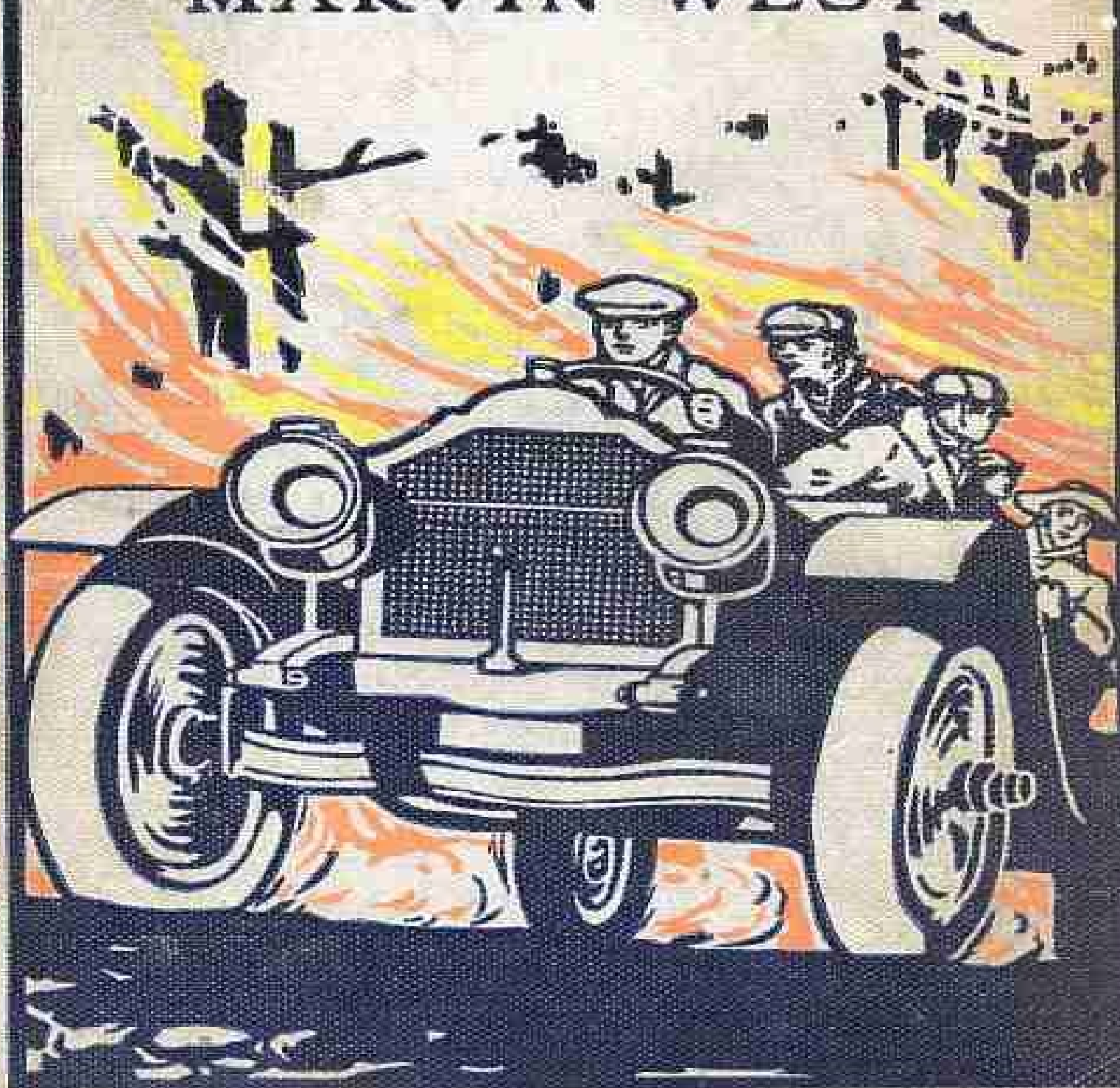


The  
**MOTOR RANGERS,**  
through the **SIERRAS**  
MARVIN WEST



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avoiding a mountain lion

**Straight and true it sped to its mark. The lion had already crouched for a spring when Nat's missile was discharged.**

—[Page 18](#).

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**THE  
MOTOR RANGERS  
THROUGH THE  
SIERRAS**

BY  
MARVIN WEST  
AUTHOR OF "THE MOTOR RANGERS' LOST MINE," ETC.

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# **The Motor Rangers Through the Sierras**

## CHAPTER I. INTO THE SIERRAS.

"Say Nat, I thought that this was to be a pleasure trip?"

Joe Hartley, the perspiration beading his round, good-natured countenance, pushed back his sombrero and looked up whimsically from the punctured tire over which he was laboring.

"Well, isn't half the pleasure of running an auto finding out how many things you don't know about it?" laughingly rejoined Nat Trevor, the eldest and most experienced of the young Motor Rangers, as they had come to be called.

"V-v-v-variety is the s-s-spice——" sputtered our old friend William, otherwise Ding-dong Bell.

"Oh, whistle it, Ding-dong," interjected Joe impatiently.

"*Phwit!*" musically chirruped the stuttering lad. "Variety is the spice of life," he concluded, his hesitating manner of speech leaving him, as usual, following the puckering of his lips and the resultant music.

"That's no reason why we should be peppered with troubles," grumbled Joe, giving the "jack" a vicious twist and raising the rear axle still higher. "Here it is, only three days since we left Santa Barbara and I'm certain that I've fixed at least four punctures already."

"Well, you'll be a model of punctuality when——" grinned Nat aggravatingly, but Joe had sprung from his crouching posture and made for him threateningly.

"Nat Trevor, if you dare to pun, I'll—I'll—bust your spark plug."

"Meaning my head, I suppose," taunted Nat from a safe distance, namely, a rock at the side of the dusty road. "'Lay on, Macduff.'"

"Oh, I've more important things to go," concluded Joe, with as much dignity as he could muster, turning once more to his tools.

While he is struggling with the puncture let us look about a little and see

where the Motor Rangers, whom we left in Lower California, are now located. As readers of "The Motor Rangers' Lost Mine" know, the three bright lads with a companion, oddly named Sandrock Smith, had visited the sun-smitten peninsula to investigate some mysterious thefts of lumber from a dye-wood property belonging to Mr. Pomery, "The Lumber King," Nat's employer. While in that country, which they only reached after a series of exciting and sometimes dangerous incidents, they stumbled across a gold mine in which Nat's father had, years before, been heavily interested.

Readers of that volume will also recall that Hale Bradford, the Eastern millionaire, and his unscrupulous associates had made a lot of trouble for Nat and his companions after the discovery. The exciting escape of Nat in a motor boat across the waters of the Gulf of California will also be called to mind, as well as the story of how matters were finally adjusted and Nat became, if not a millionaire, at least a very well-to-do young man. The gift of the auto in which they were now touring was likewise explained. The splendid vehicle, with its numerous contrivances for comfortable touring, had been the present of Mr. Pomery to the lads, as a token of his esteem and gratitude for the conclusion to which they had brought the dishonest dealings of Diego Velasco, a Mexican employed by Mr. Pomery.

On their return to California proper, the lads had spent a brief time with their parents, and Nat had seen his mother ensconced in a pretty house on the outskirts of Santa Barbara. It had been a great delight to the lady to leave the tiny cottage in which straitened circumstances following the death of Nat's father, had compelled them to live. Joe Hartley, we know, was the son of a department store keeper of Santa Barbara, and Ding-dong Bell was the only child of a well-to-do widow. So much for our introductions.

Inactivity had soon palled on the active minds of the Motor Rangers, and they had, with the consent of their parents, planned another trip. This time, however, it was to be for pleasure. As Nat had said, "We had enough adventures in Lower California to last us a lifetime." But of what lay ahead of them not one of the boys dreamed, when, three days before, they had started from Santa Barbara for a tour of the Sierras. Nat was desirous of showing that it was feasible to hunt and fish and tour the mountains in an automobile just as well as on horseback. The car, therefore, carried rifles and shot guns as well as fishing rods and paraphernalia for camping. We shall not give an inventory of it now. Suffice it to say that it was completely outfitted, and as the details of the car itself have been told in the previous volume we shall content ourselves with introducing each as

occasion arises.

The particular puncture which Joe was repairing when this volume opens, occurred just as the lads were bowling over a rather rough road into Antelope Valley, a narrow, wind-swept canyon between two steep ranges of mountains. The valley is in the heart of the Sierras, and though too insignificant to be noted on any but the largest maps, forms a portion of the range well known to mountaineers. It is a few miles from the Tehachapi Pass, at which, geographers are agreed, the true Sierra Nevadas begin.

"Say, fellows," exclaimed Nat suddenly, looking about him at the sky which from being slightly overcast had now become black and threatening, "we're going to have a storm of some sort. If you're ready there, Joe, we'll be jogging along. We ought to be under shelter when it hits."

"Yes," agreed Joe, wiping his brow with the back of his hand, "it will go whooping through this narrow valley like the mischief."

As he spoke he lowered the "jack," and put the finishing touches on his repair. The auto carried plenty of extra tires, but naturally the boys wished to be sparing of their new ones while the others offered an opportunity for a patch.

As the first heavy rain drops fell, sending up little spurts of dust from the dry road and the dusty chaparral bordering it, Nat started the motor, and the car was soon whizzing forward at a good speed. Thanks to its finely-tempered springs and the shock absorbers with which it was equipped, the roughness of the road had little effect on the comfort of the riders.

"This is going to be a hummer," shouted Joe suddenly, "we'd better get up the shelter hood."

Nat agreed, and soon the contrivance referred to, which was like a low "top" of waterproof khaki, was stretched on its collapsible frames. It fitted all round the auto, enclosing it like a snug waterproof tent. In front was a window of mica through which the driver could see the road. The erection of the shelter took but a few seconds and presently the car was once more chugging forward.

But as the storm increased in violence, the wind rose, till it fairly screamed through the narrow funnel of the rocky-walled valley. Through his window Nat could see trees being bent as if they were buggy whips.

"If this gets much worse we'll have to find cover," he thought, "or else lose



our shelter hood."

He glanced apprehensively at the steel supports of the shelter, which were bending and bowing under the stress put upon them. As Nat had remarked to himself, they would not stand much more pressure.

"Say, the rain is coming in here," began Joe suddenly, as a tiny trickle began to pour into the tonneau. It came through a crack in the khaki top which had been wrenched apart by the violence of the wind.

"It's g-g-g-gone d-d-d-down the bab-b-b-back of my n-n-n-neck," sputtered Ding-dong Bell protestingly.

"Never mind, Ding-dong," comforted Joe, "maybe it will wash your parts of speech out straight."

"I'm going to head for that cave yonder," exclaimed Nat, after running a few more minutes.

He had spied a dark opening in the rocks to his right, while the others had been talking, and had guessed that it was the mouth of a cave of some sort. And so it proved.

The auto was turned off the road, or rather track, and after bumping over rocks and brush rolled into the shelter of the cavern. It seemed quite an abrupt change from the warring of the elements outside to the darkness and quiet of the chamber in the rocks, and the Motor Rangers lost no time in lowering the hood and looking about to find out in what sort of a place they had landed.

So far as they could see, after they had all climbed out of the car, the cave was a large one. It ran back and its limits were lost in darkness. The mouth, however, was quite a big opening, being more than twenty feet across at the base. It narrowed into a sharp-topped arch at the summit, from which greenery hung down.

"Let's see where we are," remarked Nat, taking off his heavy driving gloves and throwing them upon the driver's seat.

"You'd have to be a cat to do that," laughed Joe Hartley, gazing back into the dense blackness of the cavern.

"That's soon fixed," added Nat, and removing one of the lights of the car from

its socket he pressed a little button. A sharp click resulted, and a flood of brilliant white radiance poured from the lamp. It was an improved carbide contrivance, the illuminant which made the gas being carried in its socket.

The boy turned its rays backward into the cave, flooding the rough, rocky walls, stained here and there with patches of dampness and moss, with a blaze of light.

"Say," cried Joe suddenly, as the rays fell far back into the cave but still did not seem to reach its terminus, "what is that back there?"

As he spoke he seized Nat's sleeve in a nervous, alarmed way.

"What?" demanded Nat, holding the light high above his head in his effort to pierce the uttermost shadows.

"Why that—don't you see it?" cried Joe.

"I do now," exclaimed Nat in a startled voice, "it's——"

"T-t-t-two g-g-glaring eyes!" fizzed Ding-dong Bell.

As he spoke, from behind the boys, came a low, menacing growl. They faced about abruptly to see what this new source of alarm might be.

As they all turned in the direction from which the growl had proceeded—namely the mouth of the cave—a cry of dismay was forced from the lips of the three lads. Stealthily approaching them, with cat-like caution, was a low, long-bodied animal of a tawny color. Its black-tipped tail was lashing the ground angrily, and its two immense eyes were glaring with a green light, in the gloom of the cave.

"A mountain lion!" cried Nat, recognizing their treacherous foe in an instant.

"And its mate's back there in the cave," called Joe, still more alarmedly.

"G-g-g-g-get the g-g-g-guns!" sputtered Ding-dong.

This was far more easy to recommend than to accomplish, however. The lads, never dreaming that they would want their weapons, had left them in the automobile. The car, as will be recalled, had been left near the mouth of the cave. The mountain lion advancing toward them had already passed the auto and was now between them and the place in which their weapons were reposing.

The mountain lion, or cougar, ordinarily not dangerous unless it gets its foe at an absolute disadvantage, becomes, during the mating season, a vindictive, savage brute, if separated from its mate. That this was now the case was evident. There was no room to doubt that the two green eyes glaring from the remote blackness of the cave were the optics of another "lion."

The young Motor Rangers were fairly trapped. Without weapons or any means of protecting themselves but their bare hands, they were in imminent peril of a nasty conclusion to their sudden encounter.



## **CHAPTER II. BETWEEN TWO FIRES.**

Snarling in very much the manner of an angry cat, the lion, which had appeared at the mouth of the cave, began to come forward more rapidly. At the same instant, as if by mutual consent, his mate started to advance from the rear of the cave. It was evident that if they did not wish to be seriously injured, perhaps killed, the Motor Rangers would have to act, and act quickly.

But what were they to do? Nat it was who solved the question. The floor of the cave was littered with boulders of various sizes, ranging from stones of a pound or so in weight, up to huge rocks beyond a boy's power to lift.

Stooping down swiftly Nat selected a stone a little larger than a baseball, and then throwing himself into a pitching posture, awaited the oncoming cougar, approaching from the cave mouth.

The boy had been the best pitcher the Santa Barbara Academy had ever produced, and his companions saw in a flash that he meant to exercise his skill now in a way of which he had little dreamed when on the diamond. His hand described an evolution in the air, far too quick to be followed by the eye. The next instant the stone left his grasp, and swished through the atmosphere.

Straight and true it sped to its mark.

And it struck home none too quick. The lion had already crouched for a spring on the defenseless lads, who stood between himself and his mate, when Nat's missile was discharged.

Crack!

The sharp noise of the stone's impact with the skull of the crouching feline sounded like a rifle shot.

"Bull's-eye!" yelled Joe excitedly.

And bull's-eye it was. The rock had a sharp edge which Nat, in his haste, had not noticed. As it struck the lion's head it did so with the keen surface foremost. Like a knife it drove its way into the skull and the lion, with a howl of pain and

fury, turned, stumbled forward a few paces, and then rolled over.

Before the others could stop him, Ding-dong Bell, entirely forgetting the other lion, dashed forward to examine the fallen monster. The result of his action was that his career came very near being terminated then and there. The cougar had only been stunned, and as the stuttering boy gave one of its ears a tug, it leaped erect once more and struck a blow at him with its chisel-like claws that would have torn him badly had they struck.

But Ding-dong, though deliberate in his speech, was quick in action. He leaped backward like an acrobat, as he saw the mighty muscles tauten for action, and so escaped being felled by the blow. He could feel it "swish" past his nose, however, and entirely too close to be pleasant.

In the meantime, Nat, realizing that his best move would be to get to their arms, had made a flying leap for the auto and seized an automatic rifle of heavy calibre. As Ding-dong leaped back he aimed and fired, but in the darkness he missed, and with a mighty bound the wounded cougar leaped out of the cave and dashed off through the storm into the brush on the hillside above.

"One!" exclaimed Nat, like Monte Cristo in the play.

The others gave a low laugh. They could afford not to worry so much now. True, there was one of the cougars still back in the cave, but with their rifles in their hands the lads had little to fear.

"I felt for a minute, though, like I did that time the Mexican devil sprang on me near the gulf village," said Nat, recalling one of his most perilous moments in Lower California.

But there was little time for conversation. Nat had hardly uttered his last remark before the cougar at the rear of the cave began to give signs that it too was meditating an attack. There are few animals that will not fight desperately when cornered, even a rat making a formidable foe sometimes under such conditions, and cornered the cougar unquestionably was.

"She's coming," warned Joe in a low voice, as a rumbling growl resounded above the roar of the storm outside.

"L-l-let her c-c-come," sputtered Ding-dong defiantly.

"Better climb into the car, boys," said Nat in a whispered tone, "we can get

better aim from an elevation."

Accordingly they clambered into the tonneau of the motor vehicle, and kneeling on the seat awaited the onslaught which they knew must come in a few seconds.

"I've half a mind to let her go, if we can without putting ourselves in danger," said Nat, "it doesn't seem fair somehow to shoot down a poor brute in cold blood."

"But that poor brute would attack you without hesitation if you lay injured on a trail," Joe reminded him; "these cougars, too, kill hundreds of sheep and young calves, just for the sheer love of killing, for half of what they kill they never touch."

"That's right," agreed Nat, "still fair play is a jewel, and——"

Further words were taken out of his mouth by something that occurred just at that instant, and settled the fate of the cougar then and there.

Ding-dong Bell, whose unlucky day it seemed to be, had, in his excitement, been leaning far over the back of the tonneau, peering into the darkness at the rear of the cave. He was trying to detect the shadowy outlines of the cougar. A few seconds before Joe Hartley had said:—

"Look out, Ding-dong, or you'll go overboard."

The stuttering youth's reply had been a scornful snicker. But now, however, he craned his neck just a bit too far. His upper quarters over-balanced his stumpy legs and body, and with a howl that rivalled the cougar's, he toppled clean over the edge of the tonneau.

The floor of the cave sloped steeply toward the rear, and when Ding-dong struck it he did not stop. Instead, the momentum lent him by his fall appeared to propel him forward down the sloping floor. He yelled for help as he felt himself rapidly and involuntarily being borne toward the hidden cougar.

By some mysterious combination of misfortune, too, the carbide in the lamp, which had not been renewed since they left Santa Barbara, gave out with a flicker and a fizz at this moment. The cave was plunged into almost total darkness. Nat's heart came into his throat as he realized that if the cougar was not killed within the next few seconds, Ding-dong's life might pay the forfeit.

"Good gracious!" shouted Joe above poor Ding-dong's cries, "how are we going to see to shoot?"

"Aim at the eyes," grated out Nat earnestly, "it's our only chance."

As he spoke there came an angry snarl and a hissing snort. It mingled with a shout of alarm from Ding-dong, who had now stopped rolling, but was not yet on his feet. The she-cougar had seen his peril and had taken the opportunity to bring down at least one of her enemies.

Straight up, as if impelled by a powerful steel spring, she shot. But even as she was in mid-spring two rifles cracked, and with a convulsive struggle the great tawny body fell with a thud to the floor of the cave, clawing and scratching and uttering piercing roars and cries.

"Put her out of her misery," said Nat, as Ding-dong, having regained his feet, darted at the top of his speed for the mouth of the cave.

Once more the rifles blazed away at the two green points of fire which marked the wounded cougar's eyes. This time dead silence followed the reports, which reverberated deafeningly in the confines of the cave. There was no doubt but that the animal was dead. But where was Ding-dong?

His companion Motor Rangers looked anxiously about them, but could see nothing of him. In the excitement they had not noticed him dart by. Presently, however, a slight noise near the cave month attracted their attention. There was Ding-dong out in the rain, and drenched to the skin, peering into the cave.

"C-a-can I c-c-c-come in?" he asked hesitatingly.

"Yes, and hurry up, too," ordered Nat in as stern a voice as he could command. "Your first duty," he went on, "will be to dig down in the clothes chest and put on dry things. Then you will refill the lamps with carbide, which you ought to have done two days ago, and after that you may patch up the tear the wind made in our shelter hood."

"And—phwit—after that?" inquired Ding-dong with so serious an aspect that they had to laugh.

"I'll think up something to keep you out of mischief," said Nat finally.

While Ding-dong set about his tasks after investing himself in dry clothes, the

others skinned the cougar and kindled a fire with some driftwood that lay about the cave. Hot coffee was then brewed, and some of the stores opened. After imbibing several cups of the steaming mixture, and eating numerous slices of bread and butter, the Motor Rangers felt better.

By this time, too, the storm had almost passed over, only a slight drizzle remaining to tell of the visit of the mountain tempest. An investigation of the cave failed to show any trace of a regular den in it, and the boys came to the conclusion, which was probably correct, that the cougars had merely taken to it for shelter from the storm. However that was, all three of them felt that they had had a mighty narrow escape. Ding-dong inwardly resolved that from that time on he would take care to have the lamps packed with carbide, for Nat's relation of how nearly the sudden cessation of the light had cost him his life gave the stuttering youth many qualms.

"I guess the storm is about over," said Joe, looking out of the cave while holding a tin cup of coffee in his hand.

"I see enough blue sky to m-m-m-make a pair of pants for every s-s-s-s-sailor in the navy," remarked Ding-dong, who had joined him.

"That's a sure sign of clearer weather," said Nat, "come on, boys, pack up the cups and get the car ready and we'll go ahead."

"Where are we going to stop to-night?" asked Joe. "I guess we can't be many miles from Lariat, can we?"

"I'll see," rejoined Nat, diving into his breast pocket and pulling out a map stoutly mounted on tough linen to prevent tearing. He pored over it for a moment.

"The map puts Lariat about fifteen miles from here," he said.

"What sort of a p-p-p-lace is it?" Ding-dong wished to know.

"A small post-office station," rejoined Nat. "I don't imagine that there is even a hotel there."

Ding-dong, who didn't object to the luxuries of life, sighed. Somehow, he had been looking forward to stopping at a hotel that night. He said nothing, however, well knowing how his complaints would be received.



The auto was soon moving out of the cave in which they had had so exciting an encounter. Nat was at the wheel and his two companions in the tonneau. The faces of all were as beaming as the weather had now turned out. These boys dearly loved the sensation of taking to the road and proceeding on into the unknown and adventurous.

The rough strip separating the road, as we must in courtesy call it, from the steep rock-face in which the cave lay, was speedily traversed and the auto's nose headed north. For some time they bowled along at a slow speed, the track growing rapidly rougher and rougher, till it seemed that nothing on wheels could get over it.

"What's the m-m-m-matter?" asked Ding-dong suddenly of Joe Hartley, who for a bumpy mile or two had sat with his head cocked on one side as if listening intently for something.

"I'm listening for a puncture," grinned Joe, resuming his posture of attention.

As the road grew rougher the walls of the valley began to close in. They grew more lofty as the pass grew narrower, till only a thin strip of blue sky showed at the summit. The rugged slopes were clothed with a sparse growth of pine timber and chaparral. Immense faces of rock cropped out among these. The whole scene had a wild and savage aspect.

Suddenly they reached a spot where the road took an abrupt dip downward. From the summit the descent looked as steep as the wall of a house. Fortunately, they carried an emergency brake, so that the steepness of the declivity did not alarm them. Without hesitating Nat allowed the car to roll over the summit and begin the drop. The exhilaration of the rapid motion made him delay applying his emergency just as soon as he should have, and the car had been running at considerable speed when there came a sudden shout from Joe:—

"Look, Nat! Look!"

The boy, who had been adjusting his spark lever, looked up suddenly. They were just rounding a curve, beyond which the road pitched down more steeply than ever.

At the bottom of the long hill stood an obstacle. Nat at a glance made it out as a stage coach of the old-fashioned "thorough-brace type." It was stationary, however, and its passengers stood about it in scattered groups, while, so far as

Nat could see, no horses were attached to it.

"Better go slow. There seems to be something the matter down there at the bottom of the grade," the boy remarked.

At the same instant his hand sought the emergency brake lever and he pushed it forward.

There was a loud crack as he did so, and an alarmed look flashed across his face as the lever suddenly felt "loose" in his hand. The car seemed to give an abrupt leap forward and plunge on more swiftly than ever.

Below him Nat could see the scattered figures pointing upward excitedly. He waved and yelled to warn them that he had no control over the car which was tearing forward with the speed of the wind. The ordinary brake had no effect on it under the speed it had now gathered. Lurching and plunging like a ship at sea, it rushed onward.

Directly in its path, immovable as a rock, was the stage coach. All three of the Motor Rangers' bronzed, sunburned faces blanched as they rushed onward to what seemed inevitable disaster.



## **CHAPTER III. IN A RUNAWAY AUTO.**

"Can't you stop her?" gasped Joe, clutching the forward portion of the tonneau and gripping it so tight that his knuckles went white.

Nat shook his head. He felt that he had done what he could to slow down the car. There was nothing left now but to face the end as resolutely as possible. As long as they lived the Motor Rangers never forgot that wild ride down the mountainside in a runaway car.

The speed can be described by no other word than terrific. The handkerchiefs all three of the boys wore about their necks to keep off sunstroke and dust streaked out behind as stiff as if cut out of tin. Their hair was blown back flat on their heads by the speed, and every now and then the car would strike a rock, which at the speed it was going would throw it high into the air. At such moments the auto would come back to the trail with a crash that threatened to dislocate every spring in its composition.

But Nat, his eyes glued to the path in front of him, clung to the wheel, gripping it till the varnish stuck to his palms. He knew that the slightest mistake on his part might precipitate the seemingly certain disaster. Suddenly, however, his heart gave a glad bound.

He saw before him one loophole of escape from a catastrophe. The stage was halted against the rocky wall on the right-hand side of the trail. So far over toward the rocky wall was it, in fact, that its hubs almost scraped it. This left a narrow space between its left-hand wheels and the other wall of the pass.

