, I wouldn’t give much for his hide!” and he started off on a run.



CHAPTER XVII

ANOTHER RAID

“Here! where you goin’?” demanded the foreman after the retreating cowboy.

“To see if I can catch that imp of Satan before he does any mischief,” was the reply, shot back over Gimp’s shoulder. “I can’t see how Jerry took the wrong pony.”

“They look a heap alike to a fellow that don’t know much about hosses,” was the answer. “But if he doesn’t know Go Some’s tricks he sure will be throwed, and likely trampled on. Think you can get to him in time?”

“I don’t know. They didn’t say where they was goin’, but I’ll do my best.”

Gimp threw his saddle over his own mount that was having a “breather” after dinner, pulled tight the girths and swung himself up with a peculiar hitch that, as much as had his reputed ability to dance, had gained him his nickname.

“Try down by Bubblin’ Spring,” directed the foreman. “I think I heard the professor say he was goin’ that way, and he asked the boys to stop and flag him if they got the chance. He said he was after some new kind of frog or other. The spring’s full of ’em.”

“All right,” answered Gimp, as he galloped off.

“Queer, though, how Jerry took the wrong pony,” murmured the foreman as he went back to his office. “They look a bit alike—his’n and Go Some, but the last is meaner’n pizen. He’ll trot along with you for an hour or so and then he’ll get as wild as the wust buckin’ bronco that ever stiffened his legs and humped his back. Never could account for it—never. Guess I’ll get rid of him—if Jerry comes out of this all right. If he don’t I’ll shoot the imp.”

“What’s the matter? You got money in the bank?” asked Hinkee Dee, sauntering out of the bunk house.

“Why?” the foreman queried.

“Talkin’ to yourself like that.”

“Oh! I was just wonderin’ why he took him.”

“Who took him?”

“Jerry—you know—one of the boys. He rode off on Go Some and left his own pony. Mistake, I reckon, but it’s like to be a bad one for him. You know Go Some.”

“I should say I did! Don’t care for his acquaintance, either.”

“Well, think of that tenderfoot lad on him. Gimp has rid off trying to catch him. Maybe if you was to——”

“No thank you! I’ve got something else to do besides going to the rescue of thick-headed tenderfeet.”

“But Jerry made a mistake I tell you! He took Go Some thinking he was his own pony. Must have been tethered where he left his mount, though I don’t see how that could be, as Go Some is never fastened with the saddle ponies any more.”

Hinkee Dee said nothing as he strode away, but there was no look of concern on his face as there was on the countenance of the foreman.

“What’s the matter with your pony, Jerry?” asked Bob as he and Ned rode beside their tall chum.

“Nothing that I know of. Why?”

“He seems to want to hurry up all the while. Never knew him to be that way before. He was always at the tail end.”

“He is a bit speedy,” admitted Jerry, as he saw that his mount was stepping along at a good pace. “I never paid much attention to him before. Maybe he has some friends over this way. I wonder,” went on Jerry, speculatively, “if any of the cow rustlers’ ponies could be grazing around here?” for they were in the vicinity of the place where they had picked up the trail of the last raiding party.

“It might be,” agreed Ned. “Horses have relations, same as other animals, I reckon, and if your pony got a whiff of the family he might be in a hurry to rub noses. But, however that may be, I’d give a good bit to know where they hide their horses and the cattle. Hold on there! Don’t be in such a rush!”

Jerry tried to rein in his mount, but it was too late, for, a moment later, the animal had taken the bit in his teeth and was dashing across the plain.

“What are you trying to do—start a race?” cried Ned.

“I’ll give you a brush!” added Bob, but he had a glimpse of Jerry’s face as the lad tore past him, and Jerry’s countenance showed anything but delight in a coming test of speed.

Meanwhile, Gimp, his anxious eyes scanning the horizon at every rise he topped, was riding on, muttering to himself.

“That change of horses never was made natural,” he said. “Somebody who didn’t like Jerry had a hand in it. Now I wonder who it could be? Well, better not ask too many questions, I reckon. But I’ll keep my eyes open.”

He trotted on, now and then speaking to his horse as a range rider will often do. But Gimp saw no trace of the boys of whom he was in search—at least not for over an hour after he had fared forth. Then, as he turned away from Bubbling Springs where his search had been unsuccessful, and headed for the defile where the trail of the cattle rustlers had been lost, he descried in the distance three figures, one far in advance of the others.

“That’s them, sure!” exclaimed Gimp. “And Go Some has done his famous boltin’ stunt. Anyhow, Jerry’s still in the saddle. How long he’ll stay is another matter. Hop along you rat-tailed runt!” and with this affectionate epithet directed at his own steed, Gimp shook the reins and galloped off, making sure Lizzie, his horned toad pet, was safe in his pocket.

He was within five hundred feet of the leading, onrushing Go Some when the maddened horse did just what was to be expected of him. He began to buck, and as Jerry was no expert in the saddle he shot out at the second landing. And then, with fury, [Go Some turned and rushed at the prostrate, motionless figure.](#)

“GO SOME” TURNED AND RUSHED AT THE PROSTRATE, MOTIONLESS FIGURE.

With yells of dismay, Ned and Bob tried to spur their already half-exhausted animals forward to stop the maddened brute, but their mounts were unable to give the necessary burst of speed.

“Leave him to me!” yelled Gimp, who rode up just then. “I’ll ’tend to him!”

“Hump yourself now, you rat!” he yelled to his animal.

Like a polo pony, Blaze collided with the infuriated Go Some, the two horses coming together with a thud that could be heard for a long distance. Then Ned and Bob saw Gimp’s plan. He fairly knocked the maddened animal to one side so it could not trample on the unconscious Jerry.

But the shock was only momentarily successful. Thrown out of his stride, and away from the object of his attack, Go Some swerved to one side for an instant. But as he came on again, with no thought of giving up his plan, Gimp was ready for him.

Drawing his revolver, the cowboy fired directly at the furious animal. The bullet, as the marksman intended, creased a red line along the beast's neck, making a smarting, stinging wound.

"Maybe that'll cure you!" muttered the cowboy as he saw the mad horse turn and gallop away across the rolling plain. Then Gimp reined Blaze in, and slipped out of the saddle. He knelt beside Jerry, as Bob and Ned jumped from their mounts.

"Is he—is he——" faltered Chunky.

"Not by a long shot!" exclaimed Gimp. "There's a lot of fight left in him yet! He struck on his head and he's insensible, but there don't nothin' seem to be busted," he added, feeling all over Jerry who lay with closed eyes.

"How're we going to get him home?" asked Ned, when his chum had not aroused after they had wet his face with water and had tried to force some between his lips.

"Guess one of you'll have to ride back for the ambulance—I mean a wagon," Gimp answered.

"Our auto would be best," suggested Ned. "I'll go get it and run it back here."

Ned made good time back to the ranch, considering the half-exhausted state of his pony, and he made better time back with the automobile. Jerry was just opening his eyes when Ned returned, but he went off in another spell of faintness as they lifted him up on the pile of blankets that had been slipped in by the anxious foreman.

As the automobile, carefully and slowly driven by Ned, while Bob and Gimp rode beside it, came within view of the Square Z buildings they saw a horseman riding toward them.

"What's up now; more trouble?" asked Gimp, as he recognized the Parson, who seemed excited.

"I should say so! Munson's been shot."

"Shot! How?"

“In a cattle raid. There’s been another.”



CHAPTER XVIII

TWO INVALIDS

Gimp pulled up his horse sharply and looked narrowly at the Parson.

“Where was the raid this time?” he asked.

“From the Bear Swamp range,” and he named a part of the Square Z ranch that lay to the southeast, a low tract that was wet part of the year.

“Bear Swamp, eh?” mused Gimp. “That’s where some of the good stock was, too.”

“Yes, the old man had a nice bunch fattening there for a special order. He’s ravin’ now.”

For the moment Bob and Ned were more interested in how Munson had been shot than in the news of the cattle being driven off. The same thought was in both their minds. Was the cattle buyer shot while protecting the Square Z herd, or while participating in the theft? This last fitted in with the suspicions in the minds of the two boys. They wanted to ask a question but did not know just how, when Gimp saved them the trouble.

“Where was Munson hit?” he asked. “In the back?” he added as a significant after query.

The Parson laughed.

“It wouldn’t have surprised me if he had been on the run away from the enemy when he got nipped,” he said, “but I’ll have to be just and say it was in the leg, and head on at that.”

“What was he doing?” Gimp next demanded.

“He tried to plug some of the rustlers but they got him first, it *seems*,” answered the Parson.

“Huh! It *seems*?” inquired Gimp. “Doesn’t anybody *know*?”

“Nobody was there but Munson, and we had to take his version of it,” went on the narrator. “At least nobody but Munson came back to Square Z after the

fracas. The others rode away with the cattle.”

“Oh, then he was the only one who saw ’em. Which way did they go?” asked Gimp, eagerly.

“Over there—same way as the others,” and the Parson pointed toward the rocky defile near which all traces of the former bunch of stolen cattle had been lost.

“Same gang then, I take it,” said Gimp, presently. “Go on. Spin the yarn as we go along. We’ve got a sick boy here and the sooner the doctor sees him the better.”

Gimp told the Parson, briefly, how Jerry had been hurt, and added something about Hinkee Dee which Ned and Bob could not quite catch. Then, in his turn, the Parson told of the raid.

Munson, it appeared, had ridden off, as he often did, to look at a bunch of steers or to inspect some part of the ranch. He had come back, riding a winded horse and with his right leg tied in bloody bandages. His story was to the effect that as he approached a small herd of cattle that were temporarily without cowboy watchers from Square Z, he had seen the steers being rounded up by half a dozen men, who started to drive them away.

“Munson said he knowed they wasn’t our men,” said the Parson, “so he hailed ’em. They fired at him quick as a flash, and then he said he was sure they were the rustlers. He shot back and thinks he hit one, but they got him in the leg. He knows a little about medicine it seems, so he tore up his shirt, bandaged the wound and rode home. I guess most of us would have done the same.”

“Then he saw the rustlers?” asked Gimp, eagerly.

“Sure,” assented the Parson.

“Can’t he give a description so we can find ’em?”

“Well, he didn’t get near enough to see ’em clearly, he says. And you know one cowboy on a horse looks pretty much like another,” replied the Parson. “I guess Munson’s description won’t be much help. But we’re going to get right on their trail, and maybe we’ll be able to land ’em. They haven’t got such a start as before.”

Poor Jerry was beginning to recover consciousness when they carried him into the ranch house. He opened his eyes.

“Are you badly hurt, old scout?” asked Bob, anxiously.

“Well,” was the slow and low-voiced answer, “I have felt better,” and there was a faint smile which showed Jerry’s grit.

There were some modern conveniences at Square Z, a telephone being one of them, and a message was sent to town for a physician, who, fortunately, was in his office. He promised to come at once in his automobile, and was at Square Z in a comparatively short time.

“You’ve got two invalids to look after, Doc,” remarked the foreman, who had remained behind with the boys when Gimp and the Parson had ridden off after the other cowboys who had already started the chase.

“Two? I thought there was only one.”

“Visitor stayin’ here got himself shot-up,” and Mr. Watson briefly described Munson’s hurt.

As Jerry seemed to be the worse injured, the doctor attended him first, and after a searching examination announced, to the relief of Bob and Ned, that their chum was not in a serious condition.

“He’s had a bad shaking up, and he’s as sore as a boil and will be for some days,” declared the physician. “But nothing is broken, and I think there will prove to be no internal injuries. He’s badly bruised and he’ll have to stay in bed for three or four days. Now where’s the other chap?”

But that was a question that could not be answered; at least off-hand. For when they went to Munson’s room, whither he had limped on his arrival at the ranch with the startling news, he was gone. Some bloody bandages on a chair seemed to indicate that he had dressed his wound again and gone. But where?

The cook solved the mystery by reporting that, just before the arrival of the doctor, Munson had been seen riding away in the direction taken by the pursuing cowboys.

“Well, he’s got grit, that’s what I say!” exclaimed the foreman.

Jerry was made as comfortable as possible, and then they could only await the return of the cowboys from the chase to see how Munson fared. And when he came riding in with the others, showing little traces on his face of any pain or suffering, and heard the edict that the doctor was to come to him, or he to go to the doctor, he exclaimed:

“Not much! It isn’t the first time I’ve been shot, and it may not be the last. I know how to doctor myself and I’m all right. I’ll be a little lame and stiff for a while and I’ll have to lie around the bunk, but that’ll be about all. No doctor for me!” and they could not persuade him otherwise.

Then the talk turned to the results of the pursuit.

“They got clean away!” declared Gimp, in disappointed tones. “Couldn’t find hide nor hair of ’em.”

“Where was the last trace?” asked the foreman.

“Same place as the others, near Horse Tail Gulch.” This, it appeared, was the name of the ravine near which the boys had made some observations. “We traced ’em to there,” explained the Parson, “and that was all we could do.”

“Well, this sure is queer!” exclaimed Mr. Watson, banging his fist down on the table. “I never knew cattle raids to be carried on like this. They must give the beasts wings after they start to drive ’em away.”

“It does seem so,” agreed Gimp. “What they do with ’em is a mystery to me.”

“Could they mingle your cattle in with others from another ranch, so you wouldn’t notice them?” asked Ned.

“Well, Son, they *could* do that if there was other herds with a different brand than ours near here,” admitted the foreman. “But there isn’t. I see your drift. You mean they’ll round up some of your dad’s steers and when they get to where some other rancher has his herds they’ll bunch ’em; is that it?”

“Yes,” nodded Ned.

“Well, I don’t hardly believe they’d do that. It would be too hard work to cut out our cattle, and besides, as soon as the rancher saw a new brand in with his beef he’d send word here. Our brand is registered all over.

“Besides,” went on the foreman, “the thieves wouldn’t just cut out our cattle and drive them on, after they’d let ’em mingle; they’d take some of the other man’s, too. And we haven’t heard of any other ranch being robbed the way Square Z has—at least, I haven’t,” he concluded, looking at the cowboys.