True, it looked so narrow that it hardly seemed possible that the auto could dash through, but it was the only chance that presented itself, and Nat was quick to take advantage of it. As they saw what the boy intended to do the onlookers about the stage broke into a cheer, which was quickly checked as they held their breath in anticipation. It was one chance in a thousand that Nat was taking. Would he win out?

Closer thundered the auto while the alarmed stage passengers crowded to the far side of the pass. Nat, his eyes glued on the narrow space between the stage

and the wall of rock, bent low over the wheel. His heart underwent a terrible sinking sensation as it grew closer and he saw how narrow the space was. But he didn't give up on that account. On the contrary, the extremely narrow margin of hope acted as a tonic on his nerves.

As a naval gunner aims his big projectiles so Nat aimed the thundering runaway automobile for the narrow opening between the stage and the cliff.

Almost before he realized it he was there.

There was a quick flash of a brightly painted vehicle and white, anxious human faces as he shot by the stage and its dismounted passengers.

An ominous scraping sound was audible for an instant as the hubs of the stage and the auto's tonneau came in contact. To the left, Nat felt the scrub growing in the cracks of the rock brush his face, and then, amidst a shout of joy from behind, the auto emerged beyond the stage, unharmed save for a few scratches.

As Nat brought it to a standstill on the level, the travellers came running up at top speed. All were anxious to shake the hand of the daring boy who had turned seeming disaster into safety by his grit and cool-headedness.

"Pod'ner, you jammed that thar gas brigantine through that lilly hole like you wos makin' a poket at bill-yards," admiringly cried a tall man in a long linen duster and sombrero, about whose throat was a red handkerchief. He grasped Nat's hand and wrung it as if he would have shaken it off.

"My name's Cal Gifford. I'm the driver of the Lariat-to-Hombre stage," he announced, "and any of you kids kin ride free with me any time you've a mind to."

"Thank you," said Nat, still a bit trembly from his nervous strain, "I really believe that if you only had horses we'd accept your invitation and tow the auto behind."

As he spoke he started to scramble out of the car, the others following his example. The Motor Rangers were anxious to see what had gone wrong with their ordinarily trustworthy vehicle.

"Oh, he's quite young," simpered an elderly lady in a big veil, who was accompanied by her daughter, a girl of about twenty. An old man with fierce

white whiskers stood beside them. They were evidently tourists. So, too, was a short, stout, blonde little man as rotund as a cider keg, who stepped up to the boys as they prepared to examine their car.

"Holt, plez!" he said in an authoritative voice. "I vish to take zee phitograft."

Nat looked somewhat astonished at so curt an order, but the other two Motor Rangers merely grinned.

"Better let him, pod'ner," suggested Cal Gifford. "He took them road agents a while back. Caught 'em in the act of sneaking the express box."

"Chess!" sputtered the little German. "I gedt find pigdures of all of dem. Dey vossn't looking andt I—click!"

As he spoke he rapidly produced a camera, and before the boys knew what was happening he had pressed a little lever, and behold they were "taken." But, in fact, their minds had been busy with something else. This something was what the stage driver had referred to.

"Road agents?" asked Nat. "You've been held up, then?"

"Yep, pod'ner, that's what it amounts to," drawled Cal nonchalantly, as if it were the most ordinary thing in the world.

"The varmints stepped out frum behind that thar rock and we didn't hev time ter say 'Knife' afore we found ourselves lookin' inter the muzzles of as complete a collection of rifles as you ever saw."

"Un dey tooked away der horses by der oudtside," put in the German tourist. "Oh, I schall have me fine tales to tell ven I get me pack by der Faderland."

"The Dutchman's right," said Cal. "The onnery skunks unhitched our plugs and scampered 'em off up the trail. I reckon they're in their barn at Lariat by this time."

"Oh, dear, and we'll have to walk," cried the young lady, bursting into tears.

"And I haf vot you call it, a oatmeal?—py my pig toe," protested the German.

"I guess you mean a corn, Dutchy," laughed Cal.

"Vell, I knowed it vos some kindt of cereal," was the reply.

"Seems a shame to see that purty critter cry, don't it?" said Cal, nodding his head sidewise toward the weeping young lady.

"This is an outrage! An outrage, I say!" her white-whiskered father began shouting. "Why were those highwaymen not shot down? Why didn't somebody act?"

"Well, pod'ner, you acted up fer sure," grinned Cal. "Am I mistaken or did I hear you say you'd give 'em five thousand dollars for your life?"

"Bah!" shouted the white-whiskered man. "It was your duty sure to protect us. You should have fired at them."

"I'd hev bin a hull lot uv use to yer then, except fer funeral poposes, wouldn't I?" inquired Cal calmly.

"Bah! sir, bah!" sputtered the angry old gentleman.

"Good thing ther h'aint no mounting lions 'round," drawled Cal. "They might think we wuz an outfit of sheepmen by all the bah-bahing we be doin'."

"But how is my daughter to get to Lariat, sir?" begged the elderly lady. "She hurt her foot in getting off the stage."

"Well, ma'am," said Cal, "supposing yer man yonder takes a try at carryin' her instead of wasting wind a-bahing?"

"Voss iss diss bah? Maybe I get a picture of him?" asked the German, bustling up excitedly with his camera all ready for business.

"Oh, sir, my husband was excited. He didn't know what he was saying," exclaimed the elderly lady clasping her hands.

"There, ma'am, don't take on. I was only a-having my bit of fun," said Cal. "Maybe when these boys get their gasoline catamarang fixed up they'll give us a ride."

"But they cannot take all of us, sir," cried the lady, beginning to weep afresh.

"There, there, ma'am, never mind ther irrigation—I mean 'Weep not them tears,'" comforted Cal. "Anyhow, you and your daughter can get a ride."

"But my husband—my poor husband, sir."

Cal turned with a grin at a sudden noise behind them. The white-whiskered man had now turned his wrath on the unfortunate German.

"Out of my sight, you impudent Teuton," he was shouting. "Don't aggravate me, sir, or I'll have your blood. I'm a peaceable tourist, sir, but I have fought and bled in my time."

"Must hev bin bit by a mosquito and chased it," commented Cal to himself as the lady hastened to console her raging better half, and the little Dutchman skipped nimbly out of harm's way.

"What yo' bin a-doing to ther ole bell-wether, Dutchy?" inquired Cal.

"I ask him if he blease tell me vere I can get a picture of dot Bah, und he get madt right away quvick," explained the Teuton.

While all this had been going on among the tourists and Cal, the other passengers, mainly mountaineers, had stood in a group aside talking among themselves. In the meanwhile, the Motor Rangers had been examining the damage to their car. They found that the connecting rod working the band of the emergency brake had snapped, and that a blacksmith would be needed to weld it. Cal, who had strolled up in time to hear this decision, informed them that there was a blacksmith at Lariat.

"And a good 'un, too," he volunteered.

The stage driver then made a request for a ride on behalf of the young lady and her parents.

"Me and the Dutchman and the rest kin hoof it," he remarked. "It ain't above five mile, and down grade, too."

"A steep grade?" asked Nat, with some appearance of interest as Joe finished unbolting the loose ends of the broken rod.

"No, jest gentle. It runs on 'bout this way all down into Lariat."

"Well, then," said Nat, with a smile, "I'll save you all the trouble of walking."

"How's that, pod'ner? We kain't all pile in the hold of that benzine buggy."

"No; but I can give you a tow."

"What, hitch my stage on ahind your oleomargerinerous gas cart?"

"That's it."

"By the big peak of Mount Whitney, that's an idee!" exclaimed the delighted stage driver, capering about and snapping his fingers like a big child. "Wait a jiffy, I'll explain it all to Bah-bah and the rest."

This was soon done, and the Motor Rangers in the interval attached a rope to the rear axle of the car and in turn made it fast to the front of the stage. The pole of the latter vehicle was then led over the tonneau of the auto and Joe and Ding-dong deputed to steer. From the driver's box of the stage Cal worked the brake.

An experimental run of a few yards was made, and on the gentle grade the plan was found to work perfectly, the auto towing the heavy stage without difficulty.

"Now, then, all aboard the stagemotebubble!" shouted Cal, and a few minutes later all the passengers, delighted with the novelty of the experience, had piled on board. All delighted, that is, except the white-whiskered man.

"All aboard that's a-goin' ter get thar!" bellowed Cal, fixing him with a baleful eye.

"Bah! Bah!" sputtered the white-whiskered one indignantly, nevertheless skipping nimbly on beside his wife and daughter.

But there came a fresh delay.

"Holt on, please! Vait! I vish a photegrift to take him!"

"Ef yer don't hurry up Dutchy," shouted Cal, "you'll hev a picter of yerself a-walking inter Lariat."

But the photo was taken without delay, and amid a cheer from her overjoyed passengers, the stage, which moved by such novel means, rumbled onward on its way to Lariat.





## CHAPTER IV. MOTOR RANGERS TO THE RESCUE.

"That came pretty near being like the time we collided with the hay wagon in Lower California," commented Joe, as the auto got under way, with her cumbersome tow rattling along behind.

"Yes, only this time we didn't hit," laughed Nat, who had quite recovered from the strain of those terrible moments when it seemed that they must go crashing into the stage.

"A m-m-m-miss is as g-g-g-good as a m-m-m-mile any day," said Ding-dong, as his contribution to the conversation.

As Cal Gifford had said, the road was a gentle gradient between steep mountain ranges. Consequently, the towing of the coach was an easy matter. The two boys in the tonneau steered it by giving the pole a push or a tug as occasion required—much as they would have handled the tiller of a boat. When the stage showed signs of coming ahead too fast Cal shoved the foot brake forward, at once checking the impetus.

Quite a small crowd turned out to witness the strange scene as the two vehicles rolled into Lariat. The place was a typical western mountain station. There was a small post-office, two or three rough houses and a hotel. In the heyday of gold mining, Lariat had been quite a flourishing place, but the hand of decay was upon it at the present time. The hotel, however, was, as Ding-dong noticed, apparently open for business. At least several loungers arose from their chairs on the porch, and came forward with exclamations of surprise, as the two conveyances lumbered into town.

Nat shut off power in front of the post-office and at the same time Cal applied and locked the brakes, bringing the stage likewise to a standstill. The postmaster, a long, lanky Westerner, with a much-patched pair of trousers tucked into boot tops, was already out in front of his little domain.

"Ther horses be back in ther barn," he volunteered, as Cal looked at him questioningly. "They come galloping in here like a blue streak an hour ago."

"Yep, bin held up again," Cal volunteered as the crowd gathered about the stage, "and ef it hadn't been for these bubble boys here we wouldn't hev got inter town yit."

"Take everything, Cal?" asked the postmaster.

"Yep; stock, lock and barrel, as the feller says. Left us our vallibles, though. I reckon they would have taken them if it hadn't bin for the noise this here gasolene giglet made as it come over ther hill. Thet scared 'em, and they galloped off, takin' ther plugs with 'em."

"Consarn 'em! I reckon they're some of Col. Merced Morello's gang. They've bin active hereabouts lately. Jes heard afore you come in thet they'd raided a ranch up north an' tuk two hundred head of stock."

"Outrageous! Outrageous!" exclaimed the white-whiskered man, who had been listening with an angry, red countenance, "why does not some one capture them?"

"Well, sir," rejoined the postmaster, "if you kin tell us whar ter find 'em we'll furnish ther men to smoke 'em out. But up to date no one ain't bin able ter git a glimpse of 'em. They jes' swoop down and then vanish ag'in."

"They've got some hidin' place off in the mountins," opined Cal; "but you can bet that the old colonel's foxy enough ter keep it close, wherever it is."

"Betcher life," said one or two in the crowd who had heard.

While this had been going on the Motor Rangers had been hard at work unhitching their car from the stage. In this operation they had been considerably bothered by the crowd which, never having seen an auto before, elbowed right up and indulged in comment and investigation. Ding-dong caught one bewhiskered old fellow in the very act of abstracting a spark plug. The boy promptly switched on the current and the investigator, with a wild yell, hopped backward into the crowd, wringing his hand.

"The critter bit me," he explained to the crowd. Such was his explanation of the sharp electric shock he had received.

The proprietor of the hotel now hastened up, and began urging the passengers on the stage to stay the night in his hotel. Another stage went on from Lariat, and after a run of sixty miles struck the railroad in the valley. This stage was to start

in half an hour. After a hasty meal the white-whiskered man and his family, and several of the other passengers, decided to continue their journey. The boys, however, after a consultation, came to the determination to spend the night at Lariat.

Their first care had been to hunt up the blacksmith Cal had referred to, and to give into his hands the connecting rod. He promised to have it welded as good as new by morning. This arranged, the boys sauntered back to the hotel just in time to watch the other stage pull out. On a rear seat sat the white-whiskered man. He was still boiling, despite the fact that the robbers had not harmed him or his family in any way. In fact, he occasionally simmered over.

The last the boys saw of him he had gotten hold of a fat, good-natured little man, who looked like a drummer, and they could hear frequent exclamations of "Bah!" coming back toward them, like the explosions of a rapid-fire gun. A moment later the stage vanished behind a rocky turn in the road.

Soon after the boys were called in to supper. Among the company at the meal was a tall man with a black mustache drooping down each side of his mouth in typical Western fashion.

"He looks like the pictures of Alkali Ike," remarked Joe in an undertone as they concluded the meal and arose, leaving the black-mustached man and the others still eating.

Outside they found it was a beautiful night. The storm of the afternoon had laid the dust, and the moon was rising brilliantly in the clear and sharp atmosphere peculiar to the high regions of the Sierras. In the silvery radiance every rock and bush was outlined sharply. The road lay between black curtains of mountainside, like a stretch of white ribbon.

"Let's go for a stroll," suggested Nat, as they stood about on the veranda wondering what they could do with themselves till bedtime.

The other two were nothing loath, and so, without bothering to say a word to any one, the lads sauntered off down the road. The balmy scent of pines and the mountain laurel hung heavily in the air. Nat inhaled it delightedly.

"I tell you, fellows, this is living," he exclaimed.

"You bet," agreed Joe heartily.

"T-t-t-that p-p-pie was f-f-fine," said the unpoetical Ding-dong, smacking his lips at the recollection of the dessert.

"There you go," said Nat in mock disgust, "always harping on eating."

"T-th-that's b-b-better-phwit—than eating on harpoons, isn't it?" asked Ding-dong, with a look of injured innocence.

"I said harping on eating. Not harpoons on eating," retorted Nat.

"Oh," said Ding-dong. "Well, don't wail about it."

"Say, if you make any more puns I'll chuck you down into that canyon," threatened Joe, pointing downward into a black abyss which, at the portion of the road they had now reached, yawned to one side of the thoroughfare.

"You make me chuckle," grunted the incorrigible Ding-dong, avoiding the threatened fate, however, by clambering and hiding behind a madrone tree.

"Tell you what I'll do," cried Nat suddenly.

"Well, what?" demanded Joe, as Nat stopped short.

"I'll run you fellows a race to the bottom of the hill."

"You're on," cried Ding-dong from his retreat, and emerging immediately thereafter, "don't bust your emergency brake though, or we'll have more trouble."

He peered ahead down the moonlit canyon, and noted that the road was quite steep for a distance of about a quarter of a mile.

The boys were all good runners and experts, in fact, at all branches of athletics. Their blood fairly tingled as Nat lined them up and they stood awaiting the word "go."

At last it came.

Like arrows from so many bows the three boys shot forward, Ding-dong in the lead. How his stubby legs did move! Like pistons in their speed and activity. There was no question about it, Ding-dong could run. Five feet or so behind him came Joe and at his rear was Nat, who, knowing that he was ordinarily a faster runner than either, had handicapped himself a bit.

He speedily overhauled the others, however, although Ding-dong gave him a

stiff tussle. Reaching the finishing line, Nat looked back up the moonlit road. Ding-dong and Joe were speeding toward him neck and neck.

"Go it, Ding-dong!" yelled Nat, "come on, Joe."

In a cloud of dust and small rocks the two contestants rushed on. Suddenly one of Ding-dong's feet caught in a rock, and at the impetus he had attained, the sudden shock caused him to soar upward into the air, as if he were about to essay a flight through space.

Extending his arms spread-eagle fashion, the fleshy, stuttering youth floundered above the ground for a brief second, and then, as Joe dashed across the line he came down with a resounding crash. Flat on his face he fell in the middle of the dusty road.

"Pick him up," exclaimed Nat as he saw the catastrophe.

Joe, who had by this time checked his speed, headed about after Nat, and started for the recumbent Ding-dong. As they neared his side, however, the lad jumped up with a grin on his rotund features.

"Fooled you, didn't I?" he chuckled.

"Goo—d gracious. I thought you had fractured every bone in your body," exclaimed Nat.

"Can't hurt me; I'm made of cast-iron," snickered Ding-dong.

"I always knew that applied to your head," said Joe, determined to tease the boy a bit in revenge for the fright he had given them, "but I never realized before that the complaint had spread all over you."

"I'd have won the race anyhow if I hadn't taken that tumble," retorted Ding-dong, and as this seemed to be no more than the truth the others had nothing to say in rejoinder.

"I guess we had better be getting back to the hotel," said Nat, "we want to get an early start to-morrow, so a good night's sleep will be in order."

But the words were hardly out of his mouth before he stopped short.

The boy had heard voices, apparently coming from the air above them. He soon realized, however, that in reality the speakers were on the mountain-side

above them. In fact, he now saw that a trail cut into the road above the point at which they stood. In their dash down the hill they had not noticed it. The other lads, who had also heard the voices, needed no comment to remain quiet.

While they stood listening a figure appeared on the trail, walking rapidly down it. As the newcomer drew closer the boys recognized the features and tall, ungainly outline of the man with the black mustache—"Alkali Ike." He came forward as if with a definite purpose in mind. Evidently, he was not, like the boys, out for a moonlight stroll.

As he approached he stopped and listened intently. Then he gave a low, peculiar whistle. It was like the call of a night bird.

Instantly, from the hill-side above them they heard the signal—for such it seemed—replied to.

At the same instant whoever was on the hillside above began to advance downward. The boys, crouching back in a patch of shadow behind a chaparral clump, could hear the slipping and sliding of their horses' hoofs as they came down the rocky pathway.



## **CHAPTER V.**

### **AN APPOINTMENT ON THE TRAIL.**

"Something's up," whispered Joe, as if this fact was not perfectly obvious.

"Hush," warned Nat, "that fellow who just came down the trail is the chap we noticed at supper."

"Alkali Ike?"

"Yes. That's what you called him."

"He must have a date here."

"Looks that way. If I don't miss my guess he's here to meet whoever is coming on horseback down that trail."

"Are you going to stay right here?"

"We might as well. I've got an idea somehow that these chaps are up to some mischief. It doesn't look just right for them to be meeting way off here."

"That's right," agreed Joe, "but supposing they are desperate characters. They may make trouble for us."

"I guess not," rejoined Nat, "we're well hidden in the shadow here. There's not a chance of their seeing us."

"Well I hope not."

But the arrival of the horsemen on the trail put a stop to further conversation right then. There were two of them, both, so far as the boys could see, big, heavy men, mounted on active little ponies. Their long tapaderos, or leather stirrup coverings, almost touched the ground as they rode.

"Hello, Al," exclaimed one of them, as the black mustached man came forward to meet them.

"Hello, boys," was the rejoinder in an easy tone as if the speaker had no fear of being overheard, "well, you pulled it off I see."

"Yes, and we'd have got more than the express box too if it hadn't been for the all-fired noise you ever heard at the top of the trail all of a sudden. It came just as we was about ter go through ther pockets of the passengers. Sounded like a boiler factory or suthin'. I tell you we lit out in a hurry."

The speaker was one of the pony riders. As he spoke Nat gave Joe a nudge and the other replied with a look of understanding. The men who stood talking not a score of paces from them had taken part in the stage-robbery.

The man on foot seemed immensely amused at the mention of the "terrible noise" his companions said they had been alarmed by.

"Why, that was an automobubble," he laughed.

"A bubble!" exclaimed one of the others, "what in the name of the snow-covered e-tarnal hills is one of them coal oil buckboards doin' in this neck of ther woods?"

"Why, three kids are running it on a pleasure trip. The Motor Rangers, or some such fool name, they call themselves. They hitched the bubble on ter ther stage and towed her inter town as nice as you please."

"Did you say they called themselves the Motor Rangers?" asked the other mounted man who up to this time had not spoken.

"That's right, why?"

"One of 'em a fat, foolish lookin' kid what can't talk straight?" asked the other instead of replying.

Nat nudged Ding-dong and chuckled, in imminent danger of exposing their hiding place. It tickled him immensely to hear that youth described in such an unflattering manner.

"Why yep. There is a sort of chumpish kid with 'em. For the matter of that all three of 'em are stuck up, psalm singin' sort of kids. Don't drink nor smoke nor nuthin'."

"True for you. We're not so foolish," breathed Nat to Joe.

"Why are you so anxious about 'em, Dayton?" asked the other rider who had remained silent while his comrade was making the recorded inquiries.



"Cos I know 'em and I've got some old scores to even up with them," was the rejoinder. "Do you remember what I told you about some kids fooling us all down in Lower California?"

"Yep. What of it?"

"Well, this is the same bunch. I'm sure of it."

"The dickens you say. Do they travel with much money about them?"

It was the black-mustached man who was interested now.

"I don't know about that. But their bubble is worth about \$5,000 and one of them has a gold mine in Lower Cal. Then, too, they always carry a fine stock of rifles and other truck."

"They'd be worth plucking then?"

"I guess so. At any rate I'd like to get even with them even if we didn't get a thing out of it. Ed. Dayton doesn't forgive or forget in a hurry."

Small wonder that the boys leaned forward with their ears fairly aching to catch every word. Nat knew now why the outline of one of the riders had seemed familiar to him. The man was evidently none other than Ed. Dayton, the rascal who had acted as the millionaire Hale Bradford's lieutenant in Lower California.

Nat, it will be recalled, was captured on the peninsula and an attempt made to force him to give up papers showing his right to the mine, which the gang Hale Bradford had gathered about him was working. I can tell you, Nat was mighty glad that he and his companions happened to be there in the shadow; for, thought he to himself:—

"Forewarned is forearmed, Mr. Ed. Dayton."

But the men were resuming their talk.

"Tell you what you fellows do," said the black-mustached man. "Just lie off here in the brush for an hour or so and I'll go back to the hotel and look around. Then I'll come back and tell you if the coast's clear. They've got their auto out in some sort of a shed and if we could run it we could swipe the whole thing. Can you run an auto, Ed.? Seems to me I've heard you talk about them."

"Can a dog bark?" inquired the other, who if the memory of my readers goes

back that far, they will recall had at one time been a chauffeur for Mr. Pomery.

"Very well then, that's settled. At all events it might be a good thing to smash up the car if we can't do anything else with it."

"That's right Al.," agreed Ed. Dayton's companion, "we don't want any nosy kids around in the mountains. They might discover too much."

"That's so, too. Well, you leave it to me, Al. Jeffries, and I'll bet you that after to-night they'll all be glad to go home to their mummies."

But right here something happened which might, but for good fortune, have caused a different ending to this story.

Ding-dong Bell, among other peculiarities, possessed a pair of very delicate nostrils, and the slightest irritation thereof caused him to sneeze violently. Now at the time of the year of which we are writing the California mountains are covered with a growth, called in some localities tar weed. This plant gives off an irritating dust when it is shaken or otherwise disturbed, and the hoofs of the two riders' ponies had kicked up a lot of this pungent powder. Just as the rascals concluded their plans a vagrant puff of wind carried some of it in Ding-dong's direction.

Realizing what serious consequences it might have, the lad struggled with all his might against his immediate inclination to sneeze, but try as he would he could not keep the ultimate explosion back.

"A-ch-oo-oo-oo-oo!"

It sounded as loud as the report of a cannon, in the silent canyon, and quite as startling.

"What in thunder was that?" exclaimed Ed. Dayton wheeling his pony round.

He, of course, saw nothing, and regarded his companions in a puzzled way.

Al. Jeffries was tugging his black mustache and looking about him likewise for some explanation. But he could not find it. In the meantime, the boys, in an agony of apprehension, scarcely dared to breathe. They crouched like rabbits behind their shelter awaiting what seemed inevitable discovery.

"Must have been a bird," grunted Ed. Dayton's companion.

"Funny sort of bird," was the rejoinder.

"That's right. I am a funny sort of bird," thought Ding-dong with an inward chuckle.

"Sounded to me more like somebody sneezin'," commented Ed. Dayton who was still suspicious.

"It'll be a bad day for them if there was," supplemented Al. Jeffries grimly.

"Tell you what we do, boys," came a sudden suggestion from Ed.'s companion, which sent a chill to the hearts of the boys; "let's scatter about here and look around a bit."

"That's a good idea," was the alarming rejoinder.

Nat was just revolving in his mind whether it would be the better expedient to run, and trust to hiding in the rocks and chaparral, or to leap up and try to scare the others' ponies, and then escape. But just then Al. Jeffries spoke:

"No use wastin' time on that now, boys," he said, "it's gettin' late. You do as I say, and then in a while we'll all take a little spin in that grown up taxi cab of the Motor Rangers."

To the intense relief of the boys the others agreed. Soon after this the trio of rascals separated. Ed. Dayton and his companions rode back up the trail while Al. Jeffries started off for the hotel.

As soon as their footsteps grew faint Nat galvanized into action.

"We've got a lot to do in a very short time," he announced excitedly. "Come on, Joe! Shake a foot! We've got to beat Mr. Al. back to the hotel."

"How?" inquired Joe amazedly, but not doubting in his own mind that Nat had already thought the matter out thoroughly.

"We'll skirt along the mountain-side above him. If we are careful he won't hear us."

"That is, if Ding-dong can muffle that nasal gatling gun of his," grunted Joe. "Say, young fellow, the next time you want to sneeze when we're in such a tight place, just oblige us by rolling over the edge of the canyon, will you?"

"I c-c-c-o-o-ouldn't help it," sputtered Ding-dong sorrowfully.

"Couldn't," exclaimed the indignant Joe, "you didn't even try."

"I did too. But I couldn't remember whether the book said that you could stop sneezing by pulling the lobe of your ear or rubbing the bridge of your nose."

"So you did both?"

"Y-y-y-yes; why?"

"Well, they were both wrong. You should have wiggled your right big toe while you balanced a blade of grass on your chin."



## **CHAPTER VI.**

### **SOME RASCALS GET A SCARE.**

Everybody in the hotel at Lariat had long retired to bed, when three youthful forms stole toward the stable which had been turned into a temporary garage for the Motor Rangers' big car. From their bed-room window, the boys had, a few moments before, watched Al. Jeffries stride off down the trail to meet his cronies for the second time and inform them that the time was ripe to put up their attempted trick on the lads.

The doughty Al., on his return to the hotel after the conference at which the lads were eavesdroppers, had found nothing to excite his suspicion. The boys were all seated on the porch and apparently had not moved since he had last seen them. Al. had even sat around with them a while, trying to pump them, but of course, after what they knew of him, they did not give him much information. Nat had formed an idea that the man was a sort of agent for the gang of the famous Morello. That is, he hung about towns and picked up any information he could about shipments of specie from the mines, or of wealthy travellers who might be going through. In this surmise we may say that Nat was correct.

But to return to the three lads whom we left at the beginning of the chapter stealthily slipping across the moonlit space between the hotel and the stable. All three had changed their boots for soft moccasins, in which they made next to no noise at all as they moved. Each lad, moreover, carried under his arm a small bundle. Their clothing consisted of trousers and shirts. Their broad-brimmed sombreros had been doffed with their coats. The Motor Rangers were, so to speak, stripped for action. And it was to be action of a lively kind as the event was to show.

On their arrival at the stable the boys slipped into an empty stall alongside their car, and undoing their bundles, hastily donned what was in them. Then Nat uncorked a bottle, while a strong odor filled the air. It was a pungent sort of reek, and from the bottle could be seen a faint greenish light glowing.

Their preparations completed, the Motor Rangers crouched behind the wooden wall of the stall, awaiting the next move on the program.

"And for heaven's sake sit on that sneeze!" Joe admonished Ding-dong.

Before very long the boys could hear cautious footsteps approaching the barn, and the sound of low whispering.

"The auto's right in here," they caught, in Jeffries' voice. "Say, what a laugh we'll have on those kids in the morning."

"They laugh best who laugh last," thought Nat to himself, clutching more tightly a small gleaming thing he had in his hand.

"This is pie to me," they could hear Dayton whispering, in a cautious undertone, "I told those kids I'd get even on them for driving me out of Lower California, and here's where I do it."

Nat gritted his teeth as he listened.

"You're going to get something that you don't expect," he muttered softly to himself.

The next instant the barn door framed three figures. Behind them were two ponies. The feet of the little animals were swathed in sacks so that they made no noise at all.

"Pretty foxy," whispered Joe, "they've padded the ponies' hoofs."

"Hush!" ordered Nat, "don't say a word or make a move till I give the signal."

"There's the car," whispered Jeffries, as they drew closer and the shadow of the place enclosed them, blotting out their outlines.

"Seems a shame to run it over a cliff, don't it?" put in Dayton's fellow pony rider.

"That's the only thing to do with it," said Dayton abruptly, "I want to give those kids a lesson they won't forget."

"So, you rascals," thought Nat, "you were going to run the car over a cliff were you? Oh, how I'd like to get my hands on you for just five minutes."

"Go on, Dayton. Climb into the thing and start her up," said Jeffries.

"Hope them kids don't wake up," put in Dayton's companion.

"They're off as sound as tops," Al. assured him, "I listened at their door after I came out, and they were snoring away like so many buck saws."

With the ease born of familiarity with motor vehicles, Dayton climbed into the driver's seat and bent over the steering wheel.

Presently there came a sharp click!

"Now!" whispered Nat.

As he gave the word, from behind the wooden partition upreared three terrifying objects. Their faces glared greenly and their white forms seemed to be shrouded in graveyard clothes.

In unison they uttered a dismal cry.

"Be-ware! Oh be-ware of the car of the Motor Ranger boys!"

"Wow!" yelled Dayton's companion.

As he gave the alarmed cry he fairly reeled back against the opposite stall and fell with a crash. At the same instant, an old claybank mule tethered in there awoke, and resenting the man's sudden intrusion, let fly with his hind hoofs. This shot the ruffian's form full tilt into that of Al. Jeffries, who was making at top speed for the door, and the two fell, in a rolling, cursing, struggling, clawing heap on the stable floor.

"Lemme up!" yelled Al. Jeffries, in mortal terror of the grim sheeted forms behind him.

"Lemme go!" shouted Dayton's companion, roaring half in fear and half in pain at the reminiscences of the mule's hoofs he carried.

But the startling apparitions, while at their first appearance they had made Dayton recoil, only fooled him for an instant. Springing erect from his first shock of amazement and alarm he gave an angry shout.

"Get up there you fools."

"Oh the ghosts! The ghosts with the green faces," bawled Al. Jeffries.

"Ghosts!" roared Dayton angrily, "they're no ghosts. Get up and knock their heads off."

Suiting the action to the word he leaped from the car and charged furiously at Nat. The boy's fist shot out and landed with a crash on the point of his jaw, but although Dayton reeled under the force of the blow he recovered instantly and charged furiously again on the sheeted form.

In the meantime, Al. Jeffries and the other man had rolled apart and perceived the state of affairs. The noise of the impact of Nat's fist showed conclusively that it was no ghostly hand that had struck the blow, and the fact rallied their fleeting courage. As furiously as had Dayton, they charged upon the boys. The rip and tear of sheets, and the sound of blows given and received, mingled with the angry exclamations of the men and the quick, panting breath of the boys.

Suddenly, Nat levelled the little bright glinting thing he had clutched in his hand as they crouched behind the wooden partition. He pressed a trigger on its underside and a hissing sound followed.

"Sfiz-z-z-z-z-z!"

At the same instant the air became surcharged with a pungent odor. It seemed to fill the atmosphere and made nostrils and eyes smart.

"Ammonia!" shouted Al. Jeffries, staggering backward and dabbing desperately at his face where the full force of Nat's charge had expended itself. As upon the other occasion, when the ammonia pistols had been used, the rout of the enemy was complete. With muffled imprecations and exclamations of pain, the three reeled, half blinded, out of the barn.

At the same instant the boys heard windows thrown up and the sharp report of a revolver.

"Fire! Thieves! Murder!" came from one window, in the landlord's voice, following the discharge of the pistol.

"Get to the ponies," roared Dayton, "we'll have the whole hornets' nest about our ears in a minute."

The others needed no urging. Grabbing Al. Jeffries by the arm, Dayton's companion, who was only partially blinded, made for his little steed. But Dayton, who had hardly received any of the aromatic discharge, suddenly whipped about and snatched a revolver from his side. Before the boys could dodge the man fired at them.



Nat felt the bullets fan the air by his ear, but fortunately, the man fired so quickly and the excitement and confusion was such, that in the moonlight he missed his aim.

"I'll make you smart for this some day!" he yelled, as fearful of lingering any longer he swung himself into his saddle. He drove home the spurs and with a squeal and a bound the little animal carried him out of the region of the hotel.

As for Dayton's companion he was already a good distance off with Al. Jeffries clinging behind him on his saddle.

Joe had made for the auto and seized a rifle from the rack in the tonneau as Dayton galloped off, but Nat sharply told him to put it down.

"We have scared the rascals off, and that's enough," he said.

In a few minutes the Motor Rangers were surrounded by everybody in the hotel, including Cal and the postmaster. They were warmly congratulated on their success by all hands, and much laughter greeted their account of the amusing panic into which the rascals had been thrown by the sudden appearance of the glowing-faced ghosts, followed by the discharge of the "mule battery."

"How did yer git the green glowing paint?" asked Cal interestedly.

"Why, we took the liberty of soaking two or three bundles of California matches in the tooth glass," explained Nat, "and then we had a fine article of phosphorus paint."

"Wall if you ain't the beatingest," was the landlord's admiring contribution.

In the midst of the explanations, congratulations and angry denunciation of Al. Jeffries and his companions, a sudden piping voice was heard.

"Yust von moment please. Vait! Nod a mofe!—Ah goot, I haf you!"

It was the little German, whom, the boys had discovered, was named Hans Von Schiller Muller. He had sprung out of bed in the midst of the excitement and instantly decided it would make a good subject for his camera. He presented a queer figure as he stood there, in pajamas several sizes too small for him and striped with vivid pink and green. The shrinkage had been the work of a Chinese laundryman in the San Joaquin Valley.

"Say," exclaimed Joe, "you don't expect to get a picture out of that do you?"

"Chess. Sure. Vy nodt?"

"Well, because in the first place you had no light," said Joe.

"Ach! Donnerblitzen, miserable vot I am. I shouldn't have got id a flash-light, aind't it. Hold on! Vait a minute. I get him."

"Better defer it till to-morrow," said Nat, who like the rest, was beginning to shiver in the keen air of the mountains, "it's too cold to wait for all your preparations."

And so, when Herr Muller returned to the fatherland there was one picture he did not have, and that was a portrait of the Motor Rangers as they appeared immediately after routing three notorious members of Col. Morello's band of outlaws.



## **CHAPTER VII.**

### **A PHOTOGRAPHER IN TROUBLE.**

The boys were not up as early the next morning as they had anticipated. In the first place, it was somewhat dull and overcast, and in the second they were naturally tired after their exciting adventures of the preceding day and night. The first person to hail them as they left the dining room where they had partaken of a hearty breakfast was Cal Gifford. The stage driver drew them aside and informed them in an irate voice that on account of the stage having been held up the day before, he had been notified by telegraph early that morning that his services would be no longer required by the Lariat Stage Company.

"What are you going to do?" asked Nat, after he had extended his sympathies to the indignant Cal.

"Wall, I've got a little mine up north of here that I think I'll go and take a look at," said Cal.

"How far north?" asked Nat interestedly.

"Oh, 'bout two hundred miles. I'm all packed ready ter go, but I cain't git a horse."

He indicated a battered roll of blankets and a canteen lying on the porch. Surmounting this pile of his possessions was an old rifle—that is, in pattern and design, but its woodwork gleamed, its barrel was scrupulously polished, and its mechanism well oiled. Like most good woodsmen and mountaineers, Cal kept good care of his weapons, knowing that sometimes a man's life may depend on his rifle or revolver.

"Can't get a horse?" echoed Nat. "Why, I should think there would be no trouble about that."

"Wall, thar wouldn't hev bin, but thet little Dutchman bought a nag this mornin' and started off ter take picters on his lonesome."

"I guess you mean he hired one, don't you?" asked Joe.

"No siree. That Teutonic sport paid hard cash fer ther plug. He tole the

landlord that he means ter make a trip all through the Sierras hereabout, making a fine collection of pictures."

"He must be crazy, starting off alone in an unknown country," exclaimed Nat.

"Thet's jes' what they all tole him, but there ain't no use arguin' with er mule or a Dutchman when their mind's set. He started off about an hour ago with a roll of blankets, a frying pan and his picture box."

"He stands a chance of getting captured by Col. Morello's band," exclaimed Joe.

"It's likely," agreed Cal, "but what I was a goin' ter tell yer wuz that ther plug he bought was ther last one they had here. An' so now I'm stuck I guess, till they git some more up from ther valley."

"Tell you what you do," said Nat after a brief consultation with his chums, "why not take a ride with us as far as your way lies, and then proceed any way you like?"

"What, ride with you kids in thet gasolene tug boat?"

"Yes, we'd be glad to have you. You know the roads and the people up through here, and could help us a whole lot."

"Say, that's mighty white of yer," said Cal, a broad smile spreading over his face, "if I wouldn't be in ther way now——"

"We'll be very glad to have you," Nat assured him, while Joe and Ding-dong nodded their heads in affirmation, "are you ready to start?"

Cal nodded sidewise at his pile of baggage.

"Thar's my outfit," he said.

"All right. Then I'll pay our bill and we'll start right away."

And so it was arranged. Ten minutes later the Motor Rangers in their big touring car rolled majestically out of the town of Lariat, while Cal in the tonneau waved his sombrero to admiring friends.

"This is ther first time I ever rode a benzine broncho," he declared as the car gathered way and was soon lost to the view of the citizens of Lariat in a cloud of dust.

The road lay through the same canyon in which they had so fortunately overheard the conversation of Al. Jeffries and his cronies the night before. It was a sparkling morning, with every object standing out clear and intense in the brilliant light of the high Sierras. A crisp chill lay in the air which made the blood tingle and the eyes shine. As they rolled on with the engine singing its cheering song Cal, too, burst into music:

"Riding along on my gasolene bronc;  
Instead of a whinny it goes 'Honk! Honk!'  
If we don't bust up we'll be in luck,  
You'd be blowed sky-high by a benzine buck!"

About noon they emerged from the narrow canyon into a wide valley, the broad, level floor of which was covered with green bunch grass. Through its centre flowed a clear stream, fed by the snow summits they could see in the distance. Cattle could be seen feeding at the far end of it and it was evidently used as a pasture by some mountain rancher. As they drew closer to a clump of large redwood trees at one end of the valley Nat gave a sudden exclamation of surprise, and stood up in the tonneau. Joe, who was at the wheel, sighted the scene which had attracted the others' attention at the same instant.

A group of cattlemen could be seen under one of the larger trees, with a figure in their midst. They were clustered about the central object, and appeared to be handling him pretty roughly.

Nat snatched up the glasses from their pocket in the tonneau and levelled them on the scene. He put them down again with an exclamation of excitement.

"They're going to lynch that fellow," he announced.

"What!" roared Cal, "lend me them peep glass things, young chap."

Joe stopped the car, while Cal took a long look. He confirmed Nat's opinion.

"They've got the rope over a limb of that tree already," he said.

"How are we to help him?" cried Nat, whose first and natural thought had been to go to the unfortunate's assistance.

"What do you want ter help him fer," grunted Cal, "like as not he's some sort of a horse thief or suthin'. You bet those fellers wouldn't be going ter string him

up unless he had bin doin' suthin' he hadn't orter."

Nat was not so sure about this. From what he knew of the West its impulsive citizens occasionally executed a man first and inquired into the justice of it afterward.

"Steer for those trees, Joe," he ordered sharply.

Joe, without a word, obeyed, while Cal shrugged his shoulders.

"May be runnin' inter trouble," he grunted.

"If you're scared you can get out," said Nat more sharply than was his wont.

Cal looked angry for a moment, but then his expression changed.

"Yer all right, boy," he said heartily, "and if ther's trouble I'm with you every time."

"Thanks," rejoined Nat simply, "that's the opinion I'd formed of you, Cal."

The car had now left the road and was rolling over the pasture which was by no means as smooth as it had appeared from the mountain road. However, they made good progress and as their shouts and cries had attracted the attention of the group of punchers under the trees, they at least had achieved the delay of the execution. They could now see every detail of the scene, without the aid of the field glasses. But the visage of the intended victim was hidden from them by the circle of wild-looking figures about him. As the Motor Rangers drew closer a big, raw-boned cattle puncher, with a pair of hairy "chaps" on his legs and an immense revolver in his hand, rode toward them. As his figure separated itself from the group Cal gave a low growl.

"Here comes trouble," he grumbled, closing his hand over the well-worn butt of his pistol.

"Howdy, strangers," drawled the newcomer, as he drew within earshot.

"Howdy," nodded the boys, not however, checking the auto.

"Hold on thar," cried the cowpuncher raising a big, gauntleted hand, "don't come no further, strangers. Thar's ther road back yonder."

He backed up his hint by exhibiting his revolver rather ostentatiously. But Nat's eyelids never quivered as he looked the other full in the face and asked in a

tone that sounded like one of mild, tenderfoot inquiry:—

"What are you doing there, mister—branding calves?"

"No we ain't, young feller," rejoined the cowpuncher, "Now if you're wise you'll take that fer an answer and get out of here pronto—quick—savee!"

"I don't see any reason why we can't drive through here," said Nat, cunningly stringing out the talk so that the car could creep quite close to the group of would-be lynchers.

"You don't see no reason?"

"No."

"Wall, stranger—thar's six reasons here and they all come out at once."

As he spoke the cowpuncher tapped the shiny barrel of his revolver with a meaning gesture. Nat saw that he could not go much further with safety.

"Now you git!" snarled the cowboy. "You've had fair warning. Vamoose!"

As he spoke the group about the tree parted for a minute as the cowpunchers composing it gazed curiously at the auto, which was nearing them. As they separated, the figure of the victim became visible. The boys greeted the sight with a shout of amazement which was echoed by Cal.

"Boys, it's Herr Muller!" shouted Nat.

"Wall ther blamed Dutchman!" gasped Cal, "has he bin stealin' horses?"

"Yep," rejoined the puncher briefly, "he hev. An' we're goin' ter string him up. Now you git out."

"All right," spoke Nat suddenly, with a flashing light of excitement blazing in his eyes.

"We'll get, but it will be—THIS WAY!"

As he spoke he leaped into the driver's seat, pushing Joe to one side.

The next instant the car was leaping forward with a roar and a bound, headed full at the band of amazed and thunderstruck cowpunchers.





## **CHAPTER VIII.**

### **LOST IN A PETRIFIED FOREST.**

Before the lynching party regained its senses Nat had rushed the car up alongside Herr Muller. Before that blonde pompadoured son of the fatherland knew what had occurred, Joe's strong arms, aided by Cal's biceps, jerked him off his feet and into the tonneau. But the long lariat which was already about his neck trailed behind, and the first of the punchers that realized what was happening darted forward and seized it as the car sped forward.

"P-ouf-o-o-o-f!" choked the unfortunate German, as the noose tightened. The cowpuncher who had hold of the other end of the rope dug his heels into the ground and braced himself. Herr Muller would have been jerked clean out of the tonneau by his unlucky neck had it not been for Ding-dong Bell, who, with a swift sweep downward of his knife blade severed the rope.

As the strain was abruptly relieved the cowpuncher who had hold of the other end went toppling backward in a heap. But at the same instant the rest came to their senses, and headed by the man who had threatened Nat, they clambered on their ponies and swept forward, uttering wild yells.

If this had been all, the occupants of the auto could have afforded to disregard them, but, apparently realizing the hopelessness of attempting to overtake the fleeing car they unlimbered their revolvers and began a fusillade.

Bullets whistled all about the Motor Rangers and their companions, but luckily nobody was hit. Nat's chief fear though, and his apprehension was shared by the rest, was that one of the bullets might puncture a tire.

"If it ever does—good night!" thought Nat as the angry, vengeful yells of the cheated punchers came to his ears.

But to his joy they now sounded more faintly. The pursuit was dropping behind. Right ahead was the feeding herd. In a few minutes the car would be safe from further attack,—when suddenly there came an ominous sound.

"Pop!"

At the same moment the car gave a lurch.

"Just what I thought," commented Nat, in a despairing voice, "they've winged a tire."

"Shall we have to stop?" asked Cal rather apprehensively, although a grim look about the corners of his mouth betokened the fact that he was ready to fight.

"Den maype I gedt idt a pigdure, aind idt?" asked Herr Muller, with what was almost the first free breath he had drawn since Master Bell slashed the rope.

"Good Lord!" groaned Cal in comical despair, "my little man, if those fellows ever get us you'll be able to take a picture of your own funeral."

"How would dot be bossible?" inquired Herr Muller innocently, "if I voss a deader I couldn't take my own pigdure, aind't idt?"

But before any of them could make a reply, indignant or otherwise, a sudden occurrence ahead of them caused their attention to be diverted into a fresh channel. The cattle, terrified at the oncoming auto, had stopped grazing and were regarding it curiously. Suddenly, one of them gave an alarmed bellow. It appeared to be a signal for flight, for like one animal, the herd turned, and with terrified bellowings, rushed madly off into the pine forests on the eastern side of the valley.

This was a fortunate happening for the boys, for the cowpunchers were now compelled finally to give up their chase of the automobile and head off after the stampeded cattle.

"I reckon we'd better not come this way again; it wouldn't be healthy-like," grinned Cal, hearing their shouts and yells grow faint in the distance as they charged off among the trees.

"There's one thing," said Nat as he brought the crippled auto to a halt a short distance off, "they won't worry us for some time."

"No. Among them pine stumps it'll take 'em a week to round up their stock."

And now all hands turned to Herr Muller and eagerly demanded his story. It was soon told. He had arrived in the valley a short time before they had, and, charmed by its picturesque wildness, had begun enthusiastically taking pictures. In doing so, he had dismounted, and wandered some distance from his horse.

When he turned his attention to it again, it had disappeared. However, although at first he thought he had lost the animal he soon found it grazing off among a clump of willows by the creek. He had mounted it and was riding off when suddenly the cowpunchers appeared, and as soon as their eyes fell on the horse accused the German of stealing it.

"I dell dem dot dey is mistakes making, but der use voss iss?" he went on. "Dey say dot dey pinch me anyhow."

"Lynch you, you mean, don't you?" inquired Nat.

"Vell dey pinch me too, dond dey?" asked Herr Muller indignantly. "Howefer, I egsplain by dem dot dey make misdage and den a leedle bull boy——"

"Cowboy," corrected Cal with a grin.

"Ach, how I can tell idt you my story if you are interrupt all der time," protested the German. "Well as I voss saying, der bull-boy tells me, 'loafer vot you iss you dake idt my bony vile I voss go hunting John rabbits. Yust for dot vee hang you py der neck.'"

"What did you say?" asked Nat, who began to think that the absent-minded German might actually have taken a wrong horse by accident.

"I say, 'Dot is my horse. I know him lige I know it mein brudder.' But dey say dot I iss horse bustler——"

"Rustler," muttered Cal.

"And dot I most be strunged oop. So I dake idt der picdures und gif dem my address in Chermany und den I prepare for der endt."

"Weren't you scared?" demanded Cal incredulously, for the German had related this startling narrative without turning a hair; in fact, he spoke about it as he might have talked about a tea party he had attended.

"Ach himmel, ches I voss scaredt all right. Pudt der voss no use in saying noddings, voss dere?"

"No I guess if you put it that way there wasn't," laughed Nat, "but you saved your camera I see."

He looked at the black box hanging round the German's neck by a strap.

"Yah," grinned Herr Muller, "I say I von't pee hanged if dey don'dt led itdt be mit der camera my neck py."

"No wonder they say, 'Heaven help the Irish, the Dutch can look after themselves,'" muttered Cal to himself as the entire party got out of the machine and a new tire was unbuckled from the spare tire rack.

The operation of replacing it was a troublesome one, and occupied some time.

So long did it take, in fact, that it was almost sundown by the time the shoe had been finally bolted above the inner tube, and they were ready to start once more. Just as they were about to be off Cal gave an exclamation and pointed ahead. Looking up in the direction he indicated the others saw coming toward them a saddled horse. But no rider bestrode it, and the reins were entangled in its forefeet. It whinnied as it saw them and came up close to the auto.

"Great Scott!" exclaimed Cal, as he saw it, "those cowpunchers had you right after all, Mr. Dutchman; this here is the plug you bought."

"Yah! yah! I know him now!" exclaimed Herr Muller enthusiastically. "See dere is my plankets diedt on py der saddle."

"So they are," exclaimed Nat, "at least I suppose they're yours. Then you actually were a horse thief and didn't know it. I suppose that when your horse wandered off that cowpuncher came along on his pony and left it while he went hunting jack rabbits. Then you, all absorbed in your picture taking, mistook his horse for yours."

"I guess dots der vay idt voss, chust a mistage," agreed Herr Muller with great equanimity.

"Say, pod'ner," said Cal, who had just led up the beast and restored it to its rightful owner, "you're glad you're livin', ain't you?"

The German's blue eyes opened widely as he stared at his questioner.

"Sure I iss gladt I'm lifing. Vot for—vy you ask me?"

"Wall, don't make any more mistakes like that," admonished Cal with grave emphasis, "folks out here is touchy about them."

As Herr Muller was going in the same direction as themselves he accepted a

seat in the tonneau and his angular steed was hitched on behind as over the rough ground the car could not go any faster than a horse could trot. For some time they bumped along the floor of the valley and at last emerged at its upper end into a rocky-walled canyon, not unlike the one through which they had gained the depression in the hills. But to their uneasiness they could discover no road, or even a trail. However, the bottom of the canyon was fairly smooth and so Nat decided, after a consultation with Cal, to keep going north. A glance at the compass had shown them that the canyon ultimately cut through the range in that direction.

"We'll strike a trail or a hut or suthin' afore long," Cal assured them.

"I hope we strike some place to make camp," grumbled Joe, "I'm hungry."

This speech made them remember that in their excitement they had neglected to eat any lunch.

"Never mind, Joe," said Nat, "we'll soon come across a spring or a place that isn't all strewn with rocks, and we'll camp there even if there isn't a road."

"No, there's no use going ahead in the dark," agreed Cal, looking about him.

It was now quite dark, and the depth of the canyon they were traversing made the blackness appear doubly dense. But Nat, by gazing upward at the sky, managed to keep the auto on a fairly straight course, although every now and then a terrific bump announced that they had struck a big boulder.

"Wish that moon would hurry up and rise; then we could see something," remarked Cal, as they crept along. The others agreed with him, but they would not have the welcome illumination till some time later. They were still in the canyon, however, when a dim, silvery lustre began to creep over the eastern sky. Gradually the light fell upon the western wall of the gorge and soon the surroundings were flooded with radiance.

But it was a weird and startling scene that the light fell upon. Each occupant of the car uttered an involuntary cry of amazement as he gazed about him. On every side were towering trunks of what, at first glance, seemed trees, but which, presently, were seen to be as barren of vegetation as marble columns. Stumps of these naked, leafless forms littered the ground in every direction. In the darkness seemingly, they had penetrated quite a distance into this labyrinth, for all about them now were the bare, black trunks. Some of them reached to an immense

height, and others were short and stumpy. All shared the peculiarity of possessing no branches or leaves, however.