“No, they seem to be picking on just us,” said the Parson.

“I guess my theory isn’t of much account,” admitted Ned. Then, as the two boys left the group of ranchers, going off by themselves, he added: “But we’ve got to do something—we’ve got to make good.”

“That’s right!” declared Bob. “We got the folks to consent to let us try our hand at this rather than hire detectives, and they may call us off if we don’t show results.”

The doctor came the next day and announced that Jerry was doing finely, saying he could be up and around in another day. Munson stuck to his decision not to have the physician look at the wounded leg, and to this the medical man, with a shrug of his shoulders, had to agree.

“It’s healing fine,” the cattle buyer said.

Jerry was able to be up the next day, and it was considered that the two “invalids” were doing well. Ned and Bob wanted to stay around the ranch to keep Jerry company, but he insisted that they do what they could to get some clue to the mystery. So they rode off each morning toward the gulch, but they were not successful in uncovering anything. Nor were the cowboys, though they could not devote much time to searching, since there was much work to be done about the ranch.

Jerry had been questioned as to why he took Go Some in mistake for his own horse.

“Why, I thought it was my own pony, that’s all,” he said. “The wild one was tethered where I’d left mine, and I’m not sharp enough about horses to tell one from another at a glance when they are as much alike as those two.”

“Well, they are a bit alike,” admitted the foreman. “But someone changed the places of the ponies, and I’d like to know who did it.”

The puzzle remained unsolved, however—at least for some time.

“Well, I guess I’ll be able to go about enough to-morrow to start with Bob and Ned on a thorough search,” said Jerry to himself, about a week after his accident, while he was moving about the house to get the stiffness out of his muscles. “I’m feeling all right again.”

Munson had not been active, either, his leg developing a stiffness that kept him to his room. He had been given an apartment to himself instead of bunking in with the cowboys. Ned, Bob and Jerry, too, as guests, had rooms to themselves in the same building.

As Jerry, walking in the Indian moccasins which he wore while in the house, passed Munson’s room he was minded to go in and have a talk with him. But as he noiselessly approached, something he saw through the partially opened door

caused him to pause.

The cattle buyer was changing his clothes. Jerry had a glimpse of both his bare legs and on neither one was a trace of a bullet wound!



CHAPTER XIX

ANOTHER ATTEMPT

“Well!” exclaimed Jerry to himself, “wouldn’t that make you wonder if you were seeing things?”

For a moment he stood, fascinated by the thought of what it all might mean, and he did not realize that it was not exactly the proper thing to do. But Munson was without so much as a scar to show where the bullet had gone in and been cut out, as he had claimed it had been!

“I wonder if he could have said his arm instead of his leg?” mused Jerry as he walked softly away, having given over his idea of speaking to the cattle buyer. “Did I misunderstand them when they told me about the shooting?”

Jerry tried to reason it out.

No, he was sure “leg” had been mentioned. Besides, he himself had seen the blood-stained trousers the man had worn.

“And one doesn’t wear trousers on one’s arms. What does it all mean?” Jerry mused.

He tried to think it out. Clearly, since there was no trace of a bullet wound there could have been no bullet. And, by the same process of reasoning, if there was no bullet there could have been no shot fired at Munson.

“And if there wasn’t a shot there wasn’t the fight he described, and maybe—yes, there was a cattle theft all right.” Jerry was sure of that much, anyhow.

“But why should he fake a wound?” Jerry asked himself. “What object could he have, unless he wanted to make himself out a hero. I guess that must be it. He wanted to prove that he wasn’t afraid of a gun. Well, maybe he isn’t. But this is a queer way to prove it. I give it up!”

A little later as Jerry was sitting out in the sun Munson came limping toward him.

“He’s keeping up the fake,” thought the tall lad. “And he does it well. Limp just about enough, and not as much as at first. He doesn’t forget, either. Must be

a good actor.

“How’s the leg?” the boy asked, just to see what would be said.

“Oh, getting on fine!” was the enthusiastic answer. “I’ll be able to leave the bandages off in a couple of days now,” and he motioned to a bulge under his trousers where, evidently, he had wound some cloth, uselessly, as Jerry knew.

“That’s good,” was Jerry’s comment. Then, just to see what the effect would be, he remarked, as though in surprise:

“Oh, you were shot in the right leg, weren’t you?”

He thought perhaps Munson might surmise that he had been suspected of faking, and would seem confused. But he was perfectly cool and replied in casual tones:

“Sure it was the right leg. Did you think it was the left?”

“I had an idea,” Jerry answered.

“Yes, I’ll be in fine shape in a couple more days,” went on Munson, “and then I can help you boys look for those cattle rustlers. I’d like to get hold of the man who shot me.”

“You never will,” thought the lad grimly, “for there wasn’t any such man. You’re a big faker; but what’s your game?”

Jerry cared more for that than for anything else just then. Was Munson in with the thieves? If so, what would it benefit him to pretend to be wounded? Jerry’s brain was tired with trying to get a loose end of the tangle that he could follow.

Ned and Bob, going off by themselves to look for traces of the thieves, were no more successful than the three chums had been together. They returned at the end of a long day, tired and disappointed.

Their zeal was quickened, however, when Jerry told them of the queer discovery in regard to Munson.

“Whew!” whistled Ned. “There’s something doing here, all right. He’s one of the cattle thieves as sure as guns! We’ve got to watch him close.”

“I agree to that last part all right,” said Jerry. “But I’m not so sure he’s in with the rustlers.”

“I am!” and Bob sided with Ned.

“Well, that’s one end to work on, and another is to see what happened to your

dad's cattle," said Jerry. "We'll have another try at the gulch, I think."

"It's only a waste of time," declared Ned. "Bob and I have gone over every inch of the ground there."

"Well, I'm a bit freshened up by my rest," insisted Jerry, "and I want to take another look. But have you fellows formed ideas at all?"

"Half a dozen, and not one any good," answered Bob. "Once I had an idea that they took the cattle away in a big automobile from the point where we lost trace of them."

"They couldn't do that without leaving marks of the wheels," put in Ned, "and we didn't see any."

"Then I got a crazy notion that they floated them down a river on a raft," went on Chunky. "Only," and he grinned, "there isn't any river near there."

"And then he sprang the tunnel theory," laughed Ned.

"What's that?" Jerry demanded.

"Oh, I had an idea there might be a secret underground passage somewhere near the gulch, and the rustlers could slip the cattle away through that. But we couldn't find any tunnel."

"And so we're about at the end of our guessing," resumed Ned. "The only theories left are that the cattle sprout wings and jump over the mountain range, or else they're carried up in an elevator, leaving no trace."

"Well, we'll see what we can find," said Jerry. "What with that, and keeping an eye on Munson, we're going to have our hands full."

"And our eyes, too," laughed Ned.

"Want to take a spin in the airship?" asked Bob of Jerry.

"Not quite yet," he replied. "I feel a bit weak still, and I haven't gotten back all my nerve. But you two go if you like."

Bob and Ned did take a little flight just before supper, to the delight and astonishment of the cowboys, who never wearied of watching the evolutions of the aircraft, though once it made considerable work for them, as in flying over a herd of cattle the animals stampeded, when some of them saw the shadow of the big wings hovering over them, and the cowboys had all they could do to quiet the steers.

But, for all that, the plainsmen delighted to watch the boys sail aloft. Few of them would venture very near the craft, however, for fear, as one of them said, “she might turn around and chase us.” But the airship gained for the boys a certain respect and awe that had been lacking before. Hinkee Dee only remained hostile, but he was less open in his antagonism now.

A day or two later the three boys were on their way to the baffling gulch, or defile. Jerry, Bob and Ned rode their ponies easily along the undulating grassy plains, Jerry having made sure this time that he had his own horse. The wild one had wandered off the day of the accident and had not come back to the ranch. Mr. Watson had told the men not to make a search for him, as he was “too ornery for anyone to own.”

Professor Snodgrass had been invited to accompany the boys, but he said he was on the track of some new kind of moth, and its feeding ground was in the opposite direction from the gulch.

“Well, see what you can find,” suggested Ned to Jerry, as the trio reached the place where all traces of the stolen cattle had been lost. “Bob and I have ridden all over the place, and we can’t find a crack big enough to let a sheep through, let alone a steer.”

“We’ll see,” said Jerry. “Mind, I don’t say there *is* anything here, but I just want to satisfy myself.”

They looked carefully in the vicinity of the entrance to the gulch, or defile. It was at the top of a long low slope that extended along the western boundary of Square Z ranch.

This ridge was really the last of a line of hills which lay at the foot of the mountain slope. The ravine was a sort of V-shaped break in the mountain wall. At one time it might have been a pass through the mountains, but an upheaval of nature had closed it until now it was but a wedge-shaped cut, or gash, into the stony side of the mountain. Stony were the steep walls and also the floor, which was covered with shale and flat rocks.

“There’ve been cattle along here,” declared Jerry, pausing at the entrance to the gulch.

“Yes, everybody admits that,” conceded Ned. “And there’ve been cattle in the gulch, too. You can see traces of ’em. But the mystery is: how do they get out?”

Jerry looked about without answering.



CHAPTER XX

THE PROFESSOR'S DILEMMA

Ned, Bob and Jerry were perhaps better fitted to attempt to solve a mystery of this kind than most young men would have been. They had traveled considerably, and had been in strange situations. More than once they had had to do with secret passageways and queer tunnels which they had discovered only after long, tiresome search.

“But I never saw anything quite so plain as this,” confessed Jerry, as he and his chums rode around the sides of the V-shaped gulch. It was shaped like a V in two ways. That is, the entrance was of that character and the sides sloped down from the top; though because of the width of the floor, as it might be called, of the gulch the outline of the elevation would better be represented by the letter U.

The opening of the gulch was perhaps half a mile in width, and the two sides were a mile or more long. They came together, gradually converging, until they formed the inside of a sharp wedge.

“Now the question,” said Jerry, “is whether or not there is an opening in this V; and, if so—where?”

“Now you’ve said it!” exclaimed Ned. “Where? Beats any problem in geometry I ever tackled.”

“Well, come on, let’s be systematic about this,” suggested Jerry. “There are three of us, and we can divide this gulch into three parts.”

The tall lad indicated some natural landmarks on the rocky walls of the ravine. He would take from the entrance on the left to a third of the way down the side. From there, extending part way up the other side, and, of course, including the angle of the V, would be Bob’s portion. The remainder would be inspected by Ned.

“But Bob and I have done it all before,” objected Ned. “We didn’t find a thing.”

“And maybe we sha’n’t now,” admitted Jerry. “But it won’t be for lack of trying. Come on now, start.”

“And you can both meet me at the end of the gulch,” suggested Bob.

“Why meet you there?” Jerry asked.

“So you can eat,” was the ready response. “I’ve got the grub, you know.”

“Trust you for that,” laughed Ned. “But it’s a good idea all the same.”

The search began. The boys were sure the cattle had been driven up to the entrance of the defile. In this they were supported by the cowboys who agreed to the same thing. But there was a division of opinion as to whether the steers had been driven into the gulch and held there for a time.

There were objections to this theory on the ground that in some cases pursuit had been made so soon after the raid that had the cattle been held in the gulch they would have been seen.

Of course, they might have been kept there for a little while, and then concealed, either further up the side of the mountain or among the low foothills. But searches in these places had failed to give any clue.

“The cattle come into this gulch,” was Jerry’s decision, “and we’ve got to find out how they are taken out without being seen.”

The boys searched the rocky sides of the gulch thoroughly. They even climbed part way up, but all to no purpose. When Jerry and Ned met with Bob in the angle, and began to eat, they were no nearer a solution of the mystery than at first.

“Well, I know one thing I’m going to do!” exclaimed Jerry, vigorously, as he washed down the last of his sandwich with a drink of water.

“What’s that?” queried Ned.

“I’m going up on top and look down. That’s getting a different viewpoint, and that’s a whole lot, sometimes. Me for the top of the mountain.”

“Well, maybe that wouldn’t be a bad idea,” conceded Ned. “Go to it!”

“But not to-day,” objected Bob. “I’m about tuckered out.”

“You’re getting too fat!” laughed Jerry. “But I’m in no hurry about it to-day. To-morrow or day after will do as well. And I have an idea we’ll discover something.”

“It’s going to be a climb,” observed Bob, dubiously, as they rode out of the gulch on their homeward way and looked up at the steep sides of the mountain.

Then they started for the house.

“Didn’t bring ’em back with you this time, did you?” sneered Hinkee Dee as the boys rode into the corral at the ranch.

“No, but we’re on their track,” replied Jerry, good-naturedly. “And we’ll have them in a few days now.”

“Well, give ’em my regards,” said the cowboy.

“Why, are the rustlers friends of yours?” asked Ned in drawling tones.

Hinkee Dee turned like a flash.

“What do you mean by that?” he cried.

“Just the same as you meant,” was Ned’s cool rejoinder; and, after a moment’s insolent scrutiny of the lad, Ned never flinching under the gaze, the assistant foreman swung away muttering.

“You an’ him don’t seem to pull together very well,” observed Gimp, leaping from his pony.

“That doesn’t worry me any,” said Ned.

The trip to the top of the mountain required a little more preparation than the one on which the boys had fruitlessly examined the gulch. They could not make it in one day, and had to arrange to spend the night out. But the weather was fine and they knew they would enjoy the excursion, since they could take a shelter tent along.

“I’ll go with you,” declared Professor Snodgrass. “You are going to remain out all night and that is just what I want. I am making a special study of night moths now, and I imagine I may find a new species on the mountain top. I’ll go with you.”

“Glad to have you,” replied Jerry, cordially. Since arriving at the ranch they had not seen as much of the scientist as they usually did on their travels.

“We’ll take the ponies,” suggested Jerry, in talking over the plans. “It will be easier for us and not too hard for them if we ride the slope slowly. We can even walk part of the way if it’s too steep. And with the animals we can easily carry what we need for the night camp.”