"Where on earth are we?" asked Joe, gazing about him at the desolate scene.

"I can't make out," rejoined Nat in a troubled tone, "it's sort of uncanny isn't it?"

The others agreed.

"Ugh; it remindts me of a grafeyardt," shivered the German, as he looked about him at the bare stumps rising black and ghostlike in the pale moonlight.

Suddenly Cal, who had been gazing about him, shouted an explanation of the mystery.

"Boys, we're in a petrified forest!" he exclaimed.

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## **CHAPTER IX.**

### **THE MIDNIGHT ALARM.**

The boys would have been glad to explore the petrified forest that night had it been practicable. They had read of the mysterious stone relics of ancient woods, which exist in the remote Sierras, but they had never dreamed they would stumble upon one so opportunely. However, even had they been less tired, it would have been out of the question to examine the strange place more thoroughly that night.

As there did not seem to be any limit to the place so far as they could see, the boys decided to camp where they were for the night. The auto was stopped and the horse unhitched and turned loose at the end of a lariat to graze, his rope being made fast round one of the more slender stone trunks.

"Feels like hitching him to the pillar of the City Hall at home," laughed Joe, as he formed a double half hitch and left the horse to his own devices, first, however, having watered the animal at a small spring which flowed from the foot of a large rock at one side of the mysterious stone valley.

In the meantime, Cal had built a fire of sage brush roots, for there was no wood about, every bit of it having turned to stone long ages before. The pile, on being ignited, blazed up cheerfully, illuminating the sterile, lonely spot with a merry red blaze. The spider was taken out of the utensil locker, and soon bacon was hissing in it and canned tomatoes and corn bubbling in adjacent saucepans. A big pot of coffee also sent up a savory aroma. Altogether, with canned fruit for dessert, the Motor Rangers and their friends made a meal which quite atoned for the loss of their lunch. Even Ding-dong admitted that he was satisfied by the time Cal drew out a short and exceedingly black pipe. The former stage driver rammed this full of tobacco and then leisurely proceeded to light it. After a few puffs he looked up at the group around him. They were lolling about on waterproof blankets spread out on the rock-strewn ground, a portion of which they had cleared. In the background stood the dark outlines of the auto, and beyond, the mysterious shadows of the petrified forest, the bequest to the present of the long departed stone age.

"I've bin a thinkin'," began Cal, as if he were delivering his mind of

something he had been inwardly cogitating for some time, "I've bin a thinkin' that while we are in this part of the country we ought to keep a good look out at night."

"You think that Morello's band may give us more trouble?" asked Nat.

"I don't jes' think so," rejoined Cal earnestly, "I'm purty jes' nat'ly sure of it. They ain't the sort of fellers ter fergit or furgive."

"I guess you're right," agreed Nat, "that man Dayton alone is capable of making lots of trouble for us. We'll do as you say and set a watch to-night."

"I vind und set my votch every night," declared Herr Muller, proudly drawing out of his pocket an immense timepiece resembling a bulbous silver vegetable.

"This is a different kind of watch that we're talking about," laughed Nat.

It was ultimately arranged, after some more discussion, that Joe and Nat should watch for the first part of the night and Ding-dong and Cal Gifford should come on duty at one o'clock in the morning. It seemed to young Bell that he hadn't been asleep more than five minutes when he was roughly shaken by Nat and told to tumble out of the tonneau as it was time to go on watch. Already Cal, who like an old mountaineer preferred to sleep by the fire, was up and stirring. It took a long time, though, to rout Ding-dong out of his snug bed. The air at that altitude is keen and sharp, and being turned out of his warm nest was anything but pleasant to the lad.

"L-l-l-let the D-d-d-d-dutchman do it," he begged, snuggling down in his blankets.

"No," said Nat firmly, "it's your turn on duty. Come on now, roll out or we'll pull you out."

Finally, with grumbling protestations, the stuttering youth was hauled forth, and, while Nat and Joe turned in, he and Cal went on duty, or "sentry go," as they say in the army.

"Now then," said Cal crisply, as the shivering Ding-dong lingered by the fire with his rifle in his chilled hands, "you go off there to the right and patrol a hundred feet or more. I'll do the same to the left. We'll meet at the fire every few minutes and get warm."



"A-a-all r-r-r-right," agreed Ding-dong, who stood in some awe of the stage driver. Consequently, without further demur, he strode off on his post. Having reached the end of it he marched back to the fire and warmed himself a second. Then he paced off again. This kept up for about an hour when suddenly Cal, who was at the turning point of his beat, heard a startling sound off to the right among the tomb-like forms of the stone trees.

Bang!

It was followed by two other shots.

Bang! Bang!

The reports rang sharply, amid the silence of the desolate place, and sent an alarmed chill even to Cal's stout heart. He bounded back toward the fire just in time to meet Ding-dong, who came rushing in with a scared white face, from the opposite direction. At the same time Nat and Joe awakened, and hastily slipping on some clothes, seized their rifles and prepared for trouble.

"What's the matter?" demanded Cal, in sharp, crisp tones, of the frightened sentinel.

"Indians!" was the gasped-out reply, "the p-p-p-place is f-f-f-full of them."

"Indians!" exclaimed Cal, hastily kicking out the bright fire and leaving it a dull heap of scattered embers, "are you sure?"

"S-s-s-sure. I s-s-s-saw their f-f-f-fif-feathers."

"That's queer," exclaimed Cal, "I never heard of any Indians being in this section before. But come on, boys, it's clear the lad here has seen something and we'd better get ready for trouble."

An improvised fort was instantly formed, by the boys crouching in various points of vantage in the automobile with their rifles menacingly pointed outward. Herr Muller snored on serenely, and they allowed him to slumber.

They must have remained in tense poses without moving a muscle for half an hour or more before any one dared to speak. Then Nat whispered,

"Queer we don't see or hear anything."

"They may be creeping up stealthily," rejoined Cal, "don't take your eye off

your surroundings a minute."

For some time more the lads watched with increasing vigilance. At length even Cal grew impatient.

"There's something funny about this," he declared, and then turning on Ding-dong he demanded:

"Are you sure you saw something?"

"D-d-d-didn't I s-s-s-s-shoot at it?" indignantly responded the boy.

"I know, but you actually saw something move?" persisted Nat.

"Of c-c-c-course I did. You didn't think I was go-go-going to s-s-s-shoot at a put-put-petrified tree, did you?"

"We'll wait a while longer and then if nothing shows up I'm going to investigate," declared Cal.

"I'm with you," agreed Nat.

As nothing occurred for a long time the Motor Rangers finally climbed out of the car, and with their rifles held ready for instant action, crept off in the direction from which Ding-dong's fusillade had proceeded. Every now and then they paused to listen, hardly breathing for fear of interrupting the silence. But not a sound could they hear. However, Ding-dong stuck stoutly to his story that he had seen something move and had fired at it, whereupon it had vanished.

"Maybe it was Morello's gang trying to give us a scare," suggested Nat.

"Ef they'd ever got as close to us as this they'd hev given us worse than a scare," confidently declared Cal.

By this time they had proceeded quite some distance, and Cal stopped Ding-dong with a question.

"Whereabouts were you when you fired?"

"I-I do-do-do-do-don't know," stuttered the lad.

"You don't know?" indignantly echoed Nat, "you're a fine woodsman."

"Y-y-y-y-yes I do t-t-t-too," Ding-dong hastened to amend, "I was here—right

here."

He ascended a small knoll covered with grass, at the foot of one of the stone trees.

"Which direction did you fire in?" was Nat's next question.

"Off t-t-t-that w-w-w-w-w-way," spoke Ding-dong. "Wow, there he is now!"

The boy gave a yell and started to run, and the others were considerably startled.

From the little eminence on which they stood they could see, projecting from behind one of the pillars, something that certainly did look like two feathers sticking in an Indian's head dress. As they gazed the feathers moved.

"Shoot quick!" cried Joe, jerking his rifle up to his shoulder, but Cal yanked it down with a quick pull.

"Hold on, youngster. Not so fast," he exclaimed, "let's look into this thing first."

Holding his rifle all ready to fire at the least alarm, the former stage driver crept cautiously forward. Close at his elbow came Nat, with his weapon held in similar readiness.

"There is something there—see!" exclaimed Nat in an awed tone.

"Yes," almost shouted the guide, "and it's that Dutchman's old plug!"

The next instant his words were verified. The midnight marauder at whom Ding-dong had fired was nothing more dangerous than the horse of Herr Muller. It had broken loose in the night and was browsing about when the amateur sentry had come upon it. In the moonlight, and when seen projecting from behind a pillar, its ears, which were unusually long, did look something like the head dress of an Indian.

"Wow!" yelled Nat, "this is one on you, Ding-dong!"

"Yes, here's your Indian!" shouted Joe, doubling up with laughter.

"Whoa, Indian," soothed Cal, walking up to the peaceful animal, "let's see if he hit you."

But the merriment of the lads was increased when an examination of the horse failed to show a scratch or mark upon it.

"That's another on you, Ding-dong," laughed Nat, "you're a fine sentinel. Why, you can't even hit a horse."

"Well, let the Dutchman try and see if he can do any better," rejoined Ding-dong with wounded dignity.



## CHAPTER X. ALONG THE TRAIL.

"Voss iss dot aboutt mein horse?"

The group examining that noble animal turned abruptly, to find the quadruped's owner in their midst. Herr Muller still wore his famous abbreviated pajama suit, over which he had thrown a big khaki overcoat of military cut belonging to Nat. Below this his bare legs stuck out like the drum sticks of a newly plucked chicken. His yellow hair was rumpled and stood up as if it had been electrified. Not one of the boys could help laughing at the odd apparition.

"Well, pod'ner," rejoined Cal, taking up the horse's broken hitching rope and leading it back to its original resting place, "you're purty lucky ter hev a horse left at all. This yar Ding-dong Bell almost 'put him in the well' fer fair. He drilled about ten bullets more or less around the critter's noble carcass."

"But couldn't hit him with one of them," laughed Nat, to Ding-dong's intense disgust. The stuttering lad strode majestically off to the auto, and turned in, nor could they induce him to go on watch again that night.

The morning dawned as fair and bright and crisp as mornings in the Sierras generally do. The sky was cloudless and appeared to be borne aloft like a blue canopy, by the steep walls of the canyon enclosing the petrified forest. The boys, on awakening, found Cal already up and about, and the fragrance of his sage brush fire scenting the clear air.

"'Mornin' boys," sang out the ex-stage driver as the tousled heads projected from the auto and gazed sleepily about, "I tell yer this is ther kind of er day that makes life worth livin'."

"You bet," agreed Nat, heading a procession to the little spring at the foot of one of the giant petrified trees.

"It's c-c-c-c-cold," protested Ding-dong, but before he could utter further expostulations his legs were suddenly tripped from under him and he sprawled head first into the chilly, clear water. Joe Hartley was feeling good, and of course poor Ding-dong had to suffer. By the time the latter had recovered his feet and

wiped some of the water out of his eyes, the others had washed and were off for the camp fire. With an inward resolve to avenge himself at some future time, Ding-dong soon joined them.

If the petrified forest had been a queer-looking place by night, viewed by daylight it was nothing short of astonishing.

"It's a vegetable cemetery," said Cal, looking about him. "Each of these stone trees is a monument, to my way of thinking."

"Ach, you are a fullosopher," applauded Herr Muller, who had just risen and was gingerly climbing out of the tonneau.

"And you're full o' prunes," grunted Cal to himself, vigorously slicing bacon, while Nat fixed the oatmeal, and Joe Hartley got some canned fruit ready.

Presently breakfast was announced, and a merry, laughing party gathered about the camp fire to despatch it.

"I'll bet we're the first boys that ever ate breakfast in a petrified forest," commented Joe.

"I reckon' you're right," agreed Cal, "it makes me feel like an ossified man."

"Dot's a feller whose headt is turned to bone?" asked Herr Muller.

"Must be Ding-dong," grinned Joe, which promptly brought on a renewal of hostilities.

"I've read that the petrification is caused by particles of iron pyrites, or lime, taking the place of the water in the wood," put in Nat.

"Maybe so," agreed Cal, "but I've seen a feller petrified by too much forty rod liquor."

"I wonder what shook so many of the stony stumps down," inquired Joe, gazing about him with interest.

"Airthquakes, I guess," suggested Cal, "they get 'em through here once in a while and when they come they're terrors."

"We have them in Santa Barbara, too," said Nat, "they're nasty things all right."

"Come f-f-f-f-from the e-e-e-earth getting a t-t-t-tummy ache," sagely announced Ding-dong Bell.

While the boys got the car ready and filled the circulating water tank with fresh water from the spring, Herr Muller and Cal washed the tin dishes, and presently all was ready for a start. Herr Muller decided that he would ride his horse this morning and so the move was made, with that noble steed loping along behind the auto at the best pace his bony frame was capable of producing. Luckily for him, the going was very hard among the fallen stumps of the petrified trees, and the tall, column-like, standing trunks, and the car could not do much more than crawl.

All were in jubilant spirits. The bracing air and the joyous sensation of taking the road in the early dawn invigorated them.

"I tell you," said Cal, "there's nothing like an early start in the open air. I've done it a thousand times or more I guess, but it always makes me feel good."

"Dot iss righd," put in Herr Muller, "vunce at Heidelberg I gets me oop by sunrise to fighd idt a doodle. I felt goot but bresently I gedt poked it py der nose mit mein friendt's sword. Den I nodt feel so goodt."

While the others were still laughing at the whimsical German's experience he suddenly broke into yodling:

"Hi lee! Hi lo!  
Hi lee! Hi lay!  
Riding along by der fine summer's day;  
Hi lee! Hi lo!  
Hi lee! Hi lay!  
Riding along on my——"

"Ear!" burst out Joe, as the German's horse caught its foot in a gopher hole, and stumbled so violently that it almost pitched the caroler over its head.

"That's ther first song I ever heard about a Chink," commented Cal, when Herr Muller had recovered his equilibrium.

"Voss is dot Chink?" asked Herr Muller, showing his usual keen interest in any new word.

"Gee whiz, but you Germans are benighted folks. Why, a Chink's a Chinaman, of course."

"Budt," protested the German spurring his horse alongside the auto and speaking in a puzzled tone, "budt I voss not singing aboutd a Chinaman."

"Wall, I'll leave it to anyone if Hi Lee and Hi Lo ain't Chink names," exclaimed Cal.

Whatever reply Herr Muller might have found to this indisputable assertion is lost forever to the world. For at that moment Nat, who was at the wheel, looked up to see a strange figure coming toward them, making its way rapidly in and out among the column-like, petrified trunks. His exclamation called the attention of the others to it and they regarded the oncoming figure with as much astonishment as did he.

It was the form of a very tall and lanky man on a very short and fat donkey, that was approaching them. The rider's legs projected till they touched the ground on each side like long piston rods and moved almost as rapidly as he advanced. What with the burro's galloping and the man's rapid footwork, they raised quite a cloud of dust.

"Say, is that fellow moving the burro, or is the burro moving him?" inquired Joe, with perfectly natural curiosity.

Faster and faster moved the man's legs over the ground, as he came nearer to



the auto.

"I should think he'd walk and let the burro ride," laughed Nat.

As he spoke the boy checked the auto and it came to a standstill. The tall rider could now be seen to be an aged man with a long, white beard, and a brown, sunburned face, framed oddly by his snowy whiskers. He glanced at the boys with a pair of keen eyes as he drew alongside, and stopped his long-eared steed with a loud:

"Whoa!"

"Howdy," said Cal.

"Howdy," rejoined the stranger, "whar you from?"

"South," said Cal.

"Whar yer goin'?"

"North," was the rejoinder.

"Say, stranger, you ain't much on the conversation, be yer?"

"Never am when I don't know who I be talking to," retorted Cal. The boys expected to see the other get angry, but instead he broke into a laugh.

"You're a Westerner all right," he said. "I thought everybody knew me. I'm Jeb Scantling, the sheep herder from Alamos. I'm looking fer some grass country."

"Bin havin' trouble with the cattlemen?" inquired Cal.

"Some," was the non-committal rejoinder.

"Wall, then you'd better not go through that way," enjoined Cal, "there's a bunch of cattle right through the forest thar."

"Thar is?" was the somewhat alarmed rejoinder, "then I reckon it's no place fer me."

"No, you'd better try back in the mountains some place," advised Cal.

"I will. So long."

The old man abruptly wheeled his burro, and working his legs in the same eccentric manner as before soon vanished the way he had come.

"That's a queer character," commented Nat, as the old man disappeared and the party, which had watched his curious actions in spellbound astonishment, started on once more.

"Yes," agreed Cal, "and he's had enough to make him queer, too. A sheepman has a tough time of it. The cattlemen don't want 'em around the hills 'cos they say the sheep eat off the feed so close thar ain't none left fer the cattle. And sometimes the sheepmen start fires to burn off the brush, and mebbe burn out a whole county. Then every once in a while a bunch of cattlemen will raid a sheep outfit and clean it out."

"Kill the sheep?" asked Joe.

"Yep, and the sheepmen, too, if they so much as open their mouths to holler. I tell you a sheepman has his troubles."

"Was this fellow just a herder, or did he own a flock?" inquired Nat.

"I've heard that he owns his bunch," rejoined Cal. "He's had lots of trouble with cattlemen. No wonder he scuttled off when I tole him thar was a bunch of punchers behind."

"I'm sorry he went so quickly," said Nat, "I wanted to ask him some questions about the petrified forest."

"Well, we're about out of it now," said Cal, looking around.

Only a few solitary specimens of the strange, gaunt stone trees now remained dotting the floor of the canyon like lonely monuments. Presently they left the last even of these behind them, and before long emerged on a rough road which climbed the mountain side at a steep elevation.

"No chance of your brake bustin' agin, is ther?" inquired Cal, rather apprehensively.

"No, it's as strong as it well can be now," Nat assured him.

"Glad of that. If it gave out on this grade we'd go backward to our funerals."

"Guess that's right," agreed Joe, gazing back out of the tonneau at the steep

pitch behind them.

Despite the steepness of the grade and the rough character of the road, or rather trail, the powerful auto climbed steadily upward, the rattle of her exhausts sounding like a gatling gun in action.

Before long they reached the summit and the boys burst into a shout of admiration at the scene spread out below them. From the elevation they had attained they could see, rising and falling beneath them, like billows at sea, the slopes and summits of miles of Sierra country. Here and there were forests of dense greenery, alternated with bare, scarred mountain sides dotted with bare trunks, among which disastrous forest fires had swept. It was a grand scene, impressive in its magnitude and sense of solitary isolation. Far beyond the peaks below them could be seen snow-capped summits, marking the loftiest points of the range. Here and there deep dark wooded canyons cut among the hills reaching down to unknown depths.

"Looks like a good country for grizzlies or deer," commented Cal.

"Grizzlies!" exclaimed Joe, "are there many of them back here?"

"Looks like there might be," rejoined Cal, "this is the land of big bears, big deer, little matches, and big trees, and by the same token there's a clump of the last right ahead of us."

Sure enough not a hundred yards from where they had halted, there stood a little group of the biggest trees the lads had ever set eyes on. The loftiest towered fully two hundred feet above the ground, while a roadway could have been cut through its trunk—as is actually the case with another famous specimen of the *Sequoia Gigantea*.

The foliage was dark green and had a tufted appearance, while the trunks were a rich, reddish brown. The group of vegetable mammoths was as impressive a sight as the lads had ever gazed upon.

"Them is about the oldest livin' things in ther world," said Cal gazing upward, "when Noah was building his ark them trees was 'most as big as they are now."

"I tole you vot I do," suddenly announced Herr Muller, "I take it a photogriff from der top of one of dem trees aindt it?"

"How can you climb them?" asked Nat.

"Dot iss easiness," rejoined the German, "here, hold Bismark—dot iss vot I call der horse—und I gedt out mein climbing irons."

Diving into his blanket-roll he produced a pair of iron contrivances, shaped somewhat like the climbing appliances which linemen on telegraph systems use to scale the smooth poles. These were heavier, and with longer and sharper steel points on them, however. Rapidly Herr Muller, by means of stout straps, buckled them on, explaining that he had used them to take pictures from treetops within the Black Forest.

A few seconds later he selected the tallest of the trees and began rapidly to ascend it. The climbing irons and the facility they lent him in ascending the bare trunk delighted the boys, who determined to have some made for themselves at the first opportunity.

"He kin climb like a Dutch squirrel," exclaimed Cal admiringly, as with a wave of his hand the figure of the little German grew smaller, and finally vanished in the mass of dark, sombre green which clothed the summit of the great red-wood.

"He ought to get a dandy picture from way up there," said Joe.

"Yes," agreed Nat, "he——"

The boy stopped suddenly short. From the summit of the lofty tree there had come a sharp, piercing cry of terror.

"Help! help! Quvick or I fall down!"



## **CHAPTER XI.**

### **TREED!—TWO HUNDRED FEET UP.**

Mingling with the alarming yells of the German came a strange spitting, snarling sound.

Filled with apprehensions, the boys and Cal rushed for the foot of the immense tree and gazed upward into the lofty gloom of its leafy summit. They uttered a cry of alarm as they did so. In fact the spectacle their eyes encountered was calculated to cause the heart of the most hardened woodsman to beat faster.

Astride of a branch, with his shoe soles dangling two hundred feet above the ground, was Herr Muller, while between him and the trunk of the tree was crouched a snarling, spitting wild cat of unusual size. It seemed about to spring at the human enemy who had unwittingly surprised it in its aerial retreat.

The boys were stricken speechless with alarm as they gazed, but Cal shouted encouragingly upward.

"Hold on there, Dutchy. We'll help you out."

"I know. Dot iss all right," came back the reply in a tremulous tone, "but I dink me dis branch is rodden und ef der tom cat drives me much furder out I down come."

"Don't dare think of such a thing," called up Cal, "just you grip tight and don't move."

"All right, I try," quavered the photographer, about whose neck still dangled the tool of his craft.

Cal's long legs covered the space between the tree and the auto in about two leaps, or so it seemed to the boys. In a flash he was back with his well worn rifle and was aiming it upward into the tree.

But as he brought the weapon to his shoulder and his finger pressed the trigger the formidable creature crouching along the limb, sprang full at the luckless Herr Muller. With a yell that stopped the breath of every one of the alarmed party below, the German was seen to lose his hold and drop, crashing

through the foliage like a rock. As he fell a shower of small branches and twigs were snapped off and floated downward into space.

But Herr Muller was not doomed, as the boys feared was inevitable, to be dashed to pieces on the ground. Instead, just as it appeared impossible that he could save himself from a terrible death, the German succeeded in seizing a projecting limb and hanging on. The branch bent ominously, but it held, and there he hung suspended helplessly with nothing under him but barren space. Truly his position now did not appear to be materially bettered from its critical condition of a few minutes before.

But the boys did not know, nor Cal either, that the Germans are great fellows for athletics and gymnastics, and almost every German student has at one time or another belonged to a Turn Verein. This was the case with Herr Muller and his training stood him in good stead now. With a desperate summoning of his strength, he slowly drew himself up upon the bending limb, and began tortuously to make his way in toward the trunk.

As he did so, the wild cat perceiving that it was once more at close quarters with its enemy, advanced down the trunk, but it was not destined this time to reach the German. Cal took careful aim and fired.

Before the echo of the sharp report had died away a tawny body came clawing and yowling downward, out of the tree, tumbling over and over as it shot downward. The boys could not repress a shudder as they thought how close Herr Muller had come to sharing the same fate.

The creature was, of course, instantly killed as it struck the ground, and was found to be an unusually large specimen of its kind. Its fur was a fine piece of peltry and Cal's skillful knife soon had it off the brute's carcass. A preparation of arsenic which the boys carried for such purposes, was then rubbed on it to preserve it till it could be properly cured and mounted. This done, it was placed away with the mountain lion skin in a big tin case in the tonneau.

While all this was going on, Herr Muller recovered the possession of his faculties, which had almost deserted him in the terrible moment when he hung between life and death. Presently he began to descend the tree. Near the bottom of the trunk, however, his irons slipped and he came down with a run and a rush that scraped all the skin off the palms of his hands, and coated his clothes with the red stain of the bark.

He was much too glad to be back on earth, however, to mind any such little inconveniences as that.

"Boys, I tole you ven I hung dere I dink by myselfs if ever I drop, I drop like Lucifer——"

"L-l-lucy who?" inquired Ding-dong curiously.

"Lucifer—der devil you know, nefer to rise no more yet already."

"I see you have studied Milton," laughed Nat, "but I can tell you, all joking aside, you gave us a terrible scare. I want you to promise to do all your photographing from safe places hereafter."

"I vould suffer more dan dot for mein art," declared Herr Muller proudly, "Ach, vot a terrible fright dot Robert cat give me."

"Yep, those bob cats,—as we call them for short,—are ugly customers at close quarters," put in Cal, with a grin.

"Say," said Nat, suddenly pointing below them, "that little stream down there looks as if it ought to have some trout in it. What do you say if we try and get some for dinner?"

"All right," agreed Cal, "you fellers go fishin' and the perfusser here and I will stand by the camp."

"Chess. I dinks me I dondt feel much like valking aroundt," remarked Herr Muller, whose face was still pale from the alarming ordeal he had undergone.

So the boys selected each a rod and set out at a rapid pace for the little brook Nat had indicated. The watercourse boiled brownly along over a rough bed of rocks, forming here and there little waterfalls and cascades, and then racing on again under flowering shrubs and beneath high, rocky ramparts. It was ideal trout water, and the boys, who were enthusiastic fishermen, welcomed the prospect of "wetting a line" in it.

The brook was about a quarter of a mile from the camp under the big trees, and the approach to it was across a park-like grassy slope. Beyond it, however, another range shot up forbiddingly, rearing its rough, rugged face to the sky like an impassable rampart. Gaunt pines clothed its rocky slope, intermingled with clumps of chaparral and the glossy-leaved madrone bushes. They grew almost

down to the edge of the stream in which the boys intended to fish.

The sport, as Nat had anticipated, was excellent. So absorbed in it did he become in fact, that he wandered down the streamlet's course farther than he had intended. Killing trout, however, is fascinating sport, and the time passed without the boy really noticing at all how far he had become separated from his companions.

At last, with a dozen fine speckled beauties, not one of which would weigh less than three-quarters of a pound, the boy found time to look about him. There was not a sign of Joe or Ding-dong Bell and he concluded that they must be farther up the stream. With the intention of locating them he started to retrace his footsteps.

"Odd how far a fellow can come without knowing it, when he's fishing," mused Nat. I wonder how many other boys have thought the same thing!

As he went along he looked about him. On his right hand towered the rocky slopes of the range, with the dark shadows lying under the gaunt pine trees. On his other hand, separated from him, however, by some clumps of madrone and manzanita, was the grove of big trees under which the auto was parked, and where Cal and Herr Muller were doubtlessly impatiently awaiting his arrival and that of his companions.

"Got to hurry," thought Nat, mending his pace once more, but to his dismay, as he stepped forward, his foot slipped on a sharp-edged rock, and with a wrench of sharp pain he realized that he had twisted his ankle. The sprain, judging by the pain it gave him, seemed to be a severe one, too.

"Wow!" thought Nat, sinking back upon another rock and nursing his foot, "that was a twister and no mistake. Wonder if I can get back on foot. Guess I'll rest a minute and see if it gets any better."

The boy had sat thus for perhaps five minutes when there came a sudden rustling in the brush before him. At first he did not pay much attention to it, thinking that a rabbit, or even a deer might be going through. Suddenly the noise ceased abruptly. Then it came again. This time it was louder and it sounded as if some heavy body was approaching.

"Great Scott!" was the sudden thought that flashed across the boy's mind, "what if it's a bear!"



He had good cause for alarm in such a case, for he had nothing more formidable with which to face it but his fishing rod. But the next moment the boy was destined to receive even a greater shock than the sudden appearance of a grizzly would have given him.

The shrubs before him suddenly parted and the figure of a man in sombrero, rough shirt and trousers, with big boots reaching to his knees, stepped out.

"Ed. Dayton!" gasped Nat looking up at the apparition.

"Yep, Ed. Dayton," was the reply, "and this time, Master Nat, I've got you where I want you. Boys!"

He raised his voice as he uttered the last word.

In response, from the brush-wood there stepped two others whom Nat had no difficulty in recognizing as the redoubtable Al. Jeffries and the man with whom he had struggled on the stable floor the memorable night of the attempted raid on the auto.



## **CHAPTER XII.**

### **NAT'S LUCKY ESCAPE.**

If a round black bomb had come rolling down the mountain side and exploded at Nat's feet he could not have been more thunderstruck than he was at the sudden appearance of his old enemy. True, he should have had such a possibility in mind, but so intent had he been on his trout fishing, and the pain of his injury on the top of that, that he had not given a thought to the possibility of any of their foes being about.

"Don't make a racket," warned Al. Jeffries ominously, as he flourished a revolver about, "I'm dreadful nervous, and if you make a noise I might pull the trigger by accident."

Nat saw at once that this was one way of saying that he would be shot if he made any outcry, and he decided that there was nothing for him to do but to refrain from giving any shout of alarm. Had his ankle not been wrenched and giving him so much pain the boy would have tried to run for it. But as it was, he was powerless to do anything but wait.

"Ain't quite so gabby now as you was in Lower California," snarled Dayton vindictively, as the boy sat staring at his captors.

"If you mean by that that I am not doing any talking, you're right," rejoined Nat.

"That's a purty nice watch you've got there," remarked Al., gazing at Nat's gold timepiece which had been jerked out of his breast pocket when he fell over the rock.

"Yes," agreed Nat, determined not to show them that he was alarmed by his predicament, "my dead father gave me that."

"Well, just hand it over."

"What?"

Nat's face flushed angrily. His temper began to rise too.

"Come on, hand it over and don't be all night about it," ordered Al.

Nat jumped to his feet.

His fists were clenched ready for action. It seemed clear that if they were going to take the watch from him while he had strength to protect himself that they had a tough job in front of them. But an unexpected interruption occurred. It came from Ed. Dayton.

"See here, Al.," he growled, "don't get too previous. I reckon the colonel can dispose of the watch as he sees fit. All such goes to him first you know, so as to avoid disputes."

"Don't see where you come in to run this thing," muttered Al., but nevertheless he subsided into silence.

All this time Nat's mind had been working feverishly. But cast about as he would he could not hit on a plan of escape.

"I guess the only thing to do is to let them make the first move, and then lie low and watch for a chance to get away," he thought to himself.

"Wonder what they mean to do with me anyhow?"

He was not left long in doubt.

"Get the horses," Dayton ordered, turning to Al. Jeffries.

The other, still grumbling, turned obediently away however. There seemed to be no doubt that Ed. Dayton was a man of some power in the band. Nat saw this with a sinking heart. He knew the vengeful character of the man too well for it not to cause him the gravest apprehension of what his fate might be. Not by so much as a flicker of an eyelash, however, did he let the ruffians see that he was alarmed. He would not for worlds have given them the satisfaction of seeing him weaken.

Pretty soon Al. returned with three ponies. The animals must have been hidden in the brush on the opposite, or mountain side of the stream, for this was the direction in which Al. had gone to get them. They were a trio of wiry little steeds. On the back of each was a high-horned and cantled Mexican saddle, with a rifle holster and a canteen slung from it. The bridle of Dayton's pony was decorated with silver ornaments in the Western fashion.

"Come on. Get up kid," said Dayton gruffly, seizing Nat by the shoulder, "we've got a long way to go with you."

A long way to go!

The words sounded ominous, and Nat, hurt as he was, decided on taking a desperate chance. Springing suddenly to his feet he lowered his head and ran full tilt at Dayton, driving his head into the pit of the ruffian's stomach with the force of a battering ram.

"Wo-o-o-f!"

With the above exclamation the rascal doubled up and pitched over. Before the others could recover their presence of mind Nat, despite the pain in his ankle, had managed to dash in among the brush where it was impossible to aim at him with any hope of bringing him down.

Nevertheless, Dayton's companions started firing into the close-growing vegetation.

"Fire away," thought Nat, painfully struggling through the thick growth, "the more bullets you waste the fewer you'll have for your rascally work."

But Dayton had, by this time, scrambled to his feet, and the boy could hear him shouting angry commands. At the same instant came shouts from another direction.

With a quick flash of joy, Nat recognized the new voices. The shouts were in the welcome and familiar tones of Cal Gifford and the Motor Rangers.

"Mount, boys, and get out of here quick!"

The warning shout came from behind the fleeing boy, and was in the voice of Dayton. The rascal evidently had heard, and interpreted aright, the exclamations and shouts from the meadow side of the brook. The next instant a clattering of hoofs announced the fact that the members of Col. Morello's band of outlaws were putting all the distance between themselves and the Motor Rangers' camp that they could.

"Good riddance," muttered Nat, thinking how nearly he had come to being borne off with them.

But the tension of the excitement over, the pain in his ankle almost overcame

him. He sank limply down on a rock and sent out a cry for aid.

"Cal! Cal! this way!"

"Yip yee!" he heard the welcome answering shout, and before many seconds had passed Herr Muller's horse, with the Westerner astride of its bony back, came plunging into the brush. Behind came Joe and Ding-dong, wide-eyed with excitement. They had missed their comrade and had been searching for him when the sound of the shots came. Cal, who had also become anxious, and had ridden down from the camp to the stream side, was with them at the moment. Together the rescue party had hastened forward, too late however, to find Dayton and his companions. They naturally heard Nat's story with deep interest and attention.

"Good thing them varmints didn't know that you two weren't armed," said Cal, turning to Joe and Ding-dong, "or they might hev stayed. In which case the whole bunch of us might have been cleaned out."

"I think it will be a pretty good rule never to leave camp in future without a revolver or a rifle," said Nat, painfully rising to his feet and steadying himself by gripping Bismark's mane.

"Right you are, my boy. We ought to have done that in the first place. Howsomever, the thing to do now is to get you back ter camp. Come on, I'll give you a leg up."

As he spoke, Cal slid off Bismark's back, and presently Nat was in his place. Escorted by Joe and Ding-dong, the cavalcade lost no time in getting back to where the auto had been left in charge of Herr Muller.

"Get any pictures while we was gone?" asked Cal as they came within hailing distance.

"Nein," rejoined the German sorrowfully.

"Nine," exclaimed Cal looking about him, "where in thunder did you get nine subjects about here?"

"He means no," said Nat, who had to laugh despite his pain, at this confusion of tongues.

"Wall, why can't he say so?" grunted Cal, plainly despising the ignorance of

the foreigner.

Nat's ankle was found to be quite badly twisted, but Cal's knowledge of woodcraft stood them in good stead. After examining it and making sure that nothing was broken, the former stage driver searched about the grassy meadow for a while and finally plucked several broad leaves from a low-growing bush. These had a silvery tint underneath and were dark on the upper surface.

"Silver weed," said Cal briefly, as he came back to the camp. Selecting a small pot, he rapidly heated some water on the fire which Herr Muller had kindled in his absence. This done, he placed the leaves to steep in it and after a while poured off the water and made a poultice with the leaves. This he bound upon Nat's ankle and in a wonderfully short time the pain was much reduced, and the boy could use his foot.

In the meantime, a spiderful of beans and bacon had been cooked to go with the fried trout, and the inevitable coffee prepared. For dessert they had canned peaches, topping off the spread with crackers and cheese.

"Tell you," remarked Cal, as he drew out his black pipe and prepared to enjoy his after dinner smoke, "this thing of travelling round in an auto is real, solid comfort. We couldn't hev had a spread like that if we'd bin on the trail with a packing outfit."

Dinner over and Nat feeling his ankle almost as well as ever, it was decided to start on at once. For one thing, the outlaws might have marked the camping place and it was not a good enough strategic position to withstand an attack if one should be made.

"We want to be in a snugger place than this if that outfit starts in on us," said Cal decisively.

"Do you think they'll make us more trouble then?" inquired Joe.

"I think that what they did to-day shows that they are keeping pretty close watch on us, my boy. It's up to us to keep our eyes open by day and sleep with one optic unclosed at night."

Herr Muller and Ding-dong Bell, who had undertaken the dishwashing, soon concluded the task and the Motor Rangers once more set out. They felt some regret at leaving the beautiful camping spot behind them, but still, as Cal had pointed out, it was a bad location from which to repulse an enemy, supposing

they should be attacked.

"Vell, I'm gladt I didndt drop from dot tree," remarked Herr Muller, gazing back at the lofty summit of the imposing Big Tree, in which he had had such a narrow escape.

"You take your pictures on terra firma after this," advised Joe.

"Or if you do any more such stunts leave the camera with us," suggested Cal, who was leading the Teuton's steed.

"Then we could get a g-g-g-g-good pup-p-p-picture of what England d-d-dreads," stuttered Ding-dong.

"What's that?" inquired Nat.

"The G-g-g-g-g-german p-p-p-peril," chuckled the stuttering youth.

Soon after leaving the pleasant plateau of the big trees the scenery became rough and wild in the extreme. The Sierras are noted for their deep, narrow valleys, and after about an hour's progress over very rough trails the Motor Rangers found themselves entering one of these gloomy defiles. After the bright sunlight of the open country its dim grandeur struck a feeling of apprehension into their minds. It seemed chilly and oppressive somehow.

"Say, perfusser," suggested Cal presently, "just sing us that Chinese song to cheer us up, will you?"

"Hi lee! Hi lo!  
Hi lee! Hi lay!----"

The "perfusser," as Cal insisted on calling him, had obligingly begun when from ahead of them and high up, as it seemed, came a peculiar sound.

It was a crackling of brush and small bushes apparently. Instinctively Nat stopped the car and it was well that he did so, for the next instant a giant boulder came crashing down the steep mountainside above them.

boulder rolling down hill in front of car  
**Instinctively Nat stopped the car, and it was well that he did so, for the next instant a giant boulder came crashing down.**

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## **CHAPTER XIII.**

### **THE VOLLEY IN THE CANYON.**

Nat had stopped in the nick of time. As the auto came to an abrupt halt, almost jolting those in the tonneau out of their seats, there was a roar like the voice of an avalanche. From far up the hillside a cloud of dust grew closer, and thundered past like an express train. In the midst of the cloud was the huge, dislodged rock, weighing perhaps half a ton or more.

So close did it whiz by, in fact, just ahead of the car, that Nat could almost have sworn that it grazed the engine bonnet. The ground shook and trembled as if an earthquake was in progress, during the passage of the huge rock.

"Whew! Well, what do you think of that!" gasped Joe.

"I thought the whole mountainside was coming away," exclaimed Ding-dong, startled into plain speech by his alarm.

Of course the first thing to be done was to clamber out of the car and examine the monster rock, which had come to rest some distance up the side of the opposite cliff to that from which it had fallen, such had been its velocity. Nat could not help shuddering as he realized that if the great stone had ever struck the auto it would have been, in the language of Cal, "Good-night" for the occupants of that vehicle.

"Ach, vee vould haf been more flat as a pretzel alretty yet," exclaimed Herr Muller, unslinging his ever ready camera, and preparing to take a photo of the peril which had so narrowly missed them.

"This must be our lucky day," put in Joe, "three narrow escapes, one after the other. I wonder if there'll be a fourth."

"Better not talk about it, Joe," urged Cal, "the next time we might not be so fortunate."

"Guess that's right," said Nat, who was examining the boulder with some care.

Apparently it had been one of those monster rocks which glacial action in the



bygone ages has left stranded, delicately balanced on a mountainside. Some rocks of this character it takes but a light shove to dislodge. So perfectly are other great masses poised that it takes powerful leverage to overcome their inertia—to use a term in physics.

But the scientific aspect of the rock was not what interested Nat. What he wanted to find out was just how such a big stone could have become unseated from the mountainside and at a time when its downfall would, but for their alertness, have meant disaster and perhaps death, to the Motor Rangers. Nat had an idea, but he did not wish to announce it till he was sure.

Suddenly he straightened up with a flushed face. His countenance bore an angry look.

"Come here, fellows," he said, "and tell me what you make of this mark at the side of the rock."

He indicated a queer abrasion on one side of the stone. The living stone showed whitely where the lichen and moss had been scraped aside.

"Looks like some cuss had put a lever under it," pronounced Cal, after a careful inspection.

"That's what. Fellows, this rock was deliberately tilted so that it would come down on us and crush us. Now there's only one bunch of men that we know of mean enough to do such a thing and that's——"

*Phut-t-t!*

Something whistled past Nat's ear with a noise somewhat like the humming of a drowsy bee, only the sound lasted but for a fraction of a second.

Nat knew it instantly for what it was.

A bullet!

It struck the rock behind him, and not half an inch from a direct line with his head, with a dull spatter.

The boy could not help turning a trifle pale as he realized what an exceedingly narrow escape he had had. Cal's countenance blazed with fury.

"The—the dern—skunks!" he burst out, unlimbering his well polished old

revolver.

"Reckon two kin play at that game."

But Nat pulled the other's arm down.

"No good, Cal," he said, "the best thing we can do is to get out of here as quickly as possible. One man up there behind those rocks could wipe out an army down in here."

Cal nodded grimly, as he recognized the truth of the lad's words. Truly they were in no position to do anything but, as Nat had suggested, get out as quickly as possible.

As they reached this determination another bullet whizzed by and struck a rock behind them, doubly convincing them of the wisdom of this course. Fortunately, as has been said, the boulder had rolled clear across the floor of the narrow canyon, such had been its velocity. This was lucky for the lads, for if it had obstructed the way they would have been in a nasty trap. With no room to turn round and no chance of going ahead their invisible enemies would have had them at their mercy.

But if they could not see the shooters on the hillside, those marksmen appeared to have their range pretty accurately. Bullets came pattering about them now in pretty lively fashion. Suddenly Herr Muller gave an exclamation and a cry of mingled pain and alarm. A red streak appeared at the same instant on the back of his hand where the bullet had nicked him. But this was not the cause of his outcry. The missile had ended its career in the case in which he carried his photographic plates.

Nat heard the exclamation and turned about as the car began to move forward.

"Where are you hurt?" he asked anxiously, fearing some severe injury might have been inflicted on their Teutonic comrade.

"In der plate box," was the astonishing reply.

"Good heavens, you are shot in the stomach?" cried Joe.

"No, but seferal of my plates have been smashed, Ach Himmel voss misfordune."

"I suppose you thought that plate box meant about the same thing as bread basket," grinned Nat, turning to Joe, as they sped forward. A ragged fire followed them, but no further damage to car or occupants resulted. Herr Muller's horse, in the emergency, behaved like a veteran. It trotted obediently behind the car without flinching.

"Bismark, I am proudt off you," smiled his owner, after the damage to the plate box had been investigated and found to be not so serious as its owner had feared.

"We must have drawn out of range," said Cal, as after a few more desultory reports the firing ceased altogether.

"I hope so, I'm sure," responded Nat, "I tell you it's a pretty mean feeling, this thing of being shot at by a chap you can't see at all."

"Yep, he jes' naturally has a drop on you," agreed Cal. "Wonder how them fellers trailed us?"

"Simple enough," rejoined Nat, "at least, it is so to my way of thinking. They didn't *trail* us at all. They just got ahead of us."

"How do you mean?" asked Cal, even his keen wits rather puzzled.

"Why they figured out, I guess, that we weren't going to be such cowards as to let their attempts to scare us turn us back. That being the case, the only way for us to proceed forward from the Big Trees was to drive through this canyon. I reckon therefore that they just vamoosed ahead a bit and were ready with that big rock when we came along."

"The blamed varmints," ground out the ex-stage driver, "I wonder if they meant to crush us?"

"Quite likely," rejoined Nat, "and if this car hadn't been able to stop in double-quick jig-time, they'd have done it, too. Of course they may have only intended to block the road so that they could go through us at their leisure. But in that case I should think that they would have had the rock already there before we came along."

"Just my idea, lad," agreed the Westerner heartily, "them pestiferous coyotes wouldn't stop at a little thing like wiping us out, if it was in their minds ter do it. But I've got an idea that we must be getting near their den. I've heard it is back

this way somewhere."

"If that is so," commented Nat, "it would account for their anxiety to turn us back. But," and here the boy set his lips grimly, "that's one reason why I'm determined to go on."

"And you can bet that I'm with you every step of the way," was Cal's hearty assurance. He laid a brown paw on Nat's hands as they gripped the steering wheel. I can tell you, that in the midst of the perils into which Nat could not help feeling they were now approaching, it felt good to have a stalwart, resourceful chap like Cal along.

"Thanks, Cal. I know you'll stick," rejoined Nat simply, and that was all.

The canyon—or more properly, pass—which they had been traversing soon came to an end, the spurs of the mountains which formed it sloping down, and "melting" off into adjoining ranges. This formed a pleasant little valley between their slopes. The depression, which was perhaps four miles in circumference, was carpeted with vivid green bunch grass. Clumps of flowering shrubs stood in the centre where a small lake, crystal clear, was formed by the conjunction of two little streams. The water was the clear, cold liquid of the mountains, sharp with the chill of the high altitudes.

After the boys had selected a camping place on a little knoll commanding all parts of the valley, their first task was to bring up buckets of water and clean off the auto which, by this time, as you may imagine, was pretty grimy and dusty. Several marks on the tonneau, too, showed where bullets had struck during the brush in the canyon. Altogether, the car looked "like business," that is to say, as if it had gone through other ups and downs than those of the mountains themselves.

An inspection of the big gasoline tank showed that the emergency container was almost exhausted, and before they proceeded to anything else, Nat ordered the tanks filled from the stock they carried in the big "store-room," suspended under the floor of the car.

"We might have to get out of here in a hurry, when there would be no time to fill up the tanks," he said. "It's best to have everything ready in case of accidents."

"That's right," agreed Cal, "nothing like havin' things ready. I recollect one

time when I was back home in Iowy that they——"

But whatever had occurred—and it was doubtless interesting—back at Cal's home in Iowa, the boys were destined never to know; for at that moment their attention was attracted to the horse of Herr Muller, which had been tethered near a clump of madrone shrubs not far from the lake.

"He's gone crazy!" shouted Joe.

"M-m-m-mad as a h-h-h-atter in Mum-m-march," sputtered Ding-dong.

No wonder the boys came to such a conclusion. For a respectable equine, such as Herr Muller's steed had always shown himself to be, Bismark certainly was acting in an extraordinary manner.

At one moment he flung his heels high into the air, and almost at the same instant up would come his forelegs. Then, casting himself on the ground, he would roll over and over, sending up little showers of turf and stones with his furiously beating hoofs. All the time he kept up a shrill whinnying and neighing that greatly added to the oddity of his performance.

"Ach Himmel! Bismark is a loonitacker!" yelled Herr Muller, rushing toward his quadruped, of which he had become very fond.

But alas! for the confidence of the Teuton. As he neared Bismark, the "loonitacker" horse up with his hind legs and smiting Herr Muller in the chest, propelled him with speed and violence backward toward the lake. In vain Herr Muller tried to stop his backward impetus by clutching at the brush. It gave way in his hands like so much flax. Another second and he was soused head over heels in the icy mountain water.

"What in the name of Ben Butler has got inter the critter?" gasped Cal amazedly. The others opened their eyes wide in wonder. All of them had had something to do with horses at different stages of their careers, but never in their united experiences had a horse been seen to act like Bismark, the "loonitacker."



## CHAPTER XIV. A "LOONITACKER" HORSE.

"I have it!" cried Nat suddenly.

"What, the same thing as Bismark?" shouted Joe, "here somebody, hold him down."

"No, I know what's the matter with him—loco weed!"

He stooped down and picked up a small, bright green trefoil leaf. Cal slapped his leg with an exclamation as he looked at it.

"That's right, boy. That's loco weed, sure. It's growing all around here, and we was too busy to notice it. That old plug has filled his ornery carcass up on it."

By this time the German had crawled out of the water, and was poking a dripping face, with a comical expression of dismay on it, through the bushes about the lake. Not seeing Bismark near, he ventured out a few paces, but the horse suddenly spying him made a mad dash for him. Herr Muller beat a hasty retreat. Even Bismark could not penetrate into the thick brush after him.

"Vos is los mit Bismark?" yelled the German from his retreat at the boys and Cal, who were almost convulsed with laughter at the creature's comical antics.

"I guess his brains is loose," hailed back Cal, whose knowledge of the German language was limited.

"He's mad!" shouted Joe by way of imparting some useful information.

"Mad? Voss iss he madt about?"

"Oh, what's the use?" sighed Joe. Then placing his hands funnelwise to his mouth he bawled out:—

"He's locoed!"

"Low toed?" exclaimed the amazed German. "Then I take him mit der blacksmith."

"Say, you simian-faced subject of Hoch the Kaiser, can't you understand English?" howled Cal, in a voice that might have dislodged a mountain. "Bismark is crazy, locoed, mad, off his trolley, got rats in his garret, bats in his belfry, bug-house, screw-loose, daft, looney—now do you understand?"

"Yah!" came the response, "now I know. Bismark is aufergerspeil."

"All right, call it that if you want to," muttered Cal. Then, as Bismark, with a final flourish of his heels and a loud shrill whinny, galloped off, the Westerner turned to the boys.

"Well, we've seen the last of him for a while."

"Aren't you going to try to catch him?" asked Nat, as he watched the horse dash across the meadow-like hollow, and then vanish in the belt of dark wood on the hillside beyond.

"No good," said Cal decisively, "wouldn't be able to do a thing with him for days. That loco weed is bad stuff. If I'd ever noticed it growing around here you can bet that Bismuth, or whatever that Dutchman calls him, wouldn't have left the camp."

Herr Muller, rubbing a grievous bump he had received when the ungrateful equine turned upon the hand that fed him, now came up and joined the party. He made such a grievous moan over the loss of his horse that Nat's heart was melted. He promised finally that they would stay in the vicinity the next day, and if Bismark had not appeared that they would make a short search in the mountains for him.

This was strongly against Cal's advice, but he, too, finally gave in. The Westerner knew better even than the boys with what a desperate gang they were at odds, and he did not favor anything that delayed their getting out of that part of the country as quick as possible.

"My mine is only a day or so's run from here," he said to Nat, "and if once we reached there we could stand these fellows off till help might be summoned from some place below, and we could have Morello's gang all arrested."

"That would be a great idea," agreed Nat, "do you think it could be done?"

"Don't see why not," rejoined Cal, "but you'll see better when you get a look at the place. It's a regular natural fortress, that's what it is. My plan would be to

hold 'em there while one of us rides off to Laredo or Big Oak Flat for the sheriff and his men."

"We'll talk some more about that," agreed Nat, to whom the idea appealed immensely. In fact, he felt that there was little chance of their really enjoying their trip till they were sure that Col. Morello's gang was disposed of. Somehow Nat had a feeling that they were not through with the rascals yet. In which surmise, as we shall see, he was right.

Supper that night was a merry meal, and after it had been disposed of, the waterproof tent which the boys had brought along was set up for the first time. With its sod cloth and spotless greenish-gray coloring, it made an inviting looking little habitation, more especially when the folding cots were erected within. But Herr Muller was in a despondent mood. He ate his supper in silence and sat melancholy and moody afterward about the roaring camp fire.

"Ach dot poor horse. Maypee der wolves get der poor crazy loonitacker," he moaned.

"Wall," commented Cal judicially, "ef he kin handle wolves as well as he kin Dutchmen he's no more reason to be scared of 'em than he is of jack-rabbits."

Of course watches were posted that night, and extra careful vigilance exercised. The events of the day had not added to the boys' confidence in their safety, by any means. There was every danger, in fact, of a night attack being attempted by their enemies.

But the night passed without any alarming interruption. And the morning dawned as bright and clear as the day that had preceded it. Breakfast was quickly disposed of, and then plans were laid for the pursuit of the errant Bismark.