“I’m not a very good horseman,” objected the professor. “I had hopes that you would go in the car or the airship.”

“The car couldn’t make the trip,” Jerry said. “Of course we could use the airship, but I’m not sure about a good landing place up on the summit. It looks as if it were pretty well wooded. I guess we can pick you out a good, safe pony, Professor.”

“Lots of ’em,” Mr. Watson assured them.

“Well, if I fall off you’ll have to pick me up, boys,” and the scientist smiled, but somewhat apprehensively and dubiously.

However, the animal which was assigned to him proved so very tractable and gentle that Professor Snodgrass felt all his fears vanish, and after a preliminary trial around the ranch buildings he said he felt that he could go anywhere the boys went.

The tent in which they would sleep was in four sections, each rider carrying one. The food, too, was divided into packets and this, except for weapons, was about all they needed, save blankets that went with the tent.

“Well, we’re off!” called Ned as he and his chums, with the professor, mounted their well-laden ponies and started away from the ranch.

“Good luck!” called the foreman.

“And don’t lose the rustlers when you start back with ’em!” added his assistant. “Better hog-tie ’em or they might slip loose.”

Some of the boys chuckled at this sally of wit, but others showed by their attitude that their sympathies were more with the boys than with Hinkee Dee.

The trail up the mountain was not an easy one, but the sure-footed ponies made it very well indeed. At first Professor Snodgrass stopped his steed every few steps to get off to look for some bug he fancied he saw, or to gather a specimen of a new plant or flower.

But Jerry pointed out to him that if thus delayed they would not reach the summit in time to hunt any moths that night, and admitting the right of this the professor kept on with the boys.

“Just what do you expect to find when you get up there, Jerry?” he asked.

“I wish I knew,” was the answer. “But we’ve got to find something somewhere to solve this puzzle.”

“That’s what,” agreed his chums.

The boys fully expected to get to the top well before noon, but the trail was circuitous and presented accumulating difficulties as they went upward, and finally the ponies and they, themselves, were so tired that they halted at noon, still several miles from the top, and ate their lunch, giving the animals a breathing spell and a chance to crop what scanty herbage there was.

The remainder of the trip was worse than the first part as regarded going, and the sun was hiding behind a big bank of gorgeously colored clouds when they topped the last rise and reached the summit. They found themselves on a wide, level stretch of rich land, extending for miles, and parallel to the next mountain range, there being a valley between. But the boys could not see into this yet, as night was coming on and the shadows lay deep in the valley.

“Can’t do any exploring to-night,” decided Jerry. “We’d better make camp at once and turn in, so as to be up early. Then we can put in a full day.”

“Good idea!” exclaimed Bob. “I’ll get a fire going right away. I brought along some bacon and eggs.”

“Good old scout!” yelled Ned.

The tent was soon erected, the fire was merrily burning, the horses eagerly cropping the sweet grass, and the aromatic smell of bacon and coffee filled the air.

“I’ll sleep like a top to-night,” declared Jerry as he and the others wrapped themselves up in their blankets a little later and went into the tent.

“I’ll sleep like two,” said Bob.

“No wonder—you ate so much!” joked Ned.

Probably their sound slumber accounted for the fact that the boys did not hear Professor Snodgrass leave the tent. And then he had told them he intended to get up in the night and go out with a lantern to hunt for moths that would be attracted by the light. In accordance with this plan they had given him an outside place so he would not disturb them.

Just when he went out the boys did not know, but in the middle of the night they were awakened by a cry.

“Boys! Boys! Help! They’ve got me!” was shouted in distressed tones.

“It’s the professor!” exclaimed Jerry, sitting up suddenly.

“That’s what! And he’s in trouble!” added Ned. “We’ve got to help him!”

They arose and rushed from the tent into the darkness only faintly illuminated by the dying blaze of the campfire.



CHAPTER XXI

QUEER MARKS

“What is it?”

“What was it?”

“Where is he?”

Ned, Bob and Jerry shot these questions into the darkness as they sleepily stumbled out of the tent.

“Quiet!” commanded Jerry when he realized that it was vitally necessary to learn from which direction the call for help had come so they might go to the rescue. Bob and Ned understood and stood still, listening.

But though they could hear the restless moving of their horses, tethered not far away, there was no further call. Night insects, perhaps some of the very kind the professor had gone out to capture, made their characteristic sounds.

“What shall we do?” asked Ned in a whisper. “Something must be done and quickly.”

“We’ve got to call,” said Jerry in husky tones, after waiting what seemed to his chums a long time, though it was but perhaps a few seconds. “Let’s all yell at once.”

They raised their voices in a call that must have carried far, shouting the name of the missing man. But the echoes of the forest and plain was their only answer.

“He must have fallen and knocked himself insensible,” suggested Ned.

“But didn’t you hear what he said?” asked Jerry.

“No, I didn’t,” Ned admitted. “The call woke me, but I couldn’t make out the words.”

“He called for help, and said, very distinctly: ‘They’ve got me,’” repeated Jerry. “I’m sure about that.”

“What did he mean?”

“That’s what we’ve got to find out.”

“Could it have been that he was attacked by a big moth—a giant of its species?” ventured Bob, jokingly.

“Say, this is no joke!” exclaimed Ned, and he glanced involuntarily over his shoulder.

“Let’s make up the fire,” suggested Jerry. “It will be a guiding mark for the professor, and we’ll not go to bed again this night—unless we find him.”

“Why, don’t you think we shall?” asked Bob. “And say, if not a big moth, perhaps a wild animal——”

“Forget it,” advised Ned. “If anything in the animal line attacked the professor it was a bear or a mountain lion, and I don’t believe there have been any of them in this region for years. I think he went puttering around in the dark to see about getting some insects, and he fell over a cliff, or into some hole.”

“But that wouldn’t make him say something—or someone—had him,” refuted Jerry.

“That’s so,” chimed in Bob. “But let’s do something instead of standing here talking. The professor is in trouble.”

“That’s true enough,” conceded Jerry. “Come on. We’ll get a light and make a search. But first build up the fire.”

They threw on a quantity of light wood, and the blaze that flared up was doubly welcome, giving both warmth and cheer, for things were getting on the nerves of the boys, sturdy chaps though they were.

“Let’s yell again,” suggested Jerry, and once more their voices were raised in a loud cry. They hoped with that and the sight of the fire to get some response, but none came.

“Well, we’ve got to search for him,” decided Jerry, with a sigh.

“We’ll have some hot coffee before we start out,” Bob said. “It won’t take but a few minutes to make over that hot fire, and we’ll all feel better for a drink.”

There was a rude stone fireplace at one side of the main blaze, and raking some glowing embers into this Bob set the coffee pot over the coals. In a little while he served out the hot and cheering beverage. It did put heart into the boys, and they were soon ready to set out on their search.

“Now we’ve got to have some sort of system to this,” said Jerry. “It won’t do to get separated too far, or—well, something might happen to us. Now I suggest

that we make the fire the central point. We can start from that—the three of us, as though from three equally separated points on a circle. We'll each walk until we can just see the fire and start to call from there."

"Why not fire our guns?" suggested Ned.

"Yes, we can do that. But, as we haven't any blanks, fire in the air."

"And if we don't get any result?" Bob asked.

"Then we'll have to come back, after a reasonable time and wait until morning. I haven't much hope of finding him in the dark, anyhow, for once a person starts to wander he gets more and more confused."

"Then you think he wandered away?" asked Ned.

"I don't know what to think," was Jerry's answer, and it was a bit despondent. "I wish we had a few hours of daylight."

"The night can't last forever," Bob said softly.

"No, but it's only half gone—it's only a bit after twelve," responded Jerry, looking at his watch in the light of an electric flashlight he had brought from the tent.

The boys prepared for the night search. They started from the fire, pacing off equal distances, and then went forward into the darkness. Every now and then they would look back to see that they had not lost sight of the guiding beacon behind them.

At intervals they called—shouting the professor's name. Intently they listened for an answer, but none came. Nor was there any response to the shots they fired.

An hour was spent thus fruitlessly, and then they came back to the camp blaze.

"No use, I guess," Jerry said. "You two didn't hear anything, did you?"

"No," answered Bob, and as Ned shook his head negatively he asked:

"Did the professor have a revolver with him?"

"I told him to take one when we started out from the ranch, and always keep it with him," said Jerry. "Whether he did or not I can't say."

"Let's see if he left it with his stuff in the tent," suggested Ned.

They looked near the place where the professor had slept. Some of his belongings—spare insect nets, specimen boxes and the like—were on the

ground, but there was no weapon of any sort.

“Guess he must have taken it,” Jerry said. “The question is—will he think to use it?”

“He ought to have used it on whatever attacked him,” Bob said.

The boys became silent. They loved Professor Snodgrass and they did not know what to do to help him. That he was in trouble they knew. But it was literally groping in the dark to try to do anything further until daylight.

They went back into the tent, for it was warm there from the heat of the blaze, but none of them felt like sleeping. Bob got up and began to rummage among some packages.

“What are you looking for?” asked Jerry.

“Seeing how much grub we have left. You can’t tell how long we may have to stay if we don’t find the professor.”

For once Bob’s chums did not rebuke him for mentioning something to eat.

“You’re right,” said Jerry. “We didn’t bring enough for a long stay.”

“I packed a pretty good lot,” said Bob, “and I’m glad I did. We could stay a couple of days, I think, with what we could shoot. Then if we don’t find him we’ll have to go back to the ranch for more.”

“Oh, we’ll find him before then,” declared Ned.

Jerry said nothing.

Morning came. They were astir with the first faint glow in the east and made a quick breakfast. They decided to keep together, for they were in a strange country, and to hunt in a circle with the camp as a center. Having hidden their main supply of food after putting up some for a noon-time “snack,” they mounted their horses and fared forth.

They were not experienced enough in wood lore to pick up the professor’s trail. All they knew was that he had started out in some direction from the tent. They argued that he would keep on going west, as the ranch lay to the east of the camp, and he would, most likely, want to explore new country for his moths.

For a while they discovered nothing, and there came no answer to their shouts. Then, as Ned was riding a little in advance, he gave a surprised cry and called eagerly:

“Look here, fellows!”

“What is it?” asked Jerry, as he and Bob galloped up.

“Look at those queer marks!” cried Ned, pointing to the ground.



CHAPTER XXII

ANXIOUS DAYS

The boys sat silent in their saddles and looked down at the queer tracks left in a place where the earth was soft. The marks were like two shallow depressions in the ground, about a foot across and separated by about eight feet. They looked to have been made by some rounded body, for in the center the depressions were more deeply indented than on the edge, and the marks, or tracks, curved and twisted this way and that, but always in almost an exact parallel.

“What do you make of them?” asked Ned, and both he and Bob glanced at Jerry.

“They’re queer,” said the tall lad at length.

“You’re right there,” assented Bob. “But what do they mean?”

“And have they anything to do with the disappearance of the professor?” went on Ned.

“You’ve got me there,” Jerry had to confess. “You see we don’t know whether the marks were made before or after he left us.”

“They can’t have been made very long though,” declared Ned, sliding off his pony and getting down to feel the marks. “They’re comparatively fresh.”

“But what in the world made ’em?” asked Bob.

Neither of his chums could answer, and, at Jerry’s suggestion, they decided to follow the queer trail to see whither it led.

“It may have something to do with the disappearance of the professor, though I doubt it,” said Ned.

After following the queer marks for some distance, not knowing whether they were going toward the starting point or in the opposite direction, the boys encountered a difficulty. The marks came to a sudden stop at the edge of a stretch of land that was smooth shale rock. On that, if the object that made the marks had been dragged, no impression would remain.

“Now let’s go back and start over again,” suggested Ned. “The marks either

end here—or begin.”

“More likely begin,” responded Jerry. “If they ended here it wouldn’t amount to a hill of beans as far as helping us is concerned. But let’s go back.”

So they followed the trail back to the spot they had first observed the strange lines in the soft earth. And when they reached this place Ned made another discovery.

“Look!” he cried, pointing to the space between the marks. “There have been horses along here.”

“Sure, we rode there,” said Jerry.

“No we didn’t!” said Bob, quickly. “We came over that way,” and he pointed to the left. “We haven’t ridden here at all. Those are strange horses.”

“Maybe you’re right,” Jerry admitted.

“I *know* I am!” Bob retorted.

An examination of the impressions left by the strange horses showed them to be unlike those made by the steeds the Motor Boys rode.

“Well, now that’s settled,” observed Jerry, “let’s keep on following the trail. We must find out what it all means.”

The queer marks went on for a little distance farther, and then were lost once more, at the edge of a stretch of ground so hard and rocky that it would have taken a small locomotive, running along without a track, to have made an impression.

“Nothing doing here,” said Jerry. “The mystery deepens.”

“The only two things we are sure of,” observed Ned, “is that the professor has disappeared, after calling for help, and that something has been dragged along here by horses. And they are both queer things.”

“The only thing to do is to keep on searching and calling and shooting,” said Jerry. “And we don’t want to do too much of the latter, for we haven’t a big supply of cartridges, and we may need them.”

“What for?” Bob asked.

“Well, you never can tell what will happen,” was the answer. “It’s best to be prepared and well armed, especially in this region of cattle rustlers.”

“And we’re forgetting all about them!” exclaimed Ned. “We haven’t done the

exploring up here we set out to do.”

“We had to drop it,” Jerry said. “The professor came first, of course.”

“Oh, sure,” Ned agreed with him. “I wonder,” he went on musingly, “if the rustlers are around here?”

“I only wish they *were!*” exclaimed Jerry, warmly. “They’re just the ones we’d like to see. They might put us on the trail of the professor. That is,” he chuckled, “if they didn’t feel hurt because we had caught them.”

“Do you expect to nab ’em?” asked Bob.

“Say ‘hope’ instead of ‘expect,’” suggested the tall lad with a smile.

“Well, the marks aren’t going to help as much as I expected,” Ned remarked. “We’ll just have to go it blind again.”

And they did, riding here and there, calling and occasionally firing their revolvers. But as the day passed, and they received no answer, they became discouraged.