Cal was of the opinion, that if the effect of the loco weed had worn off, that the horse might be found not far from the camp. There was a chance, of course, that he might have trotted back home. But Cal's experience had shown him that in the lonely hills, horses generally prefer the company of human kind to the solitudes and that if the influence of the crazy-weed was not still upon him the quadruped would be found not very far off.

This was cheering news to the photographing Teuton, who could hardly eat any breakfast so impatient was he to be off. Cal was to stay and guard the camp with Ding-dong for a companion. The searching party was to consist of Nat, in



command, with Joe and Herr Muller as assistants.

All, of course, carried weapons, and it was agreed that the signal in case of accident or attack, would be two shots in quick succession, followed by a third. Two shots alone would announce that the horse was found; while one would signify failure and an order to turn homeward.

These details being arranged, and Herr Muller thoroughly drilled in them, the searchers set forth. The little meadow was soon traversed, and at the edge of the woods, which clothed the slope at this side of the valley, they separated. Nat took the centre, striking straight ahead on Bismark's trail, while the other two converged at different radii.

The hill-side was not steep, and walking under the piñons and madrones not difficult. Occasionally a clump of dense chaparral intervened, so thick that it had to be walked around. It would have been waste of time to attempt to penetrate it.

All three of the searchers, as may be imagined, kept a sharp look-out, not only for trace of Bismark but also for any sign of danger. But they tramped on, while the sun rose higher, without anything alarming making itself manifest.

But of Bismark not a trace was to be found. He had, apparently, vanished completely. The ground was dry and rocky, too, which was bad, so far as trailing was concerned. Nat, although he now and then tumbled on a hoof mark or found a spot where Bismark had stopped to graze, saw nothing further of the horse.

At last he looked at his watch. He gave an exclamation of astonishment as he did so. It was almost noon.

"Got to be starting back," he thought, and drawing his revolver, he fired one shot, the signal agreed upon for the return.

This done, he set off walking at a brisk pace toward what he believed was the valley. But Nat, like many a more experienced mountaineer, had become hopelessly turned around during his wanderings. While it seemed to him he was striking in an easterly direction, he was, as a matter of fact, proceeding almost the opposite way.

After tramping for an hour or more the boy began to look about him.

"That's odd," he thought as he took in the surroundings, "I don't remember seeing anything like this around the valley."

It was, in fact, a very different scene from that surrounding the camp that now lay about him. Instead of a soft, grass-covered valley, all that could be seen from the bare eminence on which he had now climbed, was a rift in some bare, rocky hills. The surroundings were inexpressibly wild and desolate looking. Tall rocks, like the minarets of Eastern castles, shot upward, and the cliffs were split and riven as if by some immense convulsion of nature.

High above the wild scene there circled a big eagle. From time to time it gave a harsh scream, adding a dismal note to the dreary environment.

For a flash Nat felt like giving way to the wild, unreasoning panic that sometimes overwhelms those who suddenly discover they are hopelessly lost. His impulse was to dash into the wood and set off running in what he thought must be the right direction. But he checked himself by an effort of will, and forced his mind to accept the situation as calmly as possible.

"How foolish I was not to mark the trees as I came along!" he thought.

If only he had done that it would have been a simple matter to find his way back. A sudden idea flashed into his mind, and drawing out his watch the boy pointed the hour hand at the sun, which was, luckily, in full sight. He knew that a point between the hour hand thus directed, and noon, would indicate the north and south line.

As Nat had begun to think, this test showed him that he had been almost completely turned about, and had probably come miles in the wrong direction.

The east lay off to his right. Nat faced about, and was starting pluckily off in that direction when a sudden commotion in a clump of chaparral below attracted his attention. A flock of blue jays flew up, screaming and scolding hoarsely in their harsh notes.

Nat was woodsman enough to know that the blue jay is the watch-dog of the forests. Their harsh cries betoken the coming of anything for half a mile or more. Sometimes, however, they do not scream out their warning till whatever alarms them is quite close.

As the birds, uttering their grating notes, flew upward from the clump in the chaparral, Nat paused. So still did he keep that he could distinctly hear the pounding of his heart in the silence. But presently another sound became audible.

The trampling of horses coming in his direction!



## **CHAPTER XV.**

### **THE MOTOR RANGER'S PERIL.**

"Reckon Nat must have forgotten to fire the signal," thought Joe, sinking down on a rock, some little time before the former had halted to listen intently to the approaching noise.

Suddenly, however, the distant report came, borne clearly to his ears.

"There it goes," thought Joe. "One shot. I guess that means good-bye to the Dutchman's horse."

Knowing that it would be no use looking about for Nat, for evidently from the faint noise of the shot it had been fired at some distance, Joe faced about and started back for the camp. When he reached it, he found to his surprise, that Herr Muller had returned some time before. As a matter of fact, Joe formed a shrewd suspicion from the rapid time he must have made on his return, that Herr Muller had sought a snug spot and dozed away the interval before Nat's shot was heard.

As it so happened he was not very far from the truth. The German, having tramped quite a distance into the woods, had argued to himself that he stood about as good a chance of recovering his horse by remaining still as by proceeding. So he had seated himself with a big china-bowled pipe, to await the recall signal. He had started on the hunt with much enthusiasm, but tramping over rough, stony ground, under a hot sun, is one of the greatest solvents of enthusiasm known. And so it had proved in the German's case.

He had, however, a fine tale to tell of his tramp, and to listen to him one would have thought that he was the most industrious of the searchers.

"Guess we'd better start dinner without Nat," said Cal, after they had hung around, doing nothing but watching the pots simmer over the camp fire, for an hour or two.

"That's a gug-g-g-good idea," agreed Ding-dong.

Joe demurred a bit at the idea of not waiting for their young leader, but finally he, too, agreed to proceed with the meal. As will be seen by this, not much

anxiety was yet felt in the camp over Nat's absence. He was stronger and much more wiry than the other two searchers, and it was altogether probable that he had proceeded much farther than had they.

But, as the afternoon wore on and no Nat put in an appearance, conversation seemed to languish. Anxious eyes now sought the rim of the woods on the opposite side of the clearing. Nobody dared to voice the fears that lay at their hearts, however. Cal, perhaps, alone among them, realized the extent of the peril in which Nat stood, if he were lost in the mountains. It was for this reason that he did not speak until it became impossible to hold out hope any longer.

This was when the shadows began to lengthen and the western sky burned dull-red, as the sun sank behind the pine-fringed mountain tops. Then, and not till then, Cal spoke what was on his mind.

His comrades received the news of Cal's conviction that Nat was lost without the dismay and outward excitement that might have been expected. As a matter of fact, the dread that something had happened to the lad had been in the minds of all of them for some hours, although each tried to appear chipper and cheerful. There was no evading the facts as they stood, any longer, however.

Very soon night would fall, with its customary suddenness in these regions. Unless Nat returned before that time—which was so improbable as to hardly be worth considering—there remained only one conclusion to be drawn.

"Whatever can we do?" demanded Joe, in a rather shaky voice, as he thought of his comrade out on the desolate mountain side, hungry and perhaps thirsty, looking in vain for a trace of a trail back to camp.

"Not much of anything," was Cal's disquieting reply, "except to stay put."

"You mean stay right where we are?"

"That's right, boy. There's a chance that Nat may be back before long. Only a chance, mind you, but in that case we want ter be right here."

"Suppose he is h-h-h-h-hurt?" quavered out Ding-dong, voicing a fear they had all felt, but had not, so far, dared to speak of.

Cal waved his hand in an inclusive way at the range opposite.

"That will mean a search for him," he said, "and he may be any place in those

hills within a ten-mile radius. Talk about lookin' fer a needle in a haystack. It 'ud be child's play, to finding him in time to do anything."

They could not but feel the truth of his words.

"Besides," went on Cal, "there's another thing. We know that that ornery bunch of skunks and coyotes of Morello's is sky-hootin' round here some place. If we leave the camp they might swoop down on it and clean it out, and then we'd be in a worse fix than ever."

"That's right," admitted Joe, "but it seems dreadfully tough to have to sit here with folded hands and doing nothing; while Nat——"

His voice broke, and he looked off toward the mountains, now dim and dun-colored in the fast gathering night.

"No use giving way," said Cal briskly, "and as fer sitting with folded hands, it's the worst thing you could do. Here you," to Herr Muller, "hustle around and git all ther wood you can. A big pile of it. We'll keep up a monstrous fire all night in case the lad might happen to see it."

"It will give us something to think about anyhow," said Joe, catching the infection of Cal's brisk manner; "come on, Herr Muller, I'll help you."

They started off to collect wood, while Ding-dong Bell and Cal busied themselves with the supper dishes and then cleaned up a variety of small jobs around the camp.

"Jes' stick this bit of advice in your craw, son," advised Cal as he went briskly about his tasks, "work's the thing that trouble's most scart of, so if ever you want to shake your woes pitch in an' tackle something."

While Nat's comrades are thus employed, let us see for ourselves what has become of the lad. We left him listening intently to some approaching horsemen. He remained in this attentive attitude only long enough to assure himself that they were indeed coming toward him, and then, like a flash, his mind was made up.

It was clear to the boy that travellers in such a remote part of the Sierras were not common. It also came into his mind that Col. Morello's band was reputed to have their hiding place somewhere in the vicinity. The brief glance about him that Nat had obtained had shown him that it was just the sort of place that men

anxious to hide themselves from the law would select. In the first place, it was so rugged and wild as to be inaccessible to any but men on foot or horseback, and even then it would have been a rough trip.

The valley, or rather "cut," in the hills, up which the sound of hoofs was coming, was, as has been said, narrow and deep in the extreme. From the summits of its cliffs a defence of the trail that lay beneath would be easy. Stationed on those pinnacled, natural turrets, two might, if well supplied with ammunition, have withstood an army. All these thoughts had occurred to Nat before he made his resolution—and turning, started to run.

But as he sped along a fresh difficulty presented itself. The hillside at this point seemed to be alive with blue-jays. They flew screaming up, as he made his way along, and Nat knew that if they had acted as a warning to him of approaching danger the vociferous birds would be equally probable to arouse the suspicions of whoever was coming his way.

He paused to listen for a second, and was glad he had done so. The horsemen, to judge from their voices, had already reached the spot upon which he had been standing when he first heard them. What wind there was blew toward him and he could hear their words distinctly.

"Those jays are acting strangely, Manuello. I wonder if there is anybody here."

"I do not know, colonel," was the reply from the other unseen speaker, "if there is it will be to our advantage to find him. We don't want spies near the Wolf's Mouth."

"Wolf's Mouth," thought Nat, "If that's the name of that abyss it's well called."

"You are right, Manuello," went on the first speaker, "after what Dayton told us about those boys I don't feel easy in my mind as long as they are in our neighborhood. If Dayton and the others had not miscalculated yesterday we shouldn't have been bothered with them any longer."

"No," was the rejoinder, "it's a pity that boulder didn't hit them and pound them into oblivion. Just because they happen to be boys doesn't make them any the less dangerous to us."

At this unlucky moment, while Nat was straining his ears to catch every word of the conversation a stone against which he had braced one of his feet gave way.

Ordinarily he would have hardly noticed the sound it made as it went bounding and rolling down the hillside, but situated as he was, the noise seemed to be as startling and loud as the discharge of a big gun.

"What was that?" asked the man who had been addressed as "colonel."

"A dislodged stone," was the reply, "someone is in there; the blue-jays didn't fly up for nothing."

"So it would seem. We had better investigate before going farther."

"Still, it is important that we find where those boys are camped."

"That is true, but it is more important that we find out who is in that brush."

Without any more delay, the two horses were turned into the hillside growth. Nat could hear their feet slipping and sliding among the loose rocks on the mountain as they came toward him. He did not dare to run for fear of revealing his whereabouts.

Close at hand was a piñon tree, which spread out low-growing branches all about. Nat, as he spied it, decided that if he could get within its leafy screen unobserved he would, if luck favored him, escape the observation of the two men—one of whom he was certain now, must be the famous, or infamous, Col. Morello himself.

Without any repetition of the unlucky accident of the minute before, he crept to the trunk of the tree and hoisted himself noiselessly up. As he had surmised, the upper branches made a comfortable resting place impervious to the view from below.

Hardly had he made himself secure, before the horses of the two outlaws approached the tree and, rather to Nat's consternation, halted almost immediately beneath it.

Could the keen-eyed leader of the outlaw band have discovered his hiding place? It was the most anxious moment of the boy's life.





## **CHAPTER XVI.**

### **THE HORNS OF A DILEMMA.**

Few men, and still fewer boys, have ever been called upon to face the agonizing suspense which Nat underwent in the next few seconds. So close were the men to his hiding place that his nostrils could scent the sharp, acrid odor of their cigarettes. He was still enough as he crouched breathless upon the limb to have been carved out of wood, like the branch upon which he rested. He did not even dare to wink his eyes for fear of alarming the already aroused suspicions of the two men below him.

"Guess those jays got scared at a lion or something," presently decided the man who had been addressed as "colonel."

Nat, peering through his leafy screen, could see him as he sat upright on his heavy saddle of carved leather and looked about him with a pair of hawk-like eyes.

Colonel Morello, for Nat had guessed correctly when he concluded that the man was the famous leader, was a man of about fifty years, with a weather-beaten face, seamed and lined by years of exposure and hard living. But his eye, as has been said, was as keen and restless as an eagle's. A big scar made a livid mark across his cheek indicating the course of a bullet, fired years before when Morello had been at the head of a band of Mexican revolutionists. In that capacity, indeed, he had earned his brevet rank of "colonel."

A broad-brim gray sombrero, with a silver embossed band of leather about it, crowned the outlaw chief's head of glossy black hair, worn rather long and streaked with gray. Across his saddle horn rested a long-barrelled automatic rifle, of latest make and pattern. For the rest his clothes were those of an everyday mountaineer with the exception of a wide red sash. His horse was a fine buckskin animal, and was almost as famous in Sierran legend as its redoubtable master.

His companion was a squat, evil-visaged Mexican, with none of the latent nobility visible under the cruelty and rapaciousness which marred what might have once been the prepossessing countenance of Morello. His black hair hung

in dank, streaky locks down to the greasy shoulders of his well-worn buckskin coat, and framed a wrinkled face as dark as a bit of smoked mahogany, in which glittered, like two live coals, a pair of shifty black eyes. He was evidently an inferior to the other in every way—except possibly in viciousness.

Such were the two men who had paused below the tree in which was concealed, none too securely, the leader of the young Motor Rangers. As to what his fate might be if he fell into their hands Nat could hazard a guess.

All at once the lad noticed that the branch of the tree upon which he was lying was in motion. His first thought was that one of the men might be shaking it in some way. But no—neither of them had moved. They were seemingly following the remark of the colonel regarding the blue-jays, and taking a last look about before leaving. In another moment Nat would have been safe, but as he moved his eyes to try and see what had shaken the bough he suddenly became aware of an alarming thing.

From the branch of another tree which intertwined with the one in which he was hidden, there was creeping toward him a large animal. The boy gave a horrified gasp as he saw its greenish eyes fixed steadily on him with a purposeful glare.

Step by step, and not making as much noise as a stalking cat, the creature drew closer. To Nat's terrified imagination it almost seemed as if it had already given a death spring, and that he was in its clutches.

Truly his predicament was a terrible one. If he remained as he was the brute was almost certain to spring upon him. On the other hand to make a move to escape would be to draw the attention of the outlaws to his hiding place.

"Phew," thought Nat, "talk about being between two fires!"

Instinctively he drew his revolver. He felt that at least he stood more of a chance with his human foes than he did with this tawny-coated monster of the Sierran slopes.

If the worst came to the worst he would fire at the creature and trust to luck to escaping from the opposite horn of his dilemma. But in this Nat had reckoned without his host—or rather, his four-footed enemy—for without the slightest warning the big creature launched its lithe body through the air. With a cry of alarm Nat dropped, and it landed right on the spot where a second before he had

been. At the same instant the colonel and his companion wheeled their horses with a startled exclamation. The horses themselves, no less alarmed, were pawing the ground and leaping about excitedly.

The boy's fall, and the howl of rage from the disappointed animal, combined to make a sufficiently jarring interruption to the calm and quiet of the mountain side.

"Caramba! what was that?" the colonel's voice rang out sharply.

"It's a boy!" cried his companion, pointing to Nat's recumbent form. To the lad's dismay, in his fall his revolver had flown out of its holster and rolled some distance down the hillside. He lay there powerless, and too stunned and bruised by the shock of his fall to move.

But the great cat above him was not inactive. Foiled in its first spring it gathered itself for a second pounce but the colonel's sharp eye spied the tawny outline among the green boughs. Raising his rifle he fired twice. At the first shot there came a howl of pain and rage. At the second a crashing and clawing as the monster rolled out of the tree and fell in a still, motionless heap not far from Nat.

"Even the mountain lions seem to work for us," exclaimed the colonel triumphantly, as he dismounted and walked to Nat's side.

"Yes, señor, and if I make no mistake this lad here is one of the very boys we are in search of."

"You are right. These Americans are devils. I make no doubt but this one was on his way to spy into our manner of living at our fort. Eh boy, isn't that true?"

"No," replied Nat, whose face was pale but resolute. He scrambled painfully to his feet. Covered with dust, scratched in a dozen places by his fall through the branches, and streaming with perspiration, he was not an imposing looking youth right then; but whatever his appearance might have been, his spirit was dauntless.

"No," he repeated, "I came up here to look for a horse that one of us had lost."

"That's a very likely story," was the colonel's brief comment, in a dry, harsh tone. His eyes grew hard as he spoke. Evidently he had made up his mind that Nat was a spy.

"It is true," declared Nat, "I had no idea of spying into your affairs."

"Oh no," sneered the colonel vindictively, "I suppose you will tell us next that you did not know where our fort is; that you were not aware that it is up that gorge there?"

"This is the first I've heard of it," declared Nat truthfully.

"I hold a different opinion," was the rejoinder, "if you had not been up here on some mischievous errand you would not have concealed yourself in that tree. Eh, what have you to say to that?"

"Simply that from all I had heard of you and your band. I was afraid to encounter you on uneven terms, and when I heard you coming, I hid," replied Nat.

"That is it, is it? Well, I have the honor to inform you that I don't believe a word of your story. Do you know what we did with spies when I was fighting on the border?"

Nat shook his head. The colonel's eyelids narrowed into two little slits through which his dark orbs glinted flintily.

"We shot them," he whipped out.

For a moment Nat thought he was about to share the same fate. The colonel raised his rifle menacingly and glanced along the sights. But he lowered it the next minute and spoke again.

"Since you are so anxious to see our fort I shall gratify your wishes," he said. "Manuello, just take a turn or two about that boy and we'll take him home with us; he'll be better game than that lion yonder."

Manuello nimbly tumbled off his horse, and in a trice had Nat bound with his rawhide lariat. The boy was so securely bundled in it that only his legs could move.

"Good!" approvingly said the colonel as he gazed at the tightly tied captive, "it would be folly to take chances with these slippery Americanos."

Manuello now remounted, and taking a half-hitch with the loose end of his lariat about the saddle horn, he dug his spurs into his pony. The little animal leaped forward, almost jerking Nat from his feet. He only remained upright with

an effort.

"Be careful, Manuello," warned the colonel, "he is too valuable a prize to damage."

Every step was painful to Nat, bruised as he was, and weak from hunger and thirst as well, but he pluckily gave no sign. He had deduced from the fresh condition of his captors' ponies that they could not have been ridden far. This argued that it would not be long before they reached the outlaws' fortress.

In this surmise he was correct. The trail, after winding among chaparral and madrone, plunged abruptly down and entered the gloomy defile he had noticed when he first made up his mind that he was lost. Viewed closely the place was even more sinister than it had seemed at a distance. Hardly a tree grew on its rugged sides, which were of a reddish brown rock. It seemed as if they had been, at some remote period, seared with tremendous fires.

The trail itself presently evolved into a sort of gallery, hewn out of the sheer cliff face. The precipice overhung it above, while below was a dark rift that yawned upon unknown depths. So narrow was the pass that a step even an inch or two out of the way would have plunged the one making it over into the profundities of the chasm. A sort of twilight reigned in the narrow gorge, making the surroundings appear even more wild and gloomy. A chill came over Nat as he gazed about him. Do what he would to keep up his spirits they sank to the lowest ebb as he realized that he was being conducted into a place from which escape seemed impossible. Without wings, no living creature could have escaped from that gorge against the will of its lawless inhabitants.

Suddenly, the trail took an abrupt turn, and Nat saw before him the outlaws' fort itself.



## **CHAPTER XVII.**

### **IN COLONEL MORELLO'S FORTRESS.**

Directly ahead of them the gorge terminated abruptly in a blank wall of rock, in precisely the same manner that a blind alley in a city comes to a full stop. But "blank" in this case is a misnomer. The rocky rampart, which towered fully a hundred feet above the trail, was pierced with several small openings, which appeared to be windows. A larger opening was approached by a flight of steps, hewn out of the rock. Although Nat did not know it, the spot had once been a habitation of the mysterious aborigines of the Sierras. The colonel, stumbling upon it some years before, had at once recognized its possibilities as a fortress and a gathering place for his band, and had hastened to "move in." Stabling for the horses was found in a rocky chamber opening directly off the trail.

But Nat's wonderment was excited by another circumstance besides the sudden appearance of the rock fort. This was the strange manner in which the abyss terminated at the pierced cliff. As they came along, the boy had heard the sound of roaring waters at the bottom of the rift, and coupling this with the fact that the gorge emerged into the cliff at this point, he concluded that a subterranean river must wind its way beneath the colonel's unique dwelling place.

Small time, however, did he have for looking about him. About a hundred yards along the trail from the pierced cliff there was a strange contrivance extending outward from the face of the precipice along which the trail was cut. This was a sort of platform of pine trunks of great weight and thickness, on the top of which were piled several large boulders to add to the weight. This affair was suspended by chains and was an additional safeguard to the outlaws' hiding place. In the event of a sudden attack the chains were so arranged that they could be instantly cast loose. This allowed the platform to crash down, crushing whatever happened to be beneath it, as well as blocking the trail.

The colonel paused before they reached this, and whistled three times.

"Who is it?" came a voice, apparently issuing from a hole pierced in the rock at their left hand.

"Two Eagles of the Pass," came the reply from the colonel as he gave utterance to what was evidently a password.

"Go ahead, two Eagles of the Pass," came from the invisible rock aperture, and the party proceeded.

A few paces brought them from under the shadow of the weighted platform and to the foot of the flight of stone steps. A shaggy-headed man emerged from the stable door as they rode up, and took the horses of the new arrivals. He gazed curiously at Nat, but said nothing. Evidently, thought the lad, the colonel is a strict disciplinarian.

This was indeed the case. Col. Morello exacted implicit obedience from his band, which at this time numbered some twenty men of various nationalities. On more than one occasion prompt death had been the result of even a suspicion of a mutinous spirit.

With Manuello still leading him along, as if he were a calf or a sheep, Nat was conducted up the stone staircase and into the rock dwelling itself. The contrast inside the place with the heated air outside was extraordinary. It was like entering a cool cellar on a hot summer's day.

The passage which opened from the door in the cliff was in much the same condition as it had been when the vanished race occupied the place. In the floor were numerous holes where spears had been sharpened or corn ground. Rude carvings of men on horseback, or warring with strange beasts covered the walls. Light filtered in from a hole in the rock ceiling, fully twenty feet above the floor of the place. Several small doors opened off the main passage, and into one of these the colonel, who was in the lead, presently turned, followed by Manuello leading the captive lad.

Nat found himself in a chamber which, if it had not been for the rough walls of the same flame-tinted rock as the abyss, might have been the living room of any well-to-do rancher. Skins and heads of various wild beasts ornamented the walls. On the floor bright rugs of sharply contrasting hues were laid. In a polished oak gun-case in one corner were several firearms of the very latest pattern and design. A rough bookshelf held some volumes which showed evidences of having been well thumbed. From the ceiling hung a shaded silver lamp, of course unlighted, as plenty of light streamed into the place from the window in the cliff face.

The three chairs and the massive table which occupied the centre of the place were of rough-hewn wood, showing the marks of the axe, but of skilled and substantial workmanship, nevertheless. The upholstery was of deerskin, carefully affixed with brass-headed nails.

The colonel threw himself into one of the chairs and rolled a fresh cigarette, before he spoke a word. When he did, Nat was astonished, but not so much as to be startled out of his composure.

"I've heard about you from Hale Bradford," said the outlaw, "and I have always been curious to see you."

"Hale Bradford! Could it be possible," thought Nat, "that the rascally millionaire who had appropriated his father's mine was also associated with Col. Morello, the Mexican outlaw?"

Nat suddenly recalled, however, that it was entirely likely that Bradford, in his early days on the peninsula, had met Morello, who, at that time, was a border marauder in that part of the country. Perhaps they had met since Bradford's abrupt departure from Lower California. Or perhaps, as was more probable, it was Dayton who had told the colonel all about the Motor Rangers, and this reference to Bradford was simply a bluff.

"Yes, I knew Hale Bradford," was all that Nat felt called upon to say.

"Hum," observed the colonel, carefully regarding his yellow paper roll, "and he had good reason to know you, too."

"I hope so," replied Nat, "if you mean by that, that we drove the unprincipled rascal out of Lower California."

"That does not interest me," retorted Morello, "what directly concerns you is this: one of my men, an old acquaintance of mine, who has recently joined me, was done a great injury by you down there. He wants revenge."

"And this is the way he takes it," said Nat bitterly, gazing about him.

"I don't know how he means to take it," was the quiet reply. "That must be left to him. Where is Dayton?" he asked, turning to Manuello.

"Off hunting. The camp is out of meat," was the reply.

"Well, I expect Mr. Trevor will stay here till he returns," remarked the colonel



with grim irony, "take him to the west cell, Manuello. See that he has food and water, and when Dayton gets back we will see what shall be done with him."

He turned away and picked up a book, with a gesture signifying that he had finished.

Nat's lips moved. He was about to speak, but in the extremity of his peril his tongue fairly clove to the roof of his mouth. To be left to the tender mercies of Dayton! That was indeed a fate that might have made a more experienced adventurer than Nat tremble. The boy quickly overcame his passing alarm, however, and the next moment Manuello was conducting him down the passage toward what Nat supposed must be the west cell.