“Shall we go back to camp?” asked Bob, as night was beginning to manifest itself.

“Where else would we go?” asked Jerry.

“Well, I thought maybe we would go to the ranch. There isn’t much grub left _____”

“Do you put eating ahead of the professor?” cried Ned.

“No, of course not. But I meant we could go back to the ranch, stock up and come back here prepared to make a long stay. Of course, I want to find the professor as much as you!”

“That’s all right,” returned the mollified Ned. “But we’ve got grub enough for a while yet, and he may come back as queerly as he went away.”

But Professor Snodgrass did not do so. The boys passed an uneasy night, listening for any sounds that might indicate the return of their friend, but his place in the tent was vacant when morning came.

Then they held a sort of council and decided it would be best to go back to the ranch and tell what had happened. They could come back the next day, with some of the cowboys and make a more thorough search.

It was a dispirited party of youths that took the homeward trail. They gave up,

for the time being, the plan of seeking for the cattle thieves.

“Maybe he’s here ahead of us,” suggested Bob, as they came in sight of the ranch buildings.

“Where?” asked Jerry.

Bob nodded toward the collection of buildings.

“He might have got away from whatever or whoever had him,” he resumed, “and wandered back here, not being able to find our camp.”

It was but a forlorn hope and it was not justified.

“Seen Professor Snodgrass? Why, no!” exclaimed the foreman, in answer to their question, as he greeted the boys. “What happened?”

They told him, and related what they had done in the way of making a search.

“Jumping tomcats! That’s too bad!” cried Mr. Watson. “We’ll get right after this! Here, Gimp, send up some of the boys!”

“What’s happened?” asked the cowboy.

“The cattle rustlers have captured the professor!” cried the foreman.



CHAPTER XXIII

LETTERS FROM HOME

The boys started at these words. The professor in the hands of the cattle thieves!

“But—but!” stammered the surprised Ned. “If they took him, why didn’t they take us? We weren’t far away from where they made the professor a prisoner, to judge by his voice. It sounded very plainly.”

“Sound carries a good distance in this clear air,” said the foreman. “He might have been half a mile away.”

“Besides, they didn’t know you were there,” put in Gimp. “You say the professor went out of the tent?”

“Yes, to look for some moths. He’s been collecting them of late. And they grabbed him while we slept,” explained Ned.

“Well, that accounts for it,” went on the cowboy. “The rustlers were abroad that night on top of the mountain, maybe getting ready to make another raid on us. They came upon the professor, who probably didn’t notice ’em, and they nabbed him before he knew what was going on. It’s as plain as a long-eared rabbit. But we’ll get after the rascals!”

“That’s what!” declared the foreman.

“You can’t do much there at night,” Jerry said.

“No. But we can get a start, which is something, and be on the ground bright and early in the morning,” replied Mr. Watson. “The more time we lose the worse for the professor. I know that trail in the dark as well as in daylight. Where’s Hinkee Dee?” he asked.

“Makin’ a new lariat the last I seen of him,” answered Gimp.

“Send him here, will you? I’m going to leave him in charge while I go off on this expedition with some of you boys. I’ve had enough of this business. I’ll get them rustlers or bust a leg! It’s bad enough to have ’em steal our cattle, but when they take to kidnappin’ a nice man, like Professor Snodgrass, it’s time something

was done.”

A curious friendship had sprung up between the rough foreman and the gentle professor which accounted for the warmth of Mr. Watson’s talk.

“Hink,” he said shortly, when his assistant came in, “we’ve got bad news. More of those rustler’s doin’s. It’s got to stop! I want you to take hold here until I come back,” and he explained what had taken place and outlined his plans.

“Get off that shipment that’s to go to-morrow,” he added, “and I’ll be back as soon as I can make it. I won’t come without the professor either, if I can help it,” he said grimly.

“We’ll be with you after we’ve had something to eat,” said Bob, for it was then near the supper hour.

“You’re not to go back to-night!” declared the foreman. “You’ve done enough and you’re tuckered out. Get a good night’s sleep and you can ride up and join us in the morning. Bring along plenty of grub, for we may have to stay a few days. We’ll prepare to camp out. You say you left your tent there?”

“Yes, for we counted on going back,” Jerry answered.

Arrangements were quickly made to get the cowboys, under the leadership of the foreman, off on their trip.

“I wish I was going along!” exclaimed Mr. Munson, as he limped around the room where the talk had been going on.

“Why aren’t you?” asked Hinkee Dee in some surprise. “They’ll need every man they can get, and the boss has signed up more of the cowboys to go with him than I like to see leave the ranch. It makes us short-handed.”

“I don’t see how I can go,” replied the cattle buyer. “My leg doesn’t seem to be getting on as well as I expected. It pains me a lot and if I go up there, where the trail is steep, I might have to walk. I couldn’t do that very well now,” and he limped more than ever. “I’d be more of a hindrance than a help.”

“Well, I reckon there’s something in that,” agreed the assistant foreman. “Do as you think best.”

“Then I’ll stay until my leg gets better.”

“Hadn’t you better let the doctor look at it?” asked Jerry with a wink, seen only by his chums.

“Yes, I think I shall,” was Munson’s cool answer. “I’ll ride in to town and let the doc have a look some day if it doesn’t heal soon. It doesn’t hurt me to ride on the level.”

“What do you suppose his game is—playing off like that?” asked Ned of his tall chum when the three were by themselves.

“I wish I knew,” Jerry replied. “But I’m going to find out. He has some reason for wanting to stay around this ranch, and if it hasn’t to do with cattle stealing I’m very much mistaken.”

“That’s right,” chimed in Bob.

The little cavalcade of cowboys, headed by the foreman, left the ranch singing and shouting, one of the more excitable firing off his revolver.

Ned, Bob and Jerry kept pretty much to themselves that night, as Hinkee Dee was in charge. Even though the parents of the boys owned Square Z, the surly fellow might make it unpleasant for them. He had not become at all friendly as had the others.

“Where are you going?” asked Bob of Jerry, as he saw the tall lad saunter outside.

“Just to have a look around,” was the answer. “I rather want to see what our friend Munson is up to.”

“Want any company?” asked Ned.

“Thank you, no. It will be better for one to do this. He might get suspicious.”

Jerry came back an hour later, shaking his head.

“Nothing doing,” he reported. “He just sat playing cards with the other cowboys for a while, and then took a walk around. I followed, but all he did was to saunter here and there, star-gazing as nearly as I could make out.”

“He’s up to some game,” decided Bob, and his chums agreed with him.

The night passed uneventfully, and after an early breakfast Ned, Bob and Jerry started for the mountain again. They made better time on this trip, and reached the site of the camp in mid-afternoon. No one was about, but another tent had been pitched near theirs, and through a note left in a conspicuous place by the foreman the boys learned that Watson and the others were off making a search. He advised the three boys to stay in camp until the return of the party.

The chums did not want to do this—they wanted to be “on the job,” as Ned declared, but they decided it was best to obey the wishes of a more experienced person.

“We can be getting grub ready for them,” suggested Bob, who, to do him justice, was as anxious to have others partake of the good viands he so enjoyed as he was to eat them himself.

His plan was voted a good one by his chums, and, having had considerable experience in the way of preparing meals, they got up a good one, that was much appreciated by the tired cowboys who came in just before dusk.

“Well, this is a surprise!” exclaimed the foreman as he smelled the savory odors. “In a way it makes up for our disappointment.”

“Then you didn’t find a trace of him?” asked Jerry.

“Not a trace.”

“Did you see queer marks?” Bob queried.

The foreman nodded silently, his mouth full of bread and bacon.

“What were they?”

“Stone-boat,” sententiously replied Mr. Watson.

“Stone-boat?” repeated Bob.

“Yes. A stone-boat is a sort of platform of heavy planks nailed crossways to two logs. It’s easy to roll a big stone on this, as it’s up only a few inches from the ground. Then you hitch some horses to the front end, and pull the stone-boat along. It’s an easy way of hauling heavy weights over dry ground. Of course, when there’s snow you can call it a stone-sled if you like. But that’s what made the marks you saw.”

“And did they drag the professor on a stone-boat?” was Jerry’s question.

“I think not,” and the foreman shook his head. “It was a pretty big stone-boat, to judge by the marks. Most likely someone has been building a sort of wall around a water hole, and had to haul the stone quite a way. I don’t think it had anything to do with the professor.”

The search was renewed early the next morning, and kept up for two days without success. There was no trace of the professor and none of the rustlers. A careful examination was made of the land lying to the west of the ravine, but

nothing was revealed that would help solve the mystery.

“Well, I guess we’ll have to give up,” regretfully remarked the foreman after the third day, when their provisions were almost gone. “We’ve made a good search. They’ve either—well, done away with the poor professor somehow, carried him far off, or else they’re hiding with him in some cave in these mountains. And the land knows there are so many we’d never be able to search them all. We did go through a few.”

There seemed nothing else to do, and the cavalcade slowly wended its way down the mountain. The boys felt as though they were coming away from the funeral of their dear friend. It was like leaving him behind.

“But I’m not going to give up!” exclaimed Jerry. “We haven’t solved the cattle mystery yet, and we’re going to have another whack at that. Incidentally, we can look for the professor, too.”

“It does you credit, boys,” said the foreman. “But I don’t believe you’ll have any success.”

The mail was in when the boys got back to Square Z ranch. Each one had a letter, and when Jerry had finished his from his mother he looked at the faces of Ned and Bob.

“You don’t seem to have good news,” he remarked.

“We haven’t,” admitted Ned. “Dad wants us to come home!”



CHAPTER XXIV

QUESTIONS

“What’s up?” asked Jerry, solicitously. “Someone ill?”

“No,” answered Ned. “But dad intimates that we’ve fallen down on the job, so to speak, and he thinks we might as well give it up and let him send on a real detective. He says he knows of one that used to be in the United States Secret Service and he thinks this fellow would succeed where we’ve failed.”

“I don’t admit we’ve failed yet!” Jerry exclaimed. “Of course, I don’t want to presume to dictate to your father,” he hastened to add, “but I wish he’d give us a little more time.”

“My father says the same thing that Ned’s father does,” said Bob, who had finished reading his letter. “I guess yours and mine must have had a confab, and decided on this move,” he remarked to Ned.

“It looks that way. But I’m not going home, fellows. I’m going to stick it out!” and Ned struck a defiant attitude.

“So’m I!” exclaimed Bob.

“Rebels!” remarked Jerry with a smile, though none of the lads felt in any gay mood since the disappearance of Professor Snodgrass.

“Well, you have to rebel once in a while,” went on Ned. “I don’t mean to say that I’d deliberately disobey my dad,” he added. “But he doesn’t understand. I suppose he’s a bit sore at losing so many cattle, and I don’t know that I blame him. But he doesn’t understand the situation here, and your father doesn’t either, Bob.”

“I’m with you there. But this letter says come home without delay, and let the detective take up the case. Dad says there are certain reasons for this.”

“What are they?” asked Jerry.

“Mine mentions ’em, too,” added Ned. “It seems that my father is rather sorry he bought a ranch, and got Mr. Baker to go in on the deal. Dad wants the money he put in it to finance some other matters connected with his store, though he

doesn't go into details.

"He says they had a chance to sell the ranch at a handsome profit, but the intending purchaser backed out when he heard rustlers were running off the cattle. The man said he wanted a ranch with some *steers* on it, not just *grass*," went on Ned with a rueful smile as he referred to his father's letter.

"Is the deal off?" asked Jerry. "It's too bad to have your father lose money, Ned."

"Yes. Though dad isn't poor, still he is a good business man, and it must get on his nerves to see a waste in finances. The man who was going to buy the place hasn't exactly given up all interest in it, but he won't purchase until the rustlers are captured."

"Then it's up to us to get 'em!" cried Jerry. "We must do more and talk less."

"I'm with you there," agreed Ned. "But what can we do?"

"Especially when we're practically ordered home," put in Bob. "Told to give up and let a real detective take a hand! What can we do?" and he looked at his two chums.

Ned seemed to have a sudden inspiration.

"I know one thing I'm going to do!" he exclaimed.

"What?" cried his two chums together.

"I'm going to telegraph to dad."

"And say what?" Jerry queried.

"I'm going to wire him that Professor Snodgrass has most unexpectedly disappeared, and that we can't leave him here in this predicament, especially as he came out West with us as our guest. That will get my mother, anyhow," he added with a twinkle in his eyes. "Mother's great on that hospitable stuff, and she'll get dad to let us stay all right. She'll argue that it would be wrong for us to come away and leave the professor in the hands of the rustlers—if that's where he really is."

"I think you're right," returned Jerry, after a moment of thought. "It's only fair to him, and it will gain us a little delay in which we must work harder than ever before to solve the mystery."

"Now you're talking!" cried Bob.

This telegram was prepared and sent to Mr. Slade:

“Professor Snodgrass has disappeared. Probably captured by rustlers. Are on their trail. Impossible to leave now. Better wire us money for expenses. Letter follows.”

“Think that will do?” asked Ned.

“Pretty well gotten up,” Jerry assented. “You put it a bit strong, though, about being on their trail.”

“Well, it’s true enough. We are after them—on their trail—so to speak. I didn’t say we had *caught* them. But we will!”

“I hope so!” agreed Jerry.

The boys anxiously awaited the reply to their message, and to their gratification, it came the next day. They were told they might remain, and in a letter that followed a few days later funds were sent to all three, while there were many expressions of concern from those in Cresville concerning the fate of Professor Snodgrass.

“Spare no expense in finding him,” wrote Mr. Slade. “Hire a couple of detectives if necessary.”

“I guess we can do as well at this business as the city detectives,” growled Ned.

His chums agreed with him.

“And we haven’t got to the bottom of the mystery of Munson’s fake leg,” remarked Jerry as, on the afternoon following the receipt of the letters, they were riding together toward a distant part of the ranch.

“No, that’s another secret we have to solve,” agreed Ned. “He said something about riding to town to-day to have the doctor look at it. He’s limping worse than ever.”