Before a stout oaken door, studded with iron bolts, the evil-visaged Mexican paused, and diving into his pocket produced a key. Inserting this in a well-oiled lock, he swung back the portal and disclosed a rock-walled room about twelve feet square. This, then, was the west cell. Any hope that Nat might have cherished of escaping, vanished as he saw the place. It was, apparently, cut out of solid rock. It would have taken a gang of men armed with dynamite and tools many years to have worked their way out. The door, too, now that it was open, was seen to be a massive affair, formed of several layers of oak bolted together till it was a foot thick. Great steel hinges, driven firmly into the wall, held it in place and on the outside, as an additional security to the lock, was a heavy sliding bolt of steel.

Manuello gave Nat a shove and the boy half stumbled forward into the place.

The next minute the door closed with a harsh clamor, and he was alone. So utterly stunned was he by his fate that for some minutes Nat simply stood still in the centre of the place, not moving an inch. But presently he collected his faculties, and his first care was to cast himself loose from the rawhide rope the Mexican had enveloped him in. This done, he felt easier, and was about to begin an inspection of the place when a small wicket, not more than six inches square, in the upper part of the door opened, and a hand holding a tin jug of water was poked through. Nat seized the receptacle eagerly, and while he was draining it the same hand once more appeared, this time with a loaf of bread and a hunk of dried deer meat.

Nat's hunger was as keen as his thirst, and wisely deciding that better thinking can be done on a full stomach than on an empty one, he speedily demolished the provender. So utterly hopeless did the outlook seem that many a boy in Nat's

position would have thrown himself on the cell floor and awaited the coming of his fate. Not so with Nat. He had taken for his motto, "While there is life there is hope," although it must be confessed that even he felt a sinking of the heart as he thought over his position. Guided by the light that came into the cell through the small wicket, the boy began groping about him and beating on the wall. For an hour or more he kept this up, till his hands were raw and bleeding from his exertions. It appeared to him that he had pounded every foot of rock in the place, in the hope of finding some hollow spot, but to no avail. The place was as solid as a safety vault.

Giving way to real despair at last, even the gritty boy owned himself beaten. Sinking his face in his hands he collapsed upon the cell floor. As he did so voices sounded in the corridor. One of them Nat recognized with a thrill of apprehension, as Dayton's.



## **CHAPTER XVIII.**

### **A RIDE FOR LIFE.**

The next moment the door was flung open, but not before Nat had jumped to his feet. He did not want his enemies, least of all Dayton, to find him crouching in a despondent attitude. To have brought despair to Nat's heart was the one thing above all others, the lad realized, which would delight Ed. Dayton highly.

Dayton was accompanied by Manuello and Al. Jeffries. The latter seemed highly amused at the turn things had taken.

"Well! well! well! What have we here!" he cried ironically, tugging his long black mustaches as the light from the passage streamed in upon Nat, "a young automobiling rooster who's about to get a lesson in manners and minding his own business. Oh say, Ed., this is luck. Here is where you get even for the other day."

"Oh, dry up," admonished Dayton sullenly, "I know my own business best."

He advanced toward Nat with a sinister smile on his pale face. Dayton had, as Manuello had informed Colonel Morello, been off hunting. His clothes were dust covered, from the tip of his riding boots—high heeled and jingle spurred in the Mexican fashion—to the rim of his broad sombrero. He had evidently lost no time in proceeding to the cell as soon as he learned that Nat was a captive.

"Looks as if we had you bottled up at last, my elusive young friend," he grated out, "this is the time that you stay where we want you."

"What are you going to do, Dayton?" asked Nat, his face pale but resolute, though his heart was beating wildly. Knowing the man before him as he did, he had no reason to expect any compassion, nor did he get any.

"You'll see directly," rejoined Dayton, "come with me. I'm going to let the colonel boss this thing."

Nat didn't say a word. In fact, there was not anything to be said. Dayton, as well as Manuello and Al. Jeffries, was armed, and all had their weapons ready for instant action. It would have been worse than madness to attempt any

resistance right then.

With Dayton ahead of him and Manuello and Jeffries behind, Nat stepped out of the cell and into the dimly lit passage. Never had daylight looked sweeter or more desirable to him than it did now, showing in a bright, oblong patch at the end of the passage.

But Nat, much as he longed to make a dash for it then and there, saw no opportunity to do so and in silence the little procession passed along the passageway and entered the colonel's room. Colonel Morello looked up as they entered, but did not seem much surprised. Doubtless he had had a chat with Dayton on the latter's return from hunting and was aware that Nat would be ushered before him.

"Here he is, colonel," began Dayton advancing to the table, while Manuello, ever on the outlook for a cigarette, also stepped a pace to the front, to help himself from a package of tobacco and some rice papers that lay upon the table. This left only Al. Jeffries standing in the door-way.

Swift as the snap of an instantaneous camera shutter Nat's mind was made up. Crouching low, as he was used to do in football tactics, he made a rush at Al. Jeffries, striking him between the legs like a miniature thunderbolt. As he made his dash he uttered an ear-splitting screech:—

"Yee-ow!"

He shrewdly calculated that the sudden cry would further demoralize the astonished outlaws. Jeffries was literally carried off his feet by the unexpected rush. He was forcibly lifted as Nat dashed beneath him and then he fell in a heap, his head striking a rock as he did so, knocking him senseless.

Like an arrow from a bow Nat sped straight for the end of the passage through which he had spied, a minute before, two horses standing still saddled and bridled. They were the steeds upon which Dayton and Jeffries had just ridden in. Such had been Dayton's haste to taunt Nat, however, that he and his companion deferred putting up their ponies till later. Nat, on his journey down the passage, had spied the animals and his alert mind had instantly worked out a plan of escape; as desperate a one, as we shall see, as could well be imagined.

As Al. toppled over in a heap, another outlaw, who was just entering the passage, opposed himself to Nat. He shared the black-mustached one's fate, only

he came down a little harder. Neither he nor Al. moved for some time in fact. In the meantime, Morello, Dayton and Manuello, dashing pellmell after the fleeing lad, stumbled unawares over the prostrate Al., and all came down in a swearing, fighting heap.

This gave Nat the few seconds he needed. In two flying leaps he was down the steps and had flung himself into the saddle of one of the horses, before the stableman knew what was happening. When the latter finally woke up and heard the bandits' yells and shouts coming from the passage-way, it was too late. With a rattle of hoofs, and in a cloud of dust, Nat was off. Off along the trail to freedom!

"Yee-ow!"

The boy yelled as he banged his heels into the pony's sides and the spirited little animal leaped forward.

Bang!

Nat's sombrero was lifted from his head and he could feel the bullets fairly fan his hair as he rode on.

"Stop him! Stop him!" came cries from behind. And then a sudden order:—

"Let go the man-trap!"

If Nat had realized what this meant he would have been tempted to give up his dash for freedom then and there. But he had hardly given a thought to the big suspended platform of pine trunks and rocks while on his way to the outlaws' fort, nor even if he had noticed it more minutely, would he have guessed its purpose.

But as the order to release the crushing weight and send it crashing down upon the trail was roared out by the colonel, a clatter of hoofs came close behind. It was Dayton, who had hastily thrown himself upon the other horse and was now close upon Nat. Drawing a revolver he fired, but the bullet whistled harmlessly by Nat's head. At the terrific pace they were making an accurate shot was, fortunately for our hero, impossible.

platform full of rocks falling down over rider on horse  
Nat, as the pony leaped forward, instinctively bent low in the saddle.

And now Nat was in the very shadow of the great platform.

At that instant he heard a sudden creaking overhead, and looked up just in time to realize that the ponderous mass was sagging. In one flash of insight he realized the meaning of this. The great mass had been released and was about to descend.

Crack!

"Ye-oo-ow!"

The heavy quirt, which Nat had found fastened to the saddle horn, was laid over the startled pony's flanks. It gave an enraged squeal and flung itself forward like a jack-rabbit.

At the same instant came a shout from behind.

"Stop, Dayton. Stop!—The man-trap!"

Nat, as the pony leaped forward, instinctively bent low in the saddle. As they flashed forward a mighty roar sounded in his ears. Behind him, with a sound like the sudden release of an avalanche, the man-trap had fallen. It had been sprung by the colonel's own hand.

So close to Nat did the immense weight crash down that it grazed his pony's flanks, but—Nat was safe.

Behind him, he heard a shrill scream of pain and realized that Dayton had not been so fortunate.

"Has he been killed?" thought Nat as his pony, terrified beyond all control by the uproar behind it, tore up the trail in a series of long bounds.

"Safe!" thought the lad as he dashed onward. But in this he was wrong. Nat was far from being safe yet.

Even as he murmured the word to himself there came a chorus of shouts from behind. Turning in his saddle, the boy could see pursuing him six or seven men, mounted on wiry ponies, racing toward the wreckage of the ponderous man-trap. With quirt and spur they urged their frightened animals over the obstruction. From the midst of the débris Nat could see Dayton crawling. The man was evidently hurt, but the others paid no attention to him.

"A thousand dollars to the one who brings that boy down!"

The cry came in the voice of Col. Morello.

Nat laid his quirt on furiously. But the pony he bestrode had been used for hunting over the rugged mountains most of that day and soon it began to flag.

"They're gaining on me," gasped Nat, glancing behind.

At the same instant half a dozen bullets rattled on the rocks about him, or went singing by his ears. As the fusillade pelted around him, Nat saw, not more than a hundred yards ahead, the end of the trail. The point, that is, where it lost itself in the wilderness of chaparral and piñon trees, among which he had met the adventure which ended in his capture. If he could only gain that shelter, he would be safe. But on his tired, fagged pony, already almost collapsing beneath him, could he do it?



## CHAPTER XIX. OUTWITTING HIS ENEMIES.

There was a feeling of pity in Nat's heart for the unfortunate pony he bestrode. The lad was fond of all animals, and it galled him to be compelled to drive the exhausted beast so unmercifully, but it had to be done if his life were to be saved.

Crack! crack! came the cruel quirt once more, and the cayuse gamely struggled onward. Its nostrils were distended and its eyes starting out of its head with exhaustion. Its sunken flanks heaved convulsively. Nat recognized the symptoms. A few paces more and the pony would be done for.

"Come on, old bronco!" he urged, "just a little way farther."

With a heart-breaking gasp the little animal responded, and in a couple of jumps it was within the friendly shelter of the leafy cover. A yell of rage and baffled fury came from his pursuers as Nat vanished. The boy chuckled to himself.

"I guess I take the first trick," he thought, but his self-gratulation was a little premature. As he plunged on amid the friendly shelter he could still hear behind him the shouts of pursuit. The men were scattering and moving forward through the wood. There seemed but little chance in view of these maneuvers, that Nat, with only his exhausted pony under him, could get clear away. As the shouts resounded closer his former fear rushed back with redoubled force.

Suddenly his heart almost stopped beating.

In the wood in front of him he could hear the hoof-tramplings of another horse.

They were coming in his direction. Who could it be? Nat realized that it was not likely to prove anybody who was friendly to him. He was desperately casting about for some way out of this new and utterly unexpected situation, when, with a snort, the approaching animal plunged through the brush separating it from Nat. As it came into view the boy gave a sharp exclamation of surprise.



The new arrival was Herr Muller's locoed horse, now, seemingly, quite recovered from its "late indisposition." It whinnied in a low tone as it spied Nat's pony, and coming alongside, nuzzled up against it.

To Nat's joy, Bismark showed no signs of being scared of him, and allowed the boy to handle him. But in the few, brief seconds that had elapsed while this was taking place, Col. Morello's gang had drawn perilously near. The trampling and crashing as they rode through the woods was quite distinct now.

"After him, boys," Nat could hear the colonel saying, "that boy knows our hiding place. We've got to get him or get out of the country."

"We'll get him all right, colonel," Nat heard Manuello answer confidently.

"Yep. He won't go far on that foundered pony," came another voice.

In those few, tense moments of breathing space Nat rapidly thought out a plan of escape. Deftly he slipped the saddle and bridle off the outlaw's pony, and transferred them to Bismark's back.

Then, as the chase drew closer, he gave the trembling pony a final whack on the rump with the quirt. The little animal sprang forward, its hoofs making a tremendous noise among the loose rocks on the hillside.

Half frantic with fear, its alarm overcame its spent vitality, and it clattered off.

"Wow! There he goes!"

"Yip-ee-ee! After him, boys!"

"Now we've got him!"

These and a score of other triumphant cries came from the outlaws' throats as they heard the pony making off as fast as it could among the trees, and naturally assumed that Nat was on its back. With yells and shrieks of satisfaction they gave chase, firing volleys of bullets after it. The fusillade and the shouts, of course, only added to the pony's fear, and made it proceed with more expedition.

As the cries of the chase grew faint in the distance, Nat listened intently, and then, satisfied that the outlaws had swept far from his vicinity, urged Bismark cautiously forward. This time he travelled in the right direction, profiting by his experiment with his watch. But urge Bismark on as he would, darkness fell before he was out of the wilderness. But still he pressed on. In his position he

knew that it was important that he reach the camp as soon as possible. Not only on his own account, but in order that he might give warning of the attack that Col. Morello would almost certainly make as soon as he realized that his prisoner had got clear away. If they had been interested in the Motor Rangers' capture before, the outlaws must by now be doubly anxious to secure them, Nat argued. The reason for this had been voiced by Col. Morello himself while he was conducting the chase in the wood:

"That boy knows our hiding place."

"You bet I do," thought Nat to himself, "and if I don't see to it that the whole bunch is smoked out of there before long it won't be my fault."

Tethering Bismark to a tree the boy clambered up the trunk. His object in so doing was to get some idea of his whereabouts.

But it was dark, I hear some reader remark.

True, but even in the darkness there is one unfailing guide to the woodsman, providing the skies be clear, as they were on this night. The north star was what Nat was after. By it he would gauge his direction. Getting a line on it from the outer star of "the dipper" bowl, Nat soon made certain that he had not, as he had for a time feared, wandered from his course.

Descending the tree once more, he looked at his watch. It was almost midnight, yet in the excitement of his flight he felt no exhaustion or even hunger. He was terribly thirsty though, and would have given a lot for a drink of water. However, the young Motor Ranger had faced hardships enough not to waste time wishing for the unattainable. So, remounting Bismark, he pressed on toward the east, knowing that if he rode long enough he must strike the valley which would bring him to his friends.

All at once, a short distance ahead, he heard a tiny tinkle coming through the darkness. It was like the murmuring of a little bell. Nat knew, though, that it was the voice of a little stream, and a more welcome sound, except the voices of his comrades, he could not have heard at that moment.

"Here's where we get a drink, Bismark, you old prodigal son," he said in a low tone.

A few paces more brought them into a little dip in the hillside down which the tiny watercourse ran. Tumbling off his horse Nat stretched himself out flat and

fairly wallowed in the water. When he had refreshed his thirst, Bismark drinking just below him, the boy laved his face and neck, and this done felt immensely better.

He was just rising from this al-fresco bath when, from almost in front of his face as it seemed, came a sound somewhat like the dry rattle of peas in a bladder. It was harsh and unmusical, and to Nat, most startling, for it meant that he had poked his countenance almost into the evil wedge-shaped head of a big mountain rattler.

"Wow!" yelled the boy tumbling backward like an acrobat.

At the same instant a dark, lithe thing that glittered dully in the starlight, was launched by his cheek. So close did it come that it almost touched him. But Nat was not destined to be bitten that night at least. As the long body encountered the ground after striking, and Bismark jumped back snorting alarmedly, Nat picked up a big rock and terminated Mr. Rattler's existence on the spot.

Sure of his direction now, the boy remounted, and crossing the stream, arrived in due course near to the camp. The first thing he almost stumbled across was the prostrate form of Herr Muller, sound asleep just outside the flickering circle of light cast by the fire.

"Now for some fun," thought Nat, and slipping off his horse he crouched behind the sleeping Teuton, and with a long blade of grass, began tickling his ear. At first Herr Muller simply stirred uneasily, and kicked about a bit. Then finally he sat up erect and wide awake. The first thing he saw was a tall, dark form bent over him.

With a wild succession of whoops and frantic yells he set off for the camp in an astonishing series of leaps and bounds, causing Nat to exclaim as he watched the performance:—

"That Dutchman could certainly carry off a medal for broad jumping."

A few of the leaps brought Herr Muller fairly into the camp-fire, scattering the embers right and left and thoroughly alarming the awakened adventurers.

As they started up and seized their arms, Nat caused an abrupt cessation of the threatened hostilities by a loud hail:—

"Hullo, fellows!"

"It's Nat—whoop hurroo!" came in a joyous chorus, and as description is lamentably inadequate to set forth some scenes, I will leave each of my readers to imagine for himself how many times Nat's hand was wrung pump-handle fashion, and how many times he was asked:—

"How did it happen?"



## **CHAPTER XX.**

### **HERR MULLER GETS A CHILLY BATH.**

"Shake a le-e-eg!"

Rather later than usual the following morning the lengthy form of Cal reared itself upright in its blankets and uttered the waking cry. From the boys there came only a sleepy response in rejoinder. They were all pretty well tired out with the adventures and strains of the day before and had no inclination to arise from their slumbers. Even Nat, usually the first to "tumble up," didn't seem in any hurry to crawl out of his warm nest.

Winking to himself, Cal picked up two buckets and started for the little lake. He soon filled them with the clear, cold snow-water, and started back with long strides across the little meadow.

"Here's where it rains for forty days and forty nights," he grinned, as poising a bucket for a moment he let fly its contents.

S-l-o-u-s-h!

What a torrent of icy fluid dashed over the recumbent form of Herr Von Schiller Muller! The Teuton leaped up as if a tarantula had been concealed in his bed clothes, but before he could utter the yell that his fat face was framing Cal was on him in one flying leap and had clapped a big brown hand over his mouth.

"Shut up," he warned, "if you want to have some fun with the others."

He pointed to the pail which was still half full. Herr Muller instantly comprehended. Dashing the water out of his eyes he prepared to watch the others get their dose, on the principle, I suppose, that misery loves company.

S-l-o-u-s-h!

This time Ding-dong and Joe got the icy shower bath, and sputtering and protesting hugely, they leaped erect. But the water in their eyes blinded them and although they struck out savagely, their blows only punctured the surrounding atmosphere.

"Here, hold this bucket!" ordered Cal, handing the empty pail to the convulsed Dutchman.

"Oh-ho-ho-ho dees iss too much!" gasped Herr Muller, doubling himself up with merriment, "I must mage me a picdgure of him."

In the meantime Cal had dashed the contents of the other bucket over Nat, who also sprang up full of wrath at the unexpected immersion.

"Take this, too," ordered Cal, handing the other empty bucket to Herr Muller. Tears were rolling down the German's fat cheeks. He was bent double with vociferous mirth as he shook.

"Dees iss der best choke I haf seen since I hadt der measles!" he chuckled.

Shouts of anger rang from the boys' throats as they rushed about, shaking off water like so many dogs after a swim. Suddenly their eyes fell on Herr Muller doubled with laughter and holding the two buckets. From time to time, in the excess of his merriment he flourished them about.

"Oh-ho-ho-ho, I dink me I die ef I dodn't laughing stop it."

"Hey, fellows!" hailed Nat, taking in the scene, "there's the chap that did it."

"That Dutchman?—Wow!"

With a whoop the three descended on the laughter-stricken Teuton, and before he could utter a word of expostulation, they had seized him up and were off to the little lake at lightning speed, bearing his struggling form.

"Help! Murder! Poys, I don't do idt. It voss dot Cal vot vatered you!"

The cries came from the German's lips in an agonizing stream of entreaty and expostulation. But the boys, wet and irritated, were in no mood for mercy. To use an expressive term, though a slangy one, they had caught Herr Muller "with the goods on."

Through the alders they dashed, and then——

Splash!

Head over heels Herr Muller floundered in the icy water, choking and sputtering, as he came to the surface, like a grampus—or, at least in the manner, we are led to believe, grampuses or grampi conduct themselves.

As his pudgy form struck out for the shore the boys' anger gave way to yells of merriment at the comical sight he presented, his scanty pajamas clinging tightly about his rotund form.

"Say, fellows, here comes Venus from the bath!" shouted Nat.

"First time I heard of a Dutch Venus!" chortled Joe.

"Poys, you haf made it a misdake," expostulated Herr Muller, standing, with what dignity he could command, on the brink of the little lake. His teeth were chattering as if they were executing a clog dance.

"D-dod-d-dot C-c-c-c-al he do-done idt. If you don'd pelieve me,—Loog!"

He pointed back to the camp and there was Cal rolling about on the grass and indulging in other antics of amusement.

"Wow!" yelled Nat, "we'll duck him, too."

At full speed they set off for the camp once more, Cal rising to his feet as they grew near. He looked unusually large and muscular somehow.

"W-w-w-w-w-where w-w-w-w-will we t-t-t-t-tackle him?" inquired Ding-dong, who seemed quite willing to yield his foremost place in the parade of punishment.

"I guess," said Nat slowly and judiciously, "I guess we'll—leave Cal's punishment to some other time."

Breakfast that morning was a merry meal, and old Bismark, who had naturally been tethered in a post perfectly free from loco weed, came in for several lumps of sugar as reward for his signal service of the day before. All were agreed that if the old horse had not wandered along so opportunely that Nat might have been in a bad fix.

"I wonder if they'd have dared to kill me?" said Nat, drawing Cal aside while the others were busy striking camp and washing dishes.

"Wall," drawled Cal, "I may be wrong, but I don't think somehow that you'd hev had much appetite fer breakfast this mornin'."

"I'm inclined to agree with you," said Nat, repressing a shudder as he recalled the tones of the colonel's voice.

"And that reminds me," said Cal, "that our best plan is to get on ter my mine as quick as we can. It ain't much of a place. You know there's mighty little mining down here nowadays but what is done by the big companies with stamp mills and hundreds of thousands invested. But I reckon we kin be safe there while we think up some plan to get these fellows in a prison where they belong."

"That's my idea exactly," said Nat, "I'm pretty sure that now they are aware that we know the location of their fort that they'll try to get after us in every way they can."

"Right you are, boy. Their very existence in these mountains depends on their checkmating us some way. I think the sooner we get out of here the better."

"How soon can we get to the mine?" asked Nat.

"Got your map?"

"Yes."

"Let's see it."

Nat dipped down into his pocket and drew out his folder map of the Sierra region. It was necessarily imperfect, but Cal, after much cogitation, darted down his thumb on a point some distance to the northwest of where they were camped.

"It's about thar," he declared, "right in that thar canyon."

"How soon can we get there?"

"With luck, in two days, I should say. We can camp there while one of us rides off and gets the sheriff and a posse. I tell you it'll be a big feather in our caps to land those fellows where they belong. The scallywags have made themselves the terror of this region for a long time."

"Well, don't let's holler till we're out of the wood," advised Nat.

By this time the auto was ready and the others awaited their coming with some impatience.

"Are we all right?" asked Nat looking back at the tonneau and then casting a comprehensive eye about. Bismark, hitched behind as usual, was snorting impatiently and pawing the ground in quite a fiery manner.



"Let 'er go," cried Cal.

Chug-chu-g-chug!

Nat threw on the power and off moved the auto, soon leaving behind the camp on the knoll which had been the scene of so many anxieties and amusing incidents.

As they rode along Nat explained to the others the plan of campaign. It was hailed with much joy and Joe and Ding-dong immediately began asking questions. Cal explained that his mine was located in a canyon which had once been the scene of much mining activity, but like many camps in the Sierras, those who once worked it—the argonauts—had long since departed. Only a little graveyard with wooden head-boards on the hill above the camp remained to tell of them. Cal had taken up a claim there in the heyday of the gold workings and from time to time used to visit it and work about the claim a little. He had never gotten much gold out of it, but it yielded him a living, he said.

"Anybody else up there?" asked Nat.

"Only a few Chinks," rejoined Cal.

"I don't like 'em," said Joe briefly, "yellow-skinned, mysterious cusses."

"M-m-m-my mother had a C-c-c-c-chinese c-c-c-c-cook—phwit!—once," put in Ding-dong, "but we had to fire him."

"Why?" inquired Cal with some show of interest.

"We could never tell whether he was sus-s-s-singing over his work or moaning in agony," rejoined Ding-dong.

"Say, is that meant for a joke?" asked Nat amid a deadly silence.

"N-n-no, it's a f-f-fact," solemnly rejoined Ding-dong.

"That feller must hev bin a cousin to the short-haired Chinaman who couldn't be an actor," grinned Cal.

"What is this, a catch?" asked Joe suspiciously.

"No," Cal assured him.

"Oh, all right, I'll bite," said Nat with a laugh, "why couldn't the short-haired

Chinaman be an actor?"

"Pecoss he voss a voshman, I subbose," suggested Herr Muller.

"Oh, no," said Cal, "because he'd always miss his queue."

"Reminds me of the fellow who thought he was of royal blood every time he watered his wife's rubber plant which grew in a porcelain pot," grinned Nat.

"I'll bite this time," volunteered Joe, "How was that, Mister Bones?"

"Well, he said that when he irrigated it, he rained over china," grinned Nat, speeding the car up a little grade.

"If this rare and refined vein of humor is about exhausted," said Joe with some dignity after the laugh this caused had subsided, "I would like to draw the attention of the company to that smoke right ahead of us."

"Is that smoke? I thought it was dust," said Nat, squinting along the track ahead of them.

The column of bluish, brownish vapor to which Joe had drawn attention could now be seen quite distinctly, pouring steadily upward above the crest of a ridge of mountains beyond them. Although they were travelling at a considerable height they could not make out what was causing it, but Cal's face grew grave. He said nothing, however, but if the others had noticed him they would have seen that his keen eyes never left the column which, as they neared it, appeared to grow larger in size until it towered above its surroundings like a vaporous giant or the funnel of a whirlwind.