“He’ll never do it,” observed Bob.

“Do what?” asked Jerry.

“Let a doctor examine his leg. That would give the fake away right off the bat. That’s why he didn’t want to let the doctor look the time you were hurt, Jerry.”

“Oh, of course! But, it sure is a queer game.”

The capture of Professor Snodgrass—if capture it was—seemed to put a quietus on the cattle raids. The stock at Square Z ranch had not been molested since his capture, and the foreman and his cowboys were beginning to feel that perhaps the operating gang had been frightened off because of the vigorous search made for them.

Meanwhile, Professor Snodgrass had not been forgotten. A systematic search was kept up for him, but without result. Circulars describing him had been sent through the mail to various ranches and to the neighboring cities. Cowboys from other ranges made trips to the mountain where he had last been seen and tried to find the little scientist. But he seemed to have disappeared completely. Ned, Bob and Jerry joined in these hunts, eagerly searching for some clue to the mystery.

Reports from distant ranches told that there had not been any cattle losses on them of late, though no other ranch had ever been so systematically robbed as had Square Z.

And then, like a thunderclap on a pleasant day, came a change. Two cowboys, who had been sent to bring in a bunch of choice steers for shipment to Omaha, returned without them but with worried faces.

“Well?” asked the foreman. “Where are they?”

“Gone.”

“Rustlers?”

“Yep.”

“Huh!”

It was short talk but to the point.

“How did it happen?” Mr. Watson demanded, and when the cowboy admitted that the raid took place while he and his companion slept, the foreman became angry for one of the few times the boys had seen him in that condition.

“Get off the ranch! You’re discharged!” he called to the cowboys. “A tenderfoot could have done better!”

There was more than the usual buzz of excitement about the ranch when the news of the cattle raid became known. It proved, at least to Ned, Bob and Jerry, that the rustlers were still in the neighborhood and if they were, and had captured the professor, there was a chance to rescue him.

“Your father will feel still more greatly disappointed in us when he hears

there's been another raid," said Jerry to Ned.

"I don't intend he shall hear of it right away," was the answer; and when Jerry pressed for an explanation his chum said he was going to ask the foreman not to telegraph word of the theft to Mr. Slade for a few days.

"I want to have an opportunity to see what we can do," went on Ned. "It may be our last chance. A few days' delay in letting dad know won't do him any harm, and it will allow us to keep on trying to solve the mystery. If we can't, in a reasonable time, I'm willing to quit, and let the New York detective try his hand."

"Well, maybe it will be wise," agreed Jerry. "But we'll put in our best licks on this last chance. It does seem as though we ought to get some sort of clue to the thieves after all these tries."

As the cowboys who had reported the raid did not know what time it took place, except at some hour during the night, it could not be said how much of a start the thieves had. It was seven hours at least, for the men had reached the ranch house about noon, and they had awakened at daylight to find the cattle gone. More likely it was ten hours, and that was a good start.

The trail of the stolen cattle was comparatively easy to follow. And, as had the others, eventually it led to the foot hills and to the ravine the boys had explored so ineffectually.

"The secret is here, and here's where we've got to stick until we find it!" declared Jerry. "We'll make a secret camp here, and not leave day or night. Can't you plant a bunch of cattle somewhere, so they could be easily stolen?" he asked Mr. Watson.

"I s'pose I could. But why?"

"Well, we could stay near 'em and see who takes 'em. Then we could follow."

"Oh, a sort of trap, eh?"

"That's it."

"Well, I'll think about it."

Search as they did, the rest of that day, no trace of the missing cattle could be found. They returned to the ranch, tired and despondent. Mr. Watson had agreed to wait a few days before informing Mr. Slade of this latest loss.

"I'll give you your last chance, boys," he said. "Make the most of it."

That night, when the three chums were out among the cowboys, listening to their talk, Munson came in. Hinkee Dee seemed to notice him at once.

“Where you been all day?” asked the assistant foreman.

“In town, having my leg treated.”

“Do any treating on your own account?”

“Why, no, I can’t say I did.”

“Oh, you weren’t around Jack’s place then?”

Munson looked up quickly at this persistent questioning.

“I don’t see that it is any of your business if I was,” he said slowly.

A flush mounted to the tanned face of Hinkee Dee.



CHAPTER XXV

THEIR LAST CHANCE

Silence followed this rather insolent remark of the cattle buyer; and apprehensive looks were on the faces of his auditors. For in the free and breezy ranch life such talk usually was the preface to a stronger brand that ended in a fight.

“Well, in a manner of speaking, and casual like, maybe it wouldn’t be any of my business,” said Hinkee Dee, and it was noted that he was trying to keep his temper. “But this time I think it is.”

“Just what did you want to know?” asked Munson. Clearly he was not going off “half cocked.” He wanted a basis for his objections.

“I want to know,” and the assistant foreman spoke more slowly, “what you were doing with Pod Martin?”

“How do you know I was with Pod Martin?”

“You and him was seen going in Jack’s place together,” and Hinkee Dee banged his fist on a table.

“Go easy,” advised Munson. He seemed less angry than at first. “Why shouldn’t I go with Pod Martin if I want to?” he demanded.

“Well, I’ll tell you why, Mr. Cattle Buyer, as you call yourself. Out here it ain’t healthy for folks visitin’ on a ranch where cattle are being stolen, to consort with a man suspected of being a cattle rustler!”

He fairly shot out the words, and there was a general murmur throughout the room. Everyone expected to see Munson spring to an attack on the assistant foreman, at least with his fists if not drawing a gun. But the visitor, who still wore his big diamonds, gave no sign of being insulted or accused.

“I don’t admit I was consorting with a cattle-rustler suspect,” he said gently.

“You don’t have to admit it. You was seen.”

“That doesn’t prove anything. How was I to know Martin is said to be a stealer of cattle?”

“Ain’t you heard it?” blustered Hinkee Dee.

“You heard what I said,” was Munson’s rejoinder.

“Well, if you ain’t heard that then you’re about the only one in these parts that ain’t—barrin’, maybe, these tenderfeet,” and he indicated the listening and interested boys.

“Isn’t Pod Martin suspected of being a cattle rustler?” demanded the assistant foreman of the Parson.

“Yep!” was the answer.

“Well,” rejoined Munson, coolly, “I suppose if he’s really a rustler he might have taken cattle from this ranch.”

“As like as not,” growled the assistant foreman.

“Then why don’t you have him arrested?” shot out the cattle buyer so suddenly that some of the cowboys jumped, steady as their nerves were.

Hinkee Dee paused for a moment before answering. Then he growled or grunted rather than replied:

“Huh! I would soon enough, if I could get the evidence against him. But he’s too slick. There’s nothing positive.”

“Oh!” exclaimed Munson, easily. Then he got up and went away. The incident ended so quickly and so unexpectedly that it left some of the auditors in a sort of gasping state. Hinkee Dee did not, apparently, know what to make of the way the wind had been taken out of his sails. He sat looking at the door through which Munson had limped and muttered, as he, himself, went out:

“I’ll get him yet!”

“Think there’ll be a fight?” asked Bob, apprehensively, of Gimp.

“Naw. It’s all talk. I’ve seen and heard lots like it before. But Hink was right; it was sort of brash for Munson to talk openly with Martin, who people is beginnin’ to suspect of bein’ a rustler.”

All of this served to strengthen the suspicions that had been growing in the minds of the boys that Munson was, somehow or other, more or less connected with the cattle thefts.

True, there was no direct evidence against him. The only point that looked bad, aside from his talk to Martin, was the story of his having been shot while

witnessing the raid of some rustlers. That part of the story was a fake, surely enough, as Jerry could testify. And Munson still kept up the fiction about his injured leg. In fact, for some time he had been going to town twice a week, saying he had to have it treated by a doctor.

“We could disprove that easily enough,” suggested Ned. “There’s only the one doctor and we could ask him.”

“We don’t need to,” Jerry declared. “I saw both his legs and there wasn’t a scratch on them.”

“It doesn’t seem as if we’d ever get to the bottom of this,” sighed Ned. “I’m plumb discouraged about that and the professor. Had a letter from dad to-day and he wanted to know how we were making out. I hate to tell him, on top of sending word about the latest cattle raid.”

“How much longer did Mr. Watson say he’d wait before sending word?” Jerry queried.

“The last of the week. Saturday was the last chance he could give us,” he said. “He has to fix up his monthly accounts then and he’s got to make some report of the missing cattle. So, boys, we’ve got a few days more to make good.”

“It isn’t long,” suggested Bob, dolefully.

“It’ll be our first failure in a long while,” Ned admitted.

“And I’m not going to let it be a failure!” cried Jerry, eagerly.

“What are you going to do?” asked his chums. Somehow they always looked to the tall lad in an emergency, and one seemed to have arrived now.

“We’re going up in the airship,” said Jerry. “It’s a pity we couldn’t have used her more for this business as we would have except for the accident to the wheel. But from now on we’ll use our own little old machine. We’ll start to-morrow morning.”

“Doing what?” asked Ned.

“Making a search along the mountain ridge in the aeroplane,” was Jerry’s prompt answer. “This horseback business is too slow.

“Mountain climbing and searching around on top of a range is about the hardest work there is. Now what’s the matter with getting in our craft, taking along a week’s supply of grub—can we carry that much, Chunky?”

“Sure—more.”

“That sounds good, coming from you. Well, let’s go on a regular air expedition,” went on Jerry. “We can take it easy a thousand or so feet up in the air, and we can be looking down for signs all the while. We may pick up the trail of the stolen cattle, the rustlers, or even that of——”

“Professor Snodgrass!” cried Ned.

They set off early the next day, having packed a generous supply of food in the lockers of the airship.

“We’re off!” cried Ned, as the propellers whirred about.

Amid the cheers of the cowboys, who waved their hats and shot off their revolvers, the start was made.

Would the boys come back safely, having discovered the location of the rustlers’ camp, and perhaps having found Professor Snodgrass? Or would they be lost as the scientist had been, somewhere in the wilds of the mountain?

More than one asked those questions as they watched the airship becoming smaller and smaller in the blue sky.

“Our last chance!” murmured Jerry Hopkins. “Well, there’s luck in last chances.”



CHAPTER XXVI

SEEN FROM ABOVE

Below the boys in their airship there unrolled the fields and plains of Square Z ranch, as on some vast map. As the craft rose higher and higher the figures of the cowboys, gazing upward in wonder, became, to the eyes of the Motor Boys, first like dwarfs, then like a child's dolls or toy soldiers. Then the men took on the similitude of ants, and were but tiny specks on a vast field of green.

"Wonder what will happen before we get back there again," ventured Bob.

"No telling, but plenty, I hope," said Jerry who was steering.

The airship was somewhat differently outfitted than when they had first used it in the West. A sort of cabin had been put on, it having been shipped to them from home, and this shut out much of the noise of the engine so that it was possible for them to converse without yelling at the tops of their voices in the ears of one another.

"Yes," put in Ned, "if we discover the cattle thieves and find the professor that will be enough to hold us for a while."

"We may find them together," suggested Jerry.

"Then you believe the rustlers got him?" asked Bob.

"I can't imagine what else could have happened to him. Of course he might have fallen, and been fatally hurt that night when he went away alone, and his call that someone had him might have been a delusion.

"But I prefer to think otherwise. If the rustlers got him they'd keep him pretty close, so he wouldn't have a chance to escape. If anyone else caught him, say a party of hunters or cattlemen who might think him an escaped lunatic, as he has been suspected of being more than once, by this time they would have let him go. But as not a word has come from him I believe he is a prisoner of the cattle thieves."

After some talk, Ned and Bob were of the same opinion as was Jerry, and then they began to discuss ways and means of conducting the search in the airship.

“Where are you heading for, Jerry?” asked Ned, as he saw the tall lad change the course of the airship, which at the start had flown due north from the ranch buildings.

“I thought it would be a good plan to go to the site of our old camp, and make that our real starting point. There’s a good landing place there, on top of the mountain, and there is just a possibility that the professor may have gone back there. We left a notice on a tree, you know, telling him, if he did come, to proceed at once to the ranch, leaving word on the reverse of our notice that he had done so.”

“Well, it’s a pretty slim chance, but let’s take it,” conceded Ned.

That the boys had not before used their airship to make an investigation on top of the mountain was due to the fact that in making a flight one day they had broken a wheel of the engine and had had to send to Chicago to have a new part made. The craft was now, however, in good running order.

The speedy airship was not long in reaching a point above the place where the camp had been made—the camp from which Professor Snodgrass had disappeared. Jerry, at the controls, sent the craft about in a spiral, bringing it lower and lower, for they had risen to quite a height.

“Nothing down there, I’m afraid,” said Bob, peering down through the celluloid window set in the floor of the cabin. “There’s not a sign of life.”

“We’re too high to see,” declared Ned. “Wait until we get a bit lower.”

“That’ll be in a few seconds,” said Jerry, and he sent the machine down at a sharper angle.

“Hand me those glasses,” said Bob to Ned, who took a pair of powerful binoculars from their case on the cabin wall and gave them to his chum.

“See anything?” Jerry inquired, after waiting a few seconds.

“Take a look, Ned,” requested Bob, and there was that in his voice to indicate that he was laboring under some excitement.

“What’s this?” cried Ned, as he fixed the focus to suit his eyes. “I—I see smoke down there in the old camp!”

“Smoke!” cried Jerry.

“Yes—in little puffs—as though someone were signaling with a damp fire and a blanket—the way the Indians used to do. Here, give me the wheel, Jerry, and

take a look yourself.”

As the two changed places there was a sharp metallic sound near the engine—a clang of metal that sounded above the noise of the explosions. And, just as Ned took hold of the wheel which Jerry relinquished, the motor stopped.

“Look out!” yelled the tall lad. “We’re falling! You’ll have to volplane down!”

“I know,” replied Ned, coolly. He and his chums had done this before, both in emergencies and when they had purposely shut off the engine.

Volplaning down in an airship is like coasting down hill on a sled, only in the former case the hill is nothing more substantial than a bank of air. But by letting the airship slide down on slanted wings, and then by sending it sharply upward, by means of the vertical rudder, its speed can be nicely controlled, so that a landing can be made.

This was what the boys aimed to do. Ned was now at the wheel and controls in place of Jerry, who, seeing that his chum had matters well in hand, turned to look downward through the binoculars.

“Can you see the puffs of smoke?” asked Bob.

“No, I can’t,” murmured Jerry, not taking his eyes from the instruments.

“I wonder what made the engine stop?” asked Ned. “Did you have plenty of gas, Jerry?”

“Sure! Both tanks filled before we left. Wait, I’ll try the self starter.”

He set this in motion but it did not operate the engine. There seemed to be something broken, and as the motor was not readily accessible from the cabin the boys would have to wait until a landing was made.

This was in a fair way to be accomplished, and near the spot of their former camp. Ned was scanning the ground, which seemed coming up to meet them, for a smooth place on which to let the airship run along on its wheels.

“How about over there?” asked Jerry, indicating a spot to the left.

“All right,” assented Ned. “See any more smoke?”

Jerry resumed his observations, but shook his head to indicate that he saw nothing. They were soon near enough to see by the use of their unaided eyes, but the nearer they came the more it became plain to them that the camp was deserted.

“And now to see what it all means, and what happened to the engine!” exclaimed Ned, as he made the landing neatly and leaped out, followed by Bob and Jerry.

“Hello! Anybody here?” yelled Jerry as he looked about near the place where the shelter tent had stood. There was no reply save the echo of his own voice.

“Well, it couldn’t have been the professor, or he’d have been so glad to see us that he’d be jumping about here now,” commented Bob.

“But where is the fire that made the puffs of smoke?” asked Ned.

“I think there wasn’t any fire,” said Jerry.

“No fire? What do you mean? Didn’t I see smoke?”

“But smoke doesn’t always mean a campfire. Come on, let’s have a look at the engine.”

They went carefully over the machinery, the perfect working of which was so vital to their safety. It did not take Jerry long to discover what the trouble was.

“Look!” he cried. “One of the carburetors is smashed.”

“Smashed!” echoed Ned.

“Yes. No wonder we couldn’t get any explosions, even when the self starter spun the propellers. She wasn’t getting any gas, and the spare carburetor wasn’t in service.”

“But what would make it break?” asked Ned.

“That’s what we’ve got to find out,” Jerry stated. “Did you hear a sort of click just before the machinery stopped working?”

“Yes,” assented Ned, “and I wondered what caused it.”

Jerry was looking with careful and eager eyes over different parts of the powerful motor.

“I think this caused it,” he said, and with the point of his knife blade he pried from one of the propeller blades, where it was not deeply imbedded, a bullet.

Silently he held it in his palm for the inspection of his companions.



CHAPTER XXVII

THE LONE FIGURE

“Well, for the love of guns! how did that get there?” asked Bob.

“Landed after it smashed our carburetor,” was Jerry’s reply. “At least that’s my theory.”

“But who shot it at us?” Ned demanded. “Some of those crazy cowboys, I guess, who got so excited when we made flights over their heads.”

“It wasn’t there when we started out this morning,” said Jerry, “for I went over the propeller blades with a fine tooth comb, so to speak. And certainly the carburetor was all right.”

“That’s so,” admitted Ned, scratching his head. “Then——”

“The puffs of smoke down below us!” interrupted Bob. “Was it someone shooting a revolver at us, Jerry?”

“Not a revolver, Bob. That wouldn’t carry as high as we were. This is a bullet from a high-powered rifle, and it’s lucky it smashed the carburetor instead of us.”

“But who in the world could have fired it?” went on Ned. “If it was the professor, firing in the air signaling for help, he surely would have seen us and been a bit more careful.”

“It wasn’t the professor,” declared Jerry. “He hasn’t a rifle, and I doubt if he would know how to fire one if he had.”

“Then you think——” began Bob.

“I think, Chunky, that we’d better look about a bit,” was Jerry’s reply. “There may be some traces here that we could pick up which would help us solve the cattle mystery.”

“Good idea!” said Ned. “Let’s look about.”

They scurried about the site of their first camp, but it was not so easy to read any signs there as they had hoped.

“But there was certainly someone here firing at us from shelter, while we were up in the air,” declared Ned. “Those puffs of smoke Bob and I saw were from a rifle, and not a campfire.”

“My idea, too,” put in Jerry. “The question is who was shooting at us, why and where is he?”

“Three questions, and three of us to answer ’em,” remarked Bob. “For the first I’ll say it was one of the cattle thieves.”

“Probably,” agreed Jerry. “No one else hostile is in this neighborhood, as far as I know.”

“As for why,” mused Ned, “it must have been because he wanted to disable us, so we couldn’t continue the pursuit.”

“Probably that’s right,” assented Jerry. “And for the third question—where is he?—that’s for us to find out. I don’t imagine though, that he’s anywhere around here now. When he saw us coming down he probably ran away.”

“Or he might be in hiding within ten feet of us, watching us now, and hearing everything we say,” commented Bob, and at his own words he looked half-apprehensively over his shoulder.

The boys stood silent, thinking this last statement over. But as the place about them gave no sign of life they came to the conclusion that the unknown rifleman had made good his escape.

“But just to make sure we’ll have another look around,” suggested Jerry, and they scoured over the fields, penetrated a little way into the wood and looked behind clumps of bushes. No one did they see, however, and then Jerry remarked:

“Well, let’s look after our airship. We haven’t begun to do any real scouting in her yet. This is only the starting point of our search. We ought to cover a good deal of ground before night.”

“If we can go on,” supplemented Ned.

“Oh, there’s no serious damage done,” Jerry said. “We have a spare carburetor.”

“Will that bullet in the propeller weaken it any?” Bob inquired.

“Not in the slightest. The old machine will soon be as good as ever.”

It was not quite so easy to put in a new carburetor as Jerry had thought, however, for the bullet that put out of commission this very necessary part of the motor's equipment had also smashed a feed pipe.

There was an extra piece in one of the lockers, however, and this was inserted after about an hour's work. A test of the machine showed that it was again in shape for the duty required of it, and having rolled it to a stretch of level ground the boys prepared to set off once more.

Up and up rose the great bird-like affair of wood, steel and canvas and the deserted camp was soon but a speck below them.

"Now if that fellow takes it into his head to fire again, and smashes our other carburetor, we're done for," observed Ned.

"I don't believe he will," responded Jerry, and he proved a true prophet. For while the tall lad was at the wheel, Ned and Bob kept a sharp watch down below. There were no more puffs of smoke, and the airship was soon so high up that no ordinary missile could reach it.

"And now what's your plan?" asked Ned of his tall chum.

"Well, I think we'll fly over the mountain in a straight line west from the rocky defile, in which the disappearance of the cattle seem to have taken place. I have an idea there may be some way of getting under the mountain, by means of a tunnel, perhaps."

"It would have to be *some* tunnel," observed Ned, for they were flying across the flat mountain top now, and could see that it extended for several miles.

"Well, it might be one made by nature. Probably is, if there's one in existence," Jerry said.

On and on they flew, now circling to the right, and again to the left in an endeavor to cover as much ground as possible. But they saw nothing that would lead to a solution of the mystery.

All that day was spent in flying about, peering here and there through the powerful glasses, the airship moving along at a low elevation so the boys might make more careful observations.

"Well, we don't seem to have done much the first day," observed Bob, as they descended to a level, sandy plain as night settled down. "All we can do is to get something to eat and go to bed."

“There’s another day to-morrow,” remarked Ned, “so don’t eat up everything to-night.”

“No danger!” exclaimed Jerry. “Chunky brought along enough for a small army.”

“Well, I’m as hungry as half an army myself!” laughed the stout lad.

“Going to stand guard to-night?” Ned asked, as they proceeded to make the cabin of the earth-fast airship snug and comfortable.

“Well, I don’t know but that it would be a good idea,” agreed Jerry, after a moment of thought. “Of course we’re a good way from where that fellow shot at us, but that isn’t saying he hasn’t some confederates in this place. Yes, it wouldn’t be a bad plan to sit the night out in three watches. They won’t be such very long ones. I’ll take first, as I can always sleep better in the rear end of the night.”

“I wake up early, so I’ll take last watch,” volunteered Ned.

This gave Bob the middle watch, and he and Ned went to bed about nine o’clock, Jerry making a fire not far from the airship, so the blaze would serve to illuminate a space around the craft.

Somehow Jerry was distinctly nervous as he assumed his watch. There had been strenuous times since he and his chums had come to Square Z ranch, and there had been much to cause them worry. Of course, the disappearance of the professor was the most important. The loss of the cattle was serious, naturally, but both Mr. Baker and Mr. Slade were men of wealth and would not be ruined even if they lost the whole ranch. Still, Jerry and his chums felt an eager desire to solve the mystery. They felt the same excitement and determination as when trying to win a baseball or football championship.

Though Jerry kept eager watch, his vigil was not disturbed save by the approach of timid animals of the night, which made off at the sight of the fire.

Nor were the watches of Bob or Ned fruitful of any results. Ned thought, just as the east was beginning to be light, that he heard a suspicious sound at the rear of the airship. He ran to the place immediately but all he saw was a small deer that was nosing the rudder and licking it, doubtless with the hope that it was coated with salt. The animal sprang away in alarm at the lad’s approach.

“Well, this is getting pretty close to our time limit,” observed Jerry as, after breakfast, they set off through the air once more. “If we don’t have any luck now

_____”

“It’s give up for ours!” declared Ned with a sigh.

It was toward noon, when they were flying over a small valley, that Bob, looking down through the observation window in the floor of the cabin, cried:

“Look, you fellows!”

Ned sprang forward, and Jerry, at the wheel, leaned to one side to look.

Down below, standing on a big rock, was the solitary figure of a man, and he seemed trying to signal to them.



CHAPTER XXVIII

THE SECRET PASSAGE

“What shall we do?” asked Bob, greatly excited.

“Go down to him, of course,” answered Ned. “He may have some information for us.”

“I’m not so sure about that,” put in Jerry.

“Sure of what?” came quickly from Ned.

“Whether we ought to go down to him or not. He may be waiting for us with a gun, hoping to get us into range so he can take a pop at us.”

“We’re in range now, as far as that goes,” declared Bob, glancing at the barograph which gave their height. “We were up farther than this when we were hit before.”

“That’s so,” assented Jerry. “I didn’t think about that. He would have shot some time ago if that were his game. Well, we’ll take a chance.”

Nearer and nearer the aeroplane settled toward the great flat rock, on which the lone figure was now running to and fro. His clothes flapped in the breeze, as though in tatters and rags. He appeared greatly excited, and there was no question now but that he was frantically beckoning to the boys to come to him.

“Who in the world is it?” murmured Jerry, trying to peer through the floor window, but not being able to get a good view because of his position at the wheel.

“He doesn’t look like a cowboy,” said Bob.

“Then he can’t be one of the rustlers,” observed Ned. “For they’re all cowboys—of a sort.”

“He looks like a tramp, as nearly as I can make out,” suggested Jerry.

“Maybe a grub-staked miner who’s lost his way,” came from Bob. “This is sure enough a lonesome place,” and he looked around the desolate valley of which the lone figure seemed to be the only occupant. Nor was there a habitation

of even the most humble sort to be seen.

“Who is he, and what does he want?” murmured Jerry over and over again, as he manipulated the wheel and levers.

“Where are you going to land?” asked Ned. “You’ll knock him off that rock, if you don’t look out.”

“I think not,” returned Jerry, with a smile. “The rock is big enough to land on safely. And it will be a dandy spot to make a start from—it’s as level as a barn floor.”

They were now near enough to see faintly the unshaven face of the solitary man. His ragged clothes, too, gave him a grotesque appearance, but for all his forlorn plight he seemed transported with joy as the airship, now moving about in big circles, came closer and closer.

“Who is he? And what does he want?” said Jerry, again.

And then, as the airship landed on the great flat rock, and came to a gentle, gliding stop, the strange figure rushed forward, crying hoarsely.

“Boys! Oh, boys! I never was so glad to see anyone in my life! Oh, boys, at last I’ve found you!”

For perhaps three seconds none of the lads spoke. They stood looking at the pathetic figure and then, as in one voice, they cried together in low, awed tones:

“Professor Snodgrass!”

“Yes. Oh, boys! No wonder you hardly know me. I haven’t had a shave in so long that I must look like Rip Van Winkle. And as for my clothes! Oh, I’ve had a terrible time. And I’m hungry!”

“Good!” cried Bob, but he didn’t mean it just that way. “We’ve got lots to eat!” he went on eagerly. “Come and have a square meal, Professor, and then tell us what happened. Did you get away from the cattle rustlers?”

“You mean the cattle thieves?” asked the professor.

“Well, thieves, rustlers—you can call ’em whatever you like,” laughed Jerry. “But never mind talking now. We are delighted to see you!”

“No more than I am to see you.”

“We’ve been looking everywhere for you,” added Ned. “We’d about given up. How’d you make your escape?”

“I hardly know. They kept me pretty closely guarded, for they took me for a spy, I guess. But finally they weren’t so careful, and after I had let pass several chances to leave their camp, they began to think I was content to stay there.

“I would have been, too, for there were a lot of the rarest bugs I ever saw. But I wanted to get back to my friends, and so I hid away one night and in the morning began a long tramp to find your ranch. But I can’t tell it all to you now.”

“Of course not!” cried Jerry. “We’re crazy to stand here making you talk when you’re starving.”

“I’ll get him something to eat!” volunteered Bob, hurrying toward the anchored airship.

“Yes, and I’d like to get rid of some of these whiskers and wash myself with soap,” said the professor, who was the most cleanly man imaginable. “I did manage to scrub with a little sand and water, but it wasn’t soap,” he cried.

“Come in then, and get fixed up,” urged Ned, laughing.

“Wait,” begged the professor. “I must not leave my specimens behind. They are too valuable.”

He hurried to the far end of the rock, where, in a niche, he had secreted several boxes and carrying cases made rudely from bark, held together with twisted fibers.

“I didn’t dare bring my regular specimen boxes away with me,” he explained to the boys, “or they would have suspected something. So I had to leave them behind. But I hid them well and we can get them again.”

“How?” asked Jerry.

“Oh, I can get them again if you’ll take me there, I’m sure. I can guide you to the secret camp of the cattle thieves, boys!”

“Hurray!” cried Ned. “Next to finding you this is the best news I’ve heard yet! Come on, Professor!”

They helped him carry his precious specimens in their rude cases, which he had fashioned himself, into the airship cabin. There Bob was busy with the meal.

“Sorry we haven’t got more,” said the stout lad, indicating the table which he had let down from where it had been folded up against the side wall of the cabin. “But we won’t be long, now, in getting back to the ranch.”

“Well, it isn’t such a small meal at that, Chunky,” laughed Jerry. “Did you put on all there was in the locker?”

“No, there’s a little more left, but not much; so we’ll have to go back.”

“But you’ll return for my specimens, won’t you?” pleaded the little scientist.

“Oh, yes, we’ll come back after them—and the rustlers!” declared Jerry.

“Hope we can catch ’em,” sighed Ned.

“I think you can,” Professor Snodgrass said. “They are a bold but careless lot. They fancy themselves safe, but I know their secret.”

“What is it?” asked Jerry, and his chums waited eagerly for the professor’s reply.

“There is a secret way out of the rocky ravine,” was the answer. “I know how to find it. I’ll tell you about it after I eat.”

“Yes, for the love of horse-radish let him eat!” cried Bob. “He must be half starved.”

And the professor certainly seemed so, judging by the way he began at the food, after he had made a hasty toilet with soap and water, which he said was almost as great a luxury as the soup and meat Bob set before him. The boys ate with him, for they, too, were hungry.

“And now for the story of your disappearance!” cried Jerry, when appetites were satisfied, and they sat back on the lockers in comfort.



CHAPTER XXIX

THE ROUND-UP

“Well,” began Professor Snodgrass, whose strange appearance on account of his ragged and unshaven condition was a source of fascination to the boys, “I suppose you know about how I went away?”

“Out of the tent, yes,” assented Jerry. “We were awakened by hearing you yell for help, and Bob here thought,” he added, grinning, “that one of the big moths might have carried you away.”

“Not so bad as that!” laughed the professor; “though some of the moths were very large and most beautiful specimens. I went out, without waking any of you, and I was moving about with my net, my lantern and my specimen boxes, when I suddenly felt myself grabbed from behind. I heard the sound of low voices and at once it flashed into my mind that the rustlers had me. I had no chance to use my revolver.

“I called as loudly as I could, and when I said ‘they’ had me I thought you boys, if you heard me at all, would understand.”

“We didn’t though, at least not for some time,” remarked Ned.

“But no sooner had I cried out for help than someone clapped a hand over my mouth and I couldn’t make a loud sound. Then I was bound and gagged and stretched out on something by which I was pulled along the ground. It seemed like a big sled.”

The boys uttered exclamations of surprise.

“What’s the matter?” Mr. Snodgrass asked.

“Nothing, only that we saw the marks of the log runners of the stone-boat on which you were carried away,” explained Jerry. “We tried to trace the strange marks,” he said, describing them, “but we failed.”

“Yes, a stone-boat,” agreed the narrator. “But they didn’t use it for hauling stone after they used it to give me an unexpected ride.”

“What did they use it for?” Ned asked.

“To haul cattle on.”

“Cattle!” cried the boys.

“Yes. They had a sort of fence built around the edge of the big, low, flat stone-boat. They would load it with cattle in the ravine and by means of pulleys and rope work it through the secret passage. That was done so the cattle would make no mark on the ground, telling in what direction they had been taken.”

“It sounds pretty complicated,” said Jerry. “But maybe it’s easy when you come to the details. What about the secret passage in the ravine? We suspected one but we couldn’t discover it.”

“I’d better tell my story in sequence,” suggested the professor. “Throughout the night I was hauled along on this stone-boat, as I later discovered it to be, and I couldn’t see where I was going. When daylight came those who had captured me halted in a pleasant little, but well hidden, valley where hundreds of cattle were pastured. There was a sort of camp, around a group of rude buildings, and in one of these I was locked.

“To make a long story short I had been captured by the cattle rustlers as a spy. They had seen you boys come to camp and they guessed you were on their trail. They planned to get you all, but my going out in the night upset their plans, and they took me. Then events occurred to change their plans.

“That they were the cattle thieves who had me was soon proved to my satisfaction. A few days after I had been made prisoner I saw early one morning, some of the rustlers driving into the valley some of the steers from the Square Z ranch. I recognized the brand.”

“What did they do with them?” asked Ned, eagerly.

“Held them in the valley a few days, changed the brand marks, and drove them away again. The valley was so well hidden in the mountains that I believe no one, save the thieves, knew of it.

“After about a week, during which time I was kept in the shack, I was allowed to go about at will. But when I tried to get out of the valley I found it was impossible. The sides were steep and dangerous to climb. There were but two entrances and both were guarded night and day. One was that by which the cattle were driven in, and the other where they went out. Both were well concealed by winding paths leading through dense forests, and though I found both, I could not get past the guards.”

“But you finally escaped,” said Bob.

“Yes. I’ll tell you how. As I said, after a while I was allowed to go about as I pleased, and when I found out I could not escape I began to collect specimens. And what wonderful ones there were in the valley!

“In time the rustlers paid little attention to me and, as I seemed engrossed in my collecting, they talked freely before me. It was in this way that I learned the ravine was connected with the valley by a secret passage.

“When they made a cattle raid they would drive the steers up near the V-shaped end of the gorge. There the cattle would be held together until, ten or fifteen at a time they were put on the stone-boat and hauled through the secret opening, leaving no trace.”

“But how is the opening hidden?” asked Jerry.

“By means of a great wooden door covered with concrete on the outside, so that it looks like part of the rocky wall,” answered the professor. “I know about the location of it. It should be easy to find.”

“We’ll have a try at it!” murmured Jerry. “But how did you manage to get away, Professor?”

“By a stroke of good luck. The rustlers had brought in some of the choice cattle from Square Z, and as they had a market to which the steers must be sent in a hurry they decided to get them out of the valley after dark. I saw then my chance to escape. There were, lying about the camp, any number of old hides, taken off the cattle that had died or been slain for food. I wrapped one of these about me one dark night when the herd was to be driven out, and mingled with the cattle. It was taking a chance, I knew, but I managed to keep from being trampled on and went in the midst of the cattle through the woods to the secret outlet of the valley. Once outside I lay down under a bush to wait until morning. My one regret was that I had to leave behind my lovely specimens. But I dared not carry them.

“Since that night I have been tramping about trying to find Square Z ranch. But I must have gone away from it instead of toward it for I became lost. My clothes and shoes began to wear out. I managed to get enough berries and roots to live on, for I had made a careful study of botany and knew what was best for me. But I was so hungry for a ham sandwich!” said the professor, pathetically.

“Have another!” begged Bob, offering one.

The professor munched it while concluding his narrative. He had wandered on and on, finally becoming so footsore, weary and ragged that he was the tramp the boys beheld him. But in his misery he did not forget his collection mania and made boxes of bark to hold his specimens.

Finally, he reached the great rock, not knowing where he was and scarcely able to go on. Then he had heard the hum of the aircraft engine above him, and had recognized the ship of his friends.

“You are to be congratulated on getting away from those rustlers,” said Jerry. “It wasn’t easy, I imagine.”

“Indeed it wasn’t,” said the professor fervently, and the boys admired him for his pluck.

Not that he had ever lacked it, but his was a restful life, compared to theirs, and he seldom had need to show what he could do in a strenuous way. Though once, when Jerry had been in danger from a wild animal on one of their trips, the professor, armed only with a light gun which he used to bring down birds without injuring their plumage, rushed up and fired in the animal’s face, delaying the attack long enough for Ned to kill the beast.

“They watched me pretty closely,” went on the scientist. “But when I began collecting bugs and spiders, of which there is a wonderful variety in the valley, they began to think I was a bit out of my head,” he said with a chuckle. “Then, thinking me harmless and simple, they did not keep such a close espionage over me, and——”

“You fooled ’em good and proper!” exclaimed Bob, admiringly. “We couldn’t have done it half as well.”

“Not much!” declared Jerry. “We’d have probably tried to concoct some elaborate scheme to escape, and they’d have found it out right away. But the professor’s simple trick worked.”

“I didn’t exactly intend it for a trick,” said the scientist, who was the soul of honesty and fair-dealing. “I really did make a good collection while I was held a prisoner in the valley.”

“And have you really learned the secret of the mysterious ravine and just how the cattle rustlers work?” asked Ned.

“I think I have. Of course I haven’t seen the actual secret door, but I believe I can show you how to find it.”

“And the reason the marks of the cattle always stopped before the end of the gorge was reached was because they put the beasts on the stone-boat and dragged them over the remaining distance,” said Jerry. “It was a clever trick, but it’s been found out.”

“But not by us,” put in Ned, gloomily. “We have fallen down all along on this job.”

“Well, you found me, and that’s as good as finding the secret, for I can tell it to you!” exclaimed the professor. “If you hadn’t found me you might never have discovered what you wanted. So, you see, it is the same, one way or the other.”

“I wonder if we can catch the thieves?” mused Bob.

“I think you can,” the professor said. “They didn’t seem to have any idea of giving up their dishonest raids, and, doubtless, they’ll pay another visit to Square Z.”

“Then we must go back and get ready for a round-up!” exclaimed Jerry. “Are you sure you can lead us to the secret valley, Professor?”

“All we’ll have to do will be to go to the gorge, find the hidden door and go through a tunnel-like passage that leads through the base of the mountain. It is the dried bed of an ancient stream, I take it.”

The airship never made better time than in getting back to the ranch, and the surprise created by the return of Professor Snodgrass, ragged and with bristly, unshaven face, was great. Everyone, from the foreman to the least of the laborers, was thrown into a state of excitement.

It was not until after Professor Snodgrass had been shaved by the ranch barber, and had put on some garments that were not in tatters because of his long tramp through forest and brush, that Watson really got at the facts of the professor’s abduction and subsequent escape.

“And so you have discovered the camping place of the rustlers!” exclaimed the foreman, gleefully.

“Well, the professor knows where it is,” Jerry remarked.

“You made good only just in time,” went on Mr. Watson.

“Why?” Ned inquired.

“Because there was another raid last night. The biggest yet. I was just going to send your father word. Instead, I’ll wait and we’ll round-up these thieves. It’s the

best news I've heard yet! But we must be lively now."

"Oh, if they have just taken some more cattle they will not move or dispose of them for some time," said the professor. "They will have to change the brand and arrange for their sale."

"That's a part I'd like to know," said the foreman. "How do they dispose of the stolen stock?"

But this the professor could not tell.

"All hands that can be spared for the round-up!" was the general cry the next morning, and Hinkee Dee was so busy seeing to the men that he had no time to be sarcastic or to sneer at the Motor Boys, in case he had been so disposed. In fact, he did not even notice them, though the other cowboys praised them warmly for their rescue of the professor—an act that would be, it was hoped, the means of wiping out the gang of outlaws.

"Where's the Parson?" asked Hinkee Dee, as he was marshalling his forces, for he was to lead the party, the foreman having some business to attend to at the ranch that required his presence there.

"He rode to town," volunteered Gimp.

"Huh! That's a nice thing to do when he knew I wanted him on this round-up!" snapped Hinkee Dee. "Here, you Gimp, ride after him and tell him to come back at once. No, never mind. I'll need you. Just tell him to follow us when he comes back," he called to the foreman, who promised to do so.

"The Parson knew he'd be needed. I don't see why he went away at a time like this without telling me," fumed Hinkee Dee. "We're short-handed as it is. Where's Munson? He'll be of some help, even if he has a stiff leg."

"He went in to town right after Parson did," someone said.

"Well, this is a nice thing!" stormed Hinkee Dee. "Why didn't they make a regular party of it? But we won't wait. Come on, and we'll round-up this gang."

It was arranged that the boys and the professor should go on ahead in the airship, to locate and open, if possible, the secret door. The cowboys would follow, go through the passage and surprise, if they could, the rustlers in their very possession of the stolen cattle. It would be good evidence against them.

"I wonder what made Munson and the Parson go off just before the time for the raid?" asked Bob, as he and his chums, with the professor, were in the

airship, speeding toward the mysterious gulch.

“Oh, just a coincidence,” suggested Ned. Jerry did not give an opinion, but he had his own ideas.



CHAPTER XXX

A FINAL SURPRISE

“Better fly low,” said Ned to Jerry, who was guiding the airship. “If you go up too high,” he went on, as they were approaching the location of the mysterious gorge, “they may see you.”

As far as they could learn by looking down and sweeping the landscape through powerful glasses, they were not seen, and the airship settled down at the entrance of the defile, to give the boys and the professor a chance to find the secret door before the cowboys arrived.

“We’ve got about three hours,” Jerry said. “It will take them that long to ride here.”

They entered the V-gorge, and when they came to the place where, always before, they had been stopped by the lack of the cattle signs, they examined the ground with new interest.

“Look at those splinters of wood!” exclaimed Ned. “That shows where the big stone-boat was pulled along over the stones, laden with cattle.”

“That’s right,” agreed Jerry. “Probably those splinters were there all the while.”

“It’s queer we didn’t notice ’em!” cried Ned. “I don’t believe they were as plain before. I’m sure we would have taken some notice of them if they had been. More likely they put more cattle on the wooden drag this time, so as to hurry them through the passage, and because of the greater weight more splinters were rubbed off.”

“That’s right,” agreed Jerry. “Anyhow, the thing is plain now, and if we follow the splinter trail to where it ends it ought to bring us right to the secret door. Where the splinters end there is the entrance.”

“That was my idea,” said Professor Snodgrass with a smile.

They followed the “splinter trail,” as they called it, until it came to an end right where the two sides of the big stony V came together.

“Here ought to be the door—here or hereabouts,” the professor said as he drew a geologist’s hammer from his pocket, for he was a geologist as well as a botanist and a “bugologist.”

He began to tap gently on the walls of the defile. They were of rough stone, and so cunningly had the concrete coating been made for the wooden door that it could not be detected by an difference in hue or texture.

But suddenly the hammer, instead of giving back a sharp, thudding sound, produced a hollow boom.

“There it is!” cried Jerry.

“Right,” assented the scientist. “And you can see the outline of the door,” and he pointed to an irregular crack starting at the floor of the gorge, rising up about five feet, always irregular, then down again until it reached the rocky floor once more, the space between being roughly shaped like an inverted U with about ten feet distance between the two points.

“But how does it open?” asked Ned. “If we can’t get through we aren’t much better off than before.”

“It is only a light wooden door, covered on the outside with expanded metal lath and that, in turn, with concrete,” said the professor. “It was made in this irregular shape so that the crack, where it fitted into the opening of the tunnel, would look like a crack in the wall. But now we know what the crack means we can pry the door open.”

Ned ran to get the necessary tools, and while he was coming back with them Jerry and Bob looked at the secret door. It was so cunningly devised that from the gorge few would have guessed its existence. They, in their previous searches, had probably stared right at the crack but uncomprehendingly.

Ned returned with a short iron bar, sharp and flat at one end. With this, and an axe, they attacked the secret door. As the professor had said, having gained his knowledge from overhearing the thieves talk while he was a captive, the portal was really but a shell. It was quickly forced open, the secret lock on the inside being broken.

Though they worked quickly they made as little noise as possible, for they feared, from what Professor Snodgrass had said about the two entrances being guarded, that someone would be stationed near the secret door.

But no alarm was raised, for while it was true that a guard was usually kept at

the farther end of the tunnel, where it opened into the valley, on this occasion the man had been called away to help in re-branding the cattle.

So, thus favored by fortune, the Motor Boys and the professor were able, undetected by those whom they sought to capture, to force open the door. As it swung back on iron hinges set in the inner face of the rock, a dark tunnel was revealed. Hesitating a moment, to make sure none of the rustlers was there, they stepped in.

“Look! here’s the stone-boat and the ropes and pulleys they used to haul the cattle over a space so all trace of them would be lost,” exclaimed Bob, pointing to the contrivance that was at the opening of the tunnel, which, in reality was a large cave.

“Yes, that’s what I had my midnight ride on,” laughed Professor Snodgrass, who seemed to take huge delight in leading a raid on his former captors. “This is a new one they had just finished making in the woods when, unexpectedly, they caught me.”

“Hadn’t we better wait for the cowboys?” asked Bob, as Jerry and Ned seemed inclined to lead the way farther along the tunnel. “Besides, it’s so dark we can’t see more than a few feet,” and he pointed to the black void beyond.

“Yes, it is dark, and we’ll need lanterns,” said the scientist. “But we have time to go along a little way and explore. The raiding party won’t be here for some time yet.”

“We have plenty of electric flashes on the airship,” Jerry said. “We’ll get them and have a look.”

Presently they were going forward. It was new ground to the professor, as well as to the others, for he had never been in the tunnel. This latter was evidently a hollow shaft under the mountain, caused by an earthquake perhaps, or, more probably, by the erosion of an underground river.

The tunnel was about ten feet high and about as broad, being oval in shape. There was room to drive many cattle along it, and there were evidences that many had been so driven.

“Go a bit easy,” advised Ned. “We don’t want to burst out of the other end of this shaft into the midst of the rustlers.”

“Oh, the tunnel is about a mile long,” said the professor. “And the end is screened by bushes, so you’ll have plenty of chance to be on your guard.”

They hurried silently along the big rocky shaft, their electric flashlight casting queer, flickering shadows on the walls. The professor took the lead when they judged they had covered nearly the distance estimated, and presently he came to a halt.

“We’re near the end,” he said, indicating a glimmer of daylight. “Better put out your electrics.”

This the boys did. Then, proceeding still more cautiously, they presently found themselves looking through a screen of bushes at a curious sight.

Down in a sort of gigantic bowl of a valley, the presence of which they had not detected in their wanderings, as it was the depressed top of a big, deeply wooded hill, they saw a score or more of cowboys and a herd of steers, the latter being driven hither and yon in the process of having the brand of the Square Z ranch obliterated, and another substituted.

“The rustlers!” whispered Jerry.

“There they are!” murmured Bob.

“The secret solved at last!” cried Ned, in a suppressed voice. “Now dad will say we’re some pumpkins, I guess!”

“Only we haven’t got ’em yet,” remarked Jerry, cautiously.

“I guess they won’t get away,” came grimly from the professor. “And then I can get back my precious specimens I had to abandon. I hope they haven’t destroyed them.”

Marking the conformation of the valley, and noting the spot the professor pointed out as the egress, the boys and the scientist returned to the tunnel entrance. They had not long to wait before Hinkee Dee and the other cowboys came riding up.

“Are they there?” the assistant foreman asked eagerly, and he addressed Ned, Bob and Jerry in the most cordial tones he had ever used.

“All ready to go in and get,” Jerry replied.

“That’s good! Come on now, fellows!”

The situation was quickly explained, and plans for a rush made. The cowboys rode their horses into the tunnel, preceded by the boys and the professor with lights. At the far end they halted and then, after some whispered instructions from Hinkee Dee, the whole force went cautiously out and was posted behind

the screening bushes.

“All ready now?” asked Hinkee Dee, as he scanned his waiting horsemen.

“All ready,” was the answer. Bob, Ned and Jerry had managed to get places in the front rank. The professor, as soon as he saw the preparations completed, went to one side in a quiet chase after some big bug he saw.

“Let her go!” said Hinkee Dee. “But don’t begin to yell or ride hard until they’ve seen us. Then rush ’em!”

This advice was followed. And so busy were the rustlers branding the steers that the attacking cowboys had ridden a quarter of the way toward them before the alarm was given.

And then it was too late to make a strong resistance. [With a fusillade of revolver shots](#), with wild yells and waving of hats, while the ponies galloped on unguided by rein, [the raiders rushed to the attack](#). The rustlers could not have been taken at a greater disadvantage. Not one of them was armed, all having laid aside their guns to work at the branding.

“Throw up your hands!” came the stern order from Hinkee Dee, his two guns pointed at the outlaws, and the order was sullenly obeyed. One rustler tried to make a dash for his horse, probably intending to seek the egress. But a shot fired over his head caused him to stop, and in a short time the whole gang was captured.

“Well, we’ve got you at last!” exclaimed Hinkee Dee, as he and his friends looked around the discomfited gang, many of whom were known, at least by reputation, to the cowboys. “Caught you in the act, too.”

“Yes, I guess you’ve got the goods on us,” admitted one of the outlaws. “But I’d like to know how you found us.”

“I showed them the way!” exclaimed a mild voice at Hinkee Dee’s stirrup. “And now I’d thank you for my specimens. They’re very valuable. There’s one red bug that——”

“Jumpin’ molasses barrels!” cried Black Henderson, the leader. “It’s the bug-house chap! So you got away, did you?”

“Yes. And I came back again. Now for my specimens,” and the professor hurried off to the shack where he had been held prisoner, coming back presently with several boxes under his arms and a happy smile on his face. He had done his part to aid his friends, and the specimens he secured afterward proved to be

of great scientific value.

“Got them—every one!” he called, and from then on he took no more interest in the raid.

The prisoners were bound and driven out of the tunnel and eventually to town where they were locked up. The stolen cattle were gathered together, and headed for their home range.

“Well, boys,” said Hinkee Dee to Ned, Bob and Jerry as they were on their way to the ranch after the prisoners had been disposed of, “I want to congratulate you and say I was wrong in calling you tenderfeet. You’re one of us from now on. I was hopin’ to assimilate these rustlers myself, but you and the professor got ahead of me.

“Hello, what was the reason you didn’t come along with us, Munson?” he asked, as he dismounted at the corral and saw the cattle buyer standing near. “We needed all the help we could get.”

“I had business elsewhere.”

“Couldn’t have been more important business than roundin’-up the rustlers, to my way of thinkin’.”

“I was doing a little rounding-up myself,” was the smiling answer.

“You! Who’d you round up?”

“The Parson,” was the quiet answer.

“The Parson!” was yelled by a score.

“Yes, the head of the rustling gang, its prime mover and the man who gave them information when and where to make their raids on Square Z ranch.”

“Whew!” whistled Hinkee Dee; and the others expressed their surprise in different ways. “How’d you come to do that, Munson?”

“Peck’s my name,” was the quiet rejoinder. “Henry Peck, and I’m a detective. I was sent out here from New York.”

At this the boys started and looked at one another.

“I was sent on by your father,” said Mr. Peck, smiling at Ned, “to see what I could do. Evidently he didn’t take much stock in your efforts. But I shall tell him he was wrong. I did only a little end of it.”

“And you got the Parson,” murmured Gimp, amazed.

“Yes, I got the Parson! He is one of the most notorious cattle swindlers known, and the authorities have been looking for him a long time. I heard of him in Des Moines, and then I came on here. I guess you boys didn’t think much of me at first, did you?” Mr. Peck asked Jerry.

“No; not an awful lot. We thought you were a rustler yourself.”

“Especially after that fake about your leg,” added Ned.

“Well, that *was* a fake—part of it, anyhow,” admitted the detective. “I did see the rustlers drive off the cattle and they fired at me. They didn’t hit me; but I saw a chance to pretend to be wounded so I could have a good excuse for staying around the place here. That’s what I did, and in that way I got evidence against the Parson. I intercepted some messages he sent to the rustlers, made copies of them and they’ll be used for evidence. He was the real head of the gang.”

“Whew!” exclaimed Ned. “And we thought he was so good!”

“I guess you thought *I* was sort of mean, didn’t you?” asked Hinkee Dee.

“Yes,” admitted Jerry.

“But I want to say it wasn’t me who changed horses on you that time,” went on the assistant foreman. “I saw the Parson do it, but I wasn’t going to squeal. I didn’t know what his game was but I see now. He wanted to discourage you.”

“Of course not,” Jerry agreed. “I guess he had his reasons for trying to get us away from here.”

“The very best!” laughed Henry Peck. “And now I think you’d better send word home. The main credit belongs to you boys, for if you hadn’t rescued the professor you’d never have known where the rustlers’ headquarters were. I doubt if I could have forced the Parson to tell.

“I stayed away from the raid to-day to get the last bit of evidence against him I needed. And I got it—and him. He’s in jail with the rest of his gang now.”

There is little more to tell. The workings of the cattle thieves were revealed with the arrest of the entire gang. As has been related, they would run off a bunch of cattle when the signal was sent them by the Parson, who, working at the ranch, knew all its operations. Then the steers would be held in the secret valley until a favorable time to send them out to innocent buyers.

The detective’s boast that he had bought Square Z stock under the market price was not a vain one, as he had done so in order to get evidence, though it

was worthless at the time. Eventually, the lawless men received their punishment.

Mr. Peck, or Mr. Munson, a name he often went by, had been sent out to Square Z ranch by Mr. Baker as soon as the boys started. He traveled faster than they, and knew when they were to arrive in Des Moines. His attempt to make friends with them was more a joke than anything else, so as to be able to send word back to their parents that they were all right.

He learned of their arrival at the ranch, and, after having worked up some clues himself, he came on, surprising them at their airship. The detective tried to solve the mystery of where the stolen cattle were hidden, but was unsuccessful. He did, however, suspect the Parson, and with good reason, and laid his plans to trap him. The latter was a "slick" rustler, though, and, for a time, baffled the efforts of Mr. Peck.

It was soon learned that one of the rustlers, who had been sent by the others to spy on the deserted camp of the cowboys on the mountain top had fired at the airship.

"Well, I suppose we'll have to be going back to Boxwood Hall soon now," said Bob one day, following the receipt of letters from home, in which were many congratulations on their achievements.

"Yes, but there are worse places," commented Ned, and Jerry nodded.

"I'm glad that dad and Mr. Slade decided not to sell the ranch, and that Mr. Slade found funds for his new business enterprise somewhere else," observed Bob.

"Well, while we have a chance, let's take a trip in the airship," said Jerry. "Want to come, Professor?"

"No, I'm going to stay on the ground to-day. I lost a valuable jumping spider from one of my boxes and I must search for it."

And while the three chums are enjoying one of their last trips over Square Z ranch we will take leave of them for a time, to meet them again in the next volume, which will be entitled, "The Motor Boys in the Army, or Ned, Bob and Jerry as Volunteers."

It was about a week after the capture of the rustlers that Ned, Bob and Jerry prepared to make their leisurely way back East in their big car. The airship, after a last wonderful flight, which was witnessed by a number of cowboys from

neighboring ranches, had been taken apart and shipped to Cresville.

“Well, come again, boys,” urged the foreman, as he shook hands with the travelers. “Always glad to see you, though I can’t offer you any more excitement like that you just went through.”

“We’ll be glad to see you, anyhow,” put in Hinkee Dee, and this was a great deal, considering the way he had formerly regarded the boys.

The ranchmen gave them a cheer as the big car moved away, and the last sight the boys had of Square Z ranch was the waving hats of their friends.

“Well, it turned out all right,” remarked Ned, after a period of silence.

“Yes, we succeeded better than I expected we would at one time,” agreed Jerry. “It looked as though we were going to fail. What are you thinking of, Chunky?” he asked the stout lad who had not said much.

“Something to eat!” challenged Ned.

“I was not! I was just thinking how the Parson fooled us all. No one would ever have taken him for a rustler.”

“That’s the reason—he was so different,” commented Jerry, as he guided the car over the trail toward the distant East.

THE END

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The Chapter XVI title in the Table of Contents (The Wrong Way) was changed to reflect the title within the contents (The Wrong Pony).

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