## **CHAPTER XXI.**

### **THE FIRE IN THE FOREST.**

"Why, that smoke's coming up from those trees!" declared Nat as they topped the rise, and saw below them the familiar panorama of undulating mountain tops, spreading to the sky line in seeming unending billows.

Sure enough, as he said, the smoke was coming from some great timber-clad slopes directly in front of them.

"May be some more campers," suggested Joe.

"Not likely," said Cal gravely, "no campers would light a fire big enough to make all that smoke."

Nat did not reply, being too busy applying the brakes as the road took a sudden steep pitch downward. At the bottom of the dip was a bridge, made after the fashion of most mountain bridges in those remote regions. That is to say, two long logs had been felled to span the abyss the bridge crossed. Then across these string pieces, had been laid other logs close together. The contrivance seemed hardly wide enough to allow the auto to cross. Grinding down his brakes Nat brought the machine to a halt.

"I guess we'd better have a look at that bridge before we try to cross it," he said, turning to Cal.

"Right you are, boy," assented the ex-stage driver, getting out, "this gasolene gig is a sight heavier than anything that bridge was ever built for. Come on, Joe, we'll take a look at it."

Accompanied by the young Motor Ranger the Westerner set off at his swinging stride down the few paces between the auto and the bridge. Lying on his stomach at the edge of the brink, he gazed over and carefully examined the supports of the bridge and the manner in which they were embedded in the earth on either side.

Then he and Joe jumped up and down on the contrivance and gave it every test they could.

"I guess it will be all right," said Cal, as he rejoined the party.

"You guess?" said Nat, "say, Cal, if your guess is wrong we're in for a nasty tumble."

"Wall, then I'm sure," amended the former stage driver, "I've driv' stage enough to know what a bridge 'ull hold I guess, and that span yonder will carry this car over in good shape. How about it, Joe?"

"It'll be all right, Nat," Joe assured his chum, "in any case we are justified in taking a chance, for after what you told us about the colonel's gang it would be dangerous to go back again."

"That's so," agreed Nat, "now then, all hold tight, for I'm going to go ahead at a good clip. Hang on to Bismark, Herr Muller."

"I holdt on py him like he voss my long lost brudder," the German assured him.

Forward plunged the auto, Bismark almost jerking Herr Muller out of the tonneau as his head rope tightened. The next instant the car was thundering upon the doubtful bridge. A thrill went through every one of the party as the instant the entire weight of the heavy vehicle was placed upon it the flimsy structure gave a distinct sag.

"Let her have it, Nat!" yelled Cal, "or we're gone coons!"

There was a rending, cracking sound, as Nat responded, and the car leaped forward like a live thing. But as the auto bounded forward to safety Bismark hung back, shaking his head stubbornly. Herr Muller, caught by surprise, was jerked half out of the tonneau and was in imminent peril of being carried over and toppling into the chasm. But Joe grasped his legs firmly while Cal struck the rope—to which the Teuton obstinately held—out of his hands.

"Bismark! Come back!" wailed the German as the released horse turned swiftly on the rickety bridge and galloped madly back in the direction from which they had come.

But the horse, which was without saddle or bridle, both having been placed in the car when they started out, paid no attention to his owner's impassioned cry. Flinging up his heels he soon vanished in a cloud of dust over the hilltop.

"Turn round der auto. Vee go pack after him," yelled the German.

"Not much we won't," retorted Cal indignantly, "that plug of yours is headed for his old home. You wouldn't get him across that bridge if you built a fire under him."

"And I certainly wouldn't try to recross it with this car," said Nat.

"I should say not," put in Joe, "why we could feel the thing give way as our weight came on it."

"Goodt pye, Bismark, mein faithful lager—charger I mean," wailed Herr Muller, "I nefer see you again."

"Oh yes, you will," comforted Cal, seeing the German's real distress, "he'll go right home to the hotel stable that he come frum. You'll see. The man that owns it is honest as daylight and ef you don't come back fer the horse he'll send you yer money."

"Put poor Bismark will starfe!" wailed the Teuton.

"Not he," chuckled Cal, "between here and Lariat is all fine grazing country, and there's lots of water. He'll get back fatter than he came out."

"Dot is more than I'll do," wailed Herr Muller resignedly as Nat set the auto in motion once more and they left behind them the weakened bridge.

"No auto 'ull ever go over that agin," commented Cal, looking back.

"Not unless it has an aeroplane attachment," added Joe.

But their attention now was all centred on the smoke that rose in front of them. The bridge had lain in a small depression so that they had not been able to see far beyond it, but as they rolled over the brow of the hill beyond, the cause of the uprising of the vapor soon became alarmingly apparent.

A pungent smell was in the air.

"Smells like the punks on Fourth of July," said Joe, as he sniffed.

But joking was far from Cal's mind as he gazed through narrowed eyes. The smoke which had at first not been much more than a pillar, was now a vast volume of dark vapor rolling up crowdedly from the forests ahead of them. Worse still, the wind was sweeping the fire down toward the track they had to

traverse.

"The woods are on fire!" cried Nat as he gazed, and voicing the fear that now held them all.

As he spoke, from out of the midst of the dark, rolling clouds of smoke, there shot up a bright, wavering flame. It instantly died down again, but presently another fiery sword flashed up, in a different direction, and hung above the dark woods. They could now hear quite distinctly, too, the sound of heavy, booming falls as big trees succumbed to the fire and fell with a mighty crash.

"Great Scott, what are we going to do?" gasped Joe.

"T-t-t-turn b-b-b-back!" said Ding-dong as if that settled the matter.

"Py all means," chimed in Herr Muller, gazing ahead at the awe-inspiring spectacle.

"How are you going to do that when that bridge won't hold us?" asked Nat. "Do you think we can beat the fire to the trail, Cal?"

"We've gotter," was the brief, but comprehensive rejoinder.

"But if we don't?" wailed Ding-dong.

"Ef you can't find nothing ter say but that, jus' shut yer mouth," warned Cal in a sharp tone.

His face was drawn and anxious. He was too old a mountaineer not to realize to a far greater extent than the boys the nature of the peril that environed them. His acute mind had already weighed the situation in all its bearings. In no quarter could he find a trace of hope, except in going right onward and trusting to their speed to beat the flames.

True, they might have turned back and waited by the bridge, but the woods grew right up to the trail, and it would be only a matter of time in all probability before the flames reached there. In that case the Motor Rangers would have been in almost as grave a peril as they would by going on. The fire was nearly two miles from where they were, but Cal knew full well the almost incredible rapidity with which these conflagrations leap from tree to tree, bridging trails, roads, and even broad rivers. It has been said that the man or boy who starts a forest fire is an enemy to his race, and truly to any one that has witnessed the

awful speed with which these fires devour timber and threaten big ranges of country, the observation must ever seem a just one.

"Can't we turn off and outflank the flames?" asked Joe, as they sped on at as fast a pace as Nat dared to urge the car over the rough trail.

Cal's answer was a wave of his hand to the thickset trees on either side. Even had it not been for the danger of fire reaching them before they could outflank it, the trunks were too close together to permit of any vehicle threading its way amidst them.

There was but little conversation in the car as it roared on, leaping and careering over rocks and obstructions like a small boat in a heavy sea. The Motor Rangers were engaged in the most desperate race of their lives. As they sped along the eyes of all were glued on the trail ahead, with its towering walls of mighty pines and about whose bases chaparral and inflammable brush grew closely.

The air was perceptibly warmer now, and once or twice a spark was blown into the car. Not the least awe-inspiring feature of a forest fire in the mountains is the mighty booming of the great trunks as they fall. It is as impressive as a funeral march.

"Ouch, somebody burned my hand!" exclaimed Joe suddenly.

But gazing down he saw that a big ember had lit on the back of it. He glanced up and noticed that the air above them was now full of the driving fire-brands. Overhead the dun-colored smoke was racing by like a succession of tempest-driven storm clouds. A sinister gloom was in the air.

Suddenly, Cal, who had been half standing, gazing intently ahead, gave a loud shout and pointed in front of them. The others as they gazed echoed his cry of alarm.



## **CHAPTER XXII.**

### **A DASH THROUGH THE FLAMES.**

The object thus indicated by Cal was in fact about as alarming a thing as they could have encountered. It was nothing more or less than the smoking summit of a big tree a few hundred feet ahead of them. As they gazed it broke into flame, the resinous leaves igniting with a succession of sharp cracks like pistol shots. In a second the tree was transformed into the semblance of an immense torch. Driven by the wind the flames went leaping and rioting among its neighbors till all above the Motor Rangers was a fiery curtain stretched between them and the sky.

To make matters worse, the smoke, as acrid and pungent as chemical vapor, was driven in Nat's eyes, and he could hardly see to drive. His throat, too, felt hot and parched, and his gloves were singed and smoking in half a dozen places.

"Get out that big bucket and fill it from the tank," he ordered as he drove blindly onward.

"Guess it's about time," muttered Cal as he, guessing the rest of Nat's order, dashed the water right and left over the party, "we'd have bin on fire ourselves in a few seconds."

Nat drove as fast as he dared, but the fire seemed to travel faster. The roar now resembled the voice of a mighty waterfall, and occasionally the sharp cracks of bursting trunks or falling branches filled the air.

"The whole forest is going," bawled Cal, "put on more steam Nat."

The boy did as he was directed and the beleaguered auto forged forward a little more swiftly. Suddenly, however, a happening that bade fair to put a dead stop to their progress occurred. Directly in front of them the chaparral had blazed about a tree, till it had eaten into the trunk. Weakened, the monster trembled for a moment and then plunged downward.

"Lo-ok ou-t!"

Cal bellowed the warning, and just in time. Nat, half blinded as he was, had



not seen the imminent danger.

With a crash like the subsidence of a big building, the tree toppled over and fell across the track, blazing fiercely, and with a shower of sparks and embers flying upward from it.

### Car driving over log

**As if it had been a leaping, hunting horse, the big car bounced and jolted over the log.**

A new peril now threatened the already danger-surrounded lads, and their Western companion. The tree lay across their path, an apparently insurmountable object. A glance behind showed that the flames had already closed in, the fire, by some freak of the wind, having been driven back from their temporary resting place. But they knew that the respite was only momentary.

Suddenly, the car surged forward, and before one of the party even realized that Nat had made up his mind they were rushing full tilt for the blazing log.

"Wow!" yelled Cal carried away by excitement, as he sensed Nat's daring purpose, "he's going ter jump it—by thunder!"

Even as he spoke the auto was upon the log and its front wheels struck the glowing, blazing barrier with a terrific thud. Had they not been prepared for the shock the Motor Rangers would have scattered out of the car like so many loose attachments.

As if it had been a leaping, hunting horse, the big car bounced and jolted over the log, which was fully six feet in diameter. It came down again beyond it with a jounce that almost shook the teeth out of their heads, but the lads broke into a cheer in which Herr Muller's and Cal's voices joined, as they realized that Nat's daring had saved the day for them.

Behind them lay the fiercely blazing forest, but in front the road was clear, although the resinous smell of the blaze and the smoke pall lay heavily above them still. A short distance further a fresh surprise greeted them. A number of deer, going like the wind, crossed the road, fleeing in what their instinct told them was a safe direction. They were followed by numerous wolves, foxes and other smaller animals.

As they went onward they came upon a big burned-out patch in which an ember must have fallen, carried by some freak of the capricious wind. In the midst of it, squirming in slimy, scaly knots, were a hundred or more snakes of

half a dozen kinds, all scorched and writhing in their death agonies. The boys were glad to leave the repulsive sight behind them. At last, after ascending a steep bit of grade they were able to gaze back.

It was a soul-stirring sight, and one of unpassable grandeur. Below them the fire was leaping and raging on its way eastward. Behind it lay a smoking, desolate waste, with here and there a charred trunk standing upright in its midst. Already the blaze had swept across the trail, stripping it bare on either side. The lads shuddered as they thought that but for good fortune and Nat's plucky management of the car, they might have been among the ashes and débris.

"Wall, boys," said Cal, turning to them, "you've seen a forest fire. What do you think of it?"

"I think," said Nat, "that it is the most terrible agent of destruction I have ever seen."

"I t-t-t-think we need a w-w-w-ash," stuttered Ding-dong.

They burst into a laugh as they looked at one another and recognized the truth of their whimsical comrade's words. With faces blackened and blistered by their fiery ordeal and with their clothes scorched and singed in a hundred places, they were indeed a vagabond looking crew.

"I'll bet if old Colonel Morello could see us now we'd scare him away," laughed Joe, although it pained his blistered lips to indulge in merriment.

"Wall, there's a stream a little way down in that hollow," said Cal, pointing, "we'll have a good wash when we reach it."

"And maybe I won't be glad, too," laughed Nat, setting the brakes for the hill ahead of them.

Suddenly Ding-dong piped up.

"S-s-s-s-say, m-m-m-may I m-m-m-make a remark?"

"Certainly, boy, half a dozen of them," said Cal.

"It's a go-g-g-g-good thing we lost Bismark," grinned Ding-dong, in which sage observation they all perforce acquiesced.

"I've got something to say myself," observed Joe suddenly, "maybe you other

fellows have noticed it? This seat is getting awfully hot."

"By ginger, so it is," cried Cal suddenly, springing up from the easy posture he had assumed.

"L-l-l-ook, there is s-s-s-smoke c-c-c-coming out from back of the car!" cried Ding-dong alarmedly.

As he spoke a volume of smoke rolled out from behind them.

"Good gracious, the car's on fire!" yelled Nat, "throw some water on it quick!"

"Can't," exclaimed Cal, "we used it all up coming through the flames yonder."

"We'll burn up!" yelled Joe despairingly.

Indeed it seemed like it. Smoke was now rolling out in prodigious quantities from beneath the tonneau and to make the possibilities more alarming still, the reserve tank full of gasolene was located there.

The tonneau had now grown so hot that they could not sit down.

"Get out, everybody," yelled Joe, as badly scared as he had ever been in his life.

"Yep, let us out, Nat," begged Cal. The Westerner was no coward, but he did not fancy the idea of being blown sky high on top of an explosion of gasolene any more than the rest.

"Good thing I haven't got on my Sunday pants," the irrepressible Westerner remarked. "Hey, Nat," he yelled the next minute, as no diminution of speed was perceptible, "ain't you going ter stop?"

"Not on your life," hurled back Nat, without so much as turning his head.

He evidently had some plan, but what it was they could not for the life of them tell. Their hearts beat quickly and fast with a lively sensation of danger as the burning auto plunged on down the rough slope.

All at once Joe gave a shout of astonishment.

"I see what he's going to do now!" he exclaimed.

So fast was the auto travelling that hardly had the words left his lips before they were fairly upon the little rivulet or creek Cal's acute eyes had spied from the summit of the hill.

The next instant they were in it, the water coming up to the hubs. Clouds of white steam arose about the car and a great sound of hissing filled the air as the burning portion encountered the chill of the water.

"Wall, that beats a fire department," exclaimed Cal, as, after remaining immersed for a short time, Nat drove the car up the opposite bank which, luckily, had a gentle slope.

As Cal had remarked, it did indeed beat a fire department, for the water had put out the flames effectually. An investigation showed that beyond having charred and blistered the woodwork and paint that the fire had fortunately done no damage. It would take some little time to set things to rights, though, after the ordeal they had all gone through, and so it was decided that they would camp for a time at the edge of the river.

"Hullo, what's all that going on over there?" wondered Joe, as he pointed to a cloud of dust in the distance.

Cal rapidly shinned up a tree, and shading his eyes with his hand, gazed for some moments in the direction of the cloud.

"Sheep!" he announced as he slid down again, "consarn thet Jeb Scantling, now I know who set thet fire."

The boys looked puzzled till Cal went on to explain.

"You know I told you fellows that cattlemen was dead sore at sheepmen," he said, "and that's the reason."

He jerked one brown thumb backward to indicate that "that" was the fire.

"Do you mean to say that Jeb Scantling started it?" gasped Nat. The idea was a new one to him.

"Wall, I'd hate to accuse any one of doing sich a thing," rejoined Cal non-committally, "but," he added with a meaning emphasis, "I've heard of sheepmen setting tracts on fire afore this."

"But whatever for?" inquired Joe in a puzzled tone.

"So's to burn the brush away and hev nice green grass in the spring," responded Cal.

"Well, that's a nice idea," exclaimed Nat, "so they burn up a whole section of country to get feed for a few old sheep."

"Yep," nodded Cal, "and that's what is at the bottom of most of the sheep and cattlemen's wars you read about."

At first the boys felt inclined to chase up Jeb, but they concluded that it would be impracticable, so, allowing the sheepman to take his distant way off into the lonelier fastnesses of the Sierras, they hastened to the stream and began splashing about, enjoying the sensation hugely. Suddenly a voice on the bank above hailed them. Somewhat startled they all turned quickly and burst into a roar of laughter as they saw Herr Muller, who had slipped quietly from among them "holding them up" with a camera.

"Lookd idt breddy, blease," he grinned, "a picdgure I take idt."

Click!

And there the whole crew were transferred to a picture for future development.

"I guess we won't be very proud of that picture," laughed Nat, turning to his ablutions once more.

"No, we must answer in the negative," punned Joe. But the next minute he paid the penalty as Cal leaped upon him and bore him struggling to the earth. Over and over they rolled, Cal attempting to stuff a handful of soapsuds in the punning youth's mouth.

"Help! Nat!" yelled Joe.

"Not me," grinned Nat, enjoying the rough sport, "you deserve your fate."

Soon after order was restored and they sat down to a meal to which they were fully prepared to do ample justice.

"Say," remarked Cal suddenly, with his mouth full of canned plum pudding, "this stream and those sheep back yonder put me in mind of a story I once heard."

"What was it?" came the chorus.

"Wall, children, sit right quiet an' I'll tell yer. Oncet upon a time thar was a sheepman in these hills——"

"Sing ho, the sheepman in the hills!" hummed Joe.

"Thar was a sheepman in these hills," went on Cal, disdaining the interruption, "who got in trouble with some cattlemen, the same way as this one will if they git him. Wall, this sheepman had a pal and the two of them decided one day that ef they didn't want ter act as reliable imitations of porous plasters they'd better be gitting. So they gabbed and got. Wall, the cattlemen behind 'em pressed em pretty dern close, an' one night they come ter a creek purty much like this one.

"Wall, they was in a hurry ter git across as you may suppose, but the problem was ter git ther sheep over. You see they didn't want ter leave 'em as they was about all the worldly goods they had. But the sheep was inclined to mutiny."

"Muttony, you mean, don't you?" grinned Joe, dodging to safe distance. When quiet was restored, Cal resumed.

"As I said, the sheep was inclined ter argify"—this with a baleful glance at Joe—"and so they decided that they'd pick up each sheep in ther arms and carry them over till they got the hull three thousand sheep across ther crick. You see it wuz ther only thing ter do."

The boys nodded interestedly.

"Wall, one of ther fellows he picks up a sheep and takes it across and comes back fer another, and then ther other feller he does the same and in the meantime ther first feller had got his other across and come back fer more and ther second was on his way over and——"

"Say, Cal," suggested Nat quietly, "let's suppose the whole bunch is across. You see——"

"Say, who's tellin' this?" inquired Cal indignantly.

"You are, but——"

"Wall, let me go ahead in my own way," protested the Westerner. "Let's see where I was; I—oh yes, wall, and then ther other feller he dumped down his

sheep and come back fer another and——Say, how many does that make, got across?"

"Search me," said Joe.

Nat shook his head.

"I d-d-d-d-on't know," stuttered Ding-dong Bell.

"Diss iss foolishness-ness," protested Herr Muller indignantly.

"Wall, that ends it," said Cal tragically, "I can't go on."

"Why not?" came an indignant chorus.

"Wall, you fellers lost count of ther sheep and there ain't no way of going on till we get 'em all over. You see there's three thousand and——"

This time they caught a merry twinkle in Cal's eye, and with wild yells they arose and fell upon him. It was a ruffled Cal who got up and resumed a sandy bit of canned plum pudding.

"You fellers don't appreciate realism one bit," grumbled Cal.

"Not three thousand sheep-power realism," retorted Nat with a laugh.



## **CHAPTER XXIII.**

### **THE HUT IN THE MOUNTAINS.**

The next morning they were off once more. As may be imagined each one of the party was anxious to reach the canyon in which Cal's mine was located. There they would be in touch with civilization and in a position to retaliate upon the band of Col. Morello if they dared to attack them.

On the evening of the second day they found themselves not far from the place, according to Cal's calculations. But they were in a rugged country through which it would be impossible to proceed by night, so it was determined to make camp as soon as a suitable spot could be found.

As it so happened, one was not far distant. A gentle slope comparatively free from rocks and stones, and affording a good view in either direction, was in the immediate vicinity. The auto, therefore, was run up there and brought to a halt, and the Motor Rangers at once set about looking for a spring. They had plenty of water in the tank, but preferred, if they could get it, to drink the fresh product. Water that has been carried a day or two in a tank is not nearly as nice as the fresh, sparkling article right out of the ground.

"Look," cried Joe, as they scattered in search of a suitable spot, "there's a little hut up there."

"M-m-m-maybe a h-h-h-hermit l-l-lives there," suggested Ding-dong in rather a quavering voice.

"Nonsense," put in Nat, "that hut has been deserted for many years. See the ridge pole is broken, and the roof is all sagging in. Let's go and explore it."

With a whoop they set out across the slope for the ruined hut, which stood back in a small clearing cut out of the forest. Blackened stumps stood about it but it was long since the ground had been cultivated. A few mouldering corn stalks, however, remained to show that the place had once been inhabited.

As for the hut itself, it was a primitive shelter of rough logs, the roof of which had been formed out of "slabs" split from the logs direct. A stone chimney was crumbling away at one end, but it was many a year since any cheerful wreaths of



smoke had wound upward from it.

The boys were alone, Cal and Herr Muller having remained to attend to the auto and build a fire. Somehow, in the fading evening light, this ruined human habitation on the edge of the dark Sierran forest had an uncanny effect on the boys. The stillness was profound. And half consciously the lads sank their voices to whispers as they drew closer.

"S-s-s-s-say hadn't we b-b-b-better go back and g-g-g-get a g-gun?" suggested Ding-dong in an awe-struck tone.

"What for," rejoined Joe, whose voice was also sunk to a low pitch, "not scared, are you?"

"N-n-n-no, but it seems kind of creepy somehow."

"Nonsense," said Nat crisply, "come on, let's see what's inside."

By this time they were pretty close to the place, and a few strides brought Nat to the rotting door. It was locked apparently, for, as he gave it a vigorous shake, it did not respond but remained closed.

"Come on, fellows. Bring your shoulders to bear," cried Nat, "now then all together!"

Three strong young bodies battered the door with their shoulders with all their might, and at the first assault the clumsy portal went crashing off its hinges, falling inward with a startling "bang."

"Look out!" yelled Nat as it subsided, and it was well he gave the warning.

Before his sharp cry had died out a dark form about the size of a small rabbit came leaping out with a squeak like the sound made by a slate pencil. Before the boy could recover from his involuntary recoil the creature was followed by a perfect swarm of his companions. Squeaking and showing their teeth the creatures came pouring forth, their thousands of little eyes glowing like tiny coals.

"Timber rats!" shouted Nat, taking to his heels, but not before some of the little animals had made a show of attacking him. Nat was too prudent a lad to try conclusions with the ferocious rodents, which can be savage as wild cats, when cornered. Deeming discretion the better part of valor he sped down the hillside

after Ding-dong and Joe, who had started back for the camp at the first appearance of the torrent of timber rats.

From a safe distance the lads watched the exodus. For ten minutes or more the creatures came rushing forth in a solid stream. But at last the stampede began to dwindle, and presently the last old gray fellow joined his comrades in the woods.

"Great Scott!" exclaimed Joe, "did you ever see such a sight?"

"Well, I've heard of places in which the rats gathered in immense numbers, but I never knew before that such a thing as we have seen was possible," replied Nat; "there must have been thousands."

"Mum-m-m-m-millions," stuttered Ding-dong, his eyes still round with astonishment.

"I suppose some supplies were left in there," suggested Nat, "and that the rats gathered there and made a regular nesting place of it after the owner departed."

"Well, now that they have all cleared out, let's go and have a look," said Joe.

"Might as well," agreed Nat, "it's a good thing those creatures didn't take it into their heads to attack us, as I have read they have done to miners. They might have picked our bones clean."

They entered the hut with feelings of intense curiosity. It was well that they trod gingerly as they crossed the threshold, for the floor was so honeycombed with the holes of the timber rats that walking was difficult and even dangerous. The creatures had evidently gnawed through the sill beams supporting the floor, for the hearthstone in front of the open fireplace had subsided and sagged through into the foundations, leaving a big open space. The boys determined to explore this later but in the meantime other things in the hut attracted their attention.

There was a rough board table with a cracker box to serve as chair drawn up close to it. But both the table and the box had been almost gnawed to pieces by the ravenous rats. Some tin utensils stood upon the table but all trace of what they might have contained had, of course, vanished. Even pictures from illustrated magazines which had once been pasted on the walls had been devoured, leaving only traces to show what they had been.

Nat, while the others had been investigating at large, had made his way to the corner of the hut where a rude bunk had been built. As he gazed into its dark recesses he shrank back with a startled cry.

"Fellows! Oh, fellows! Come here!"

The other two hastened to his side and were scarcely less shocked than he at what they saw. Within the bunk, the bed clothing of which had been devoured wholesale, lay a heap of whitened bones. A skull at the head of the rude bed-place told all too clearly that the owner had either been killed or had died in the lonely place and had been devoured by the rats. The grisly evidences were only too plain.

The boys were almost unnerved by this discovery, and it was some time before any one of them spoke. Then Nat said in a low tone, almost a whisper:—

"I wonder who he was?"

"There's a tin box," said Joe, pointing to a receptacle beneath the bunk, "maybe there's something in that to tell."

"Perhaps," said Nat, picking the article up. It was a much battered case of the type known as "despatch box." The marks of the rats' teeth showed upon it, but it had not been opened. A rusty hammer with the handle half gnawed off lay a short distance away. With one sharp blow of this tool Nat knocked the lock off the despatch box. He gave a cry of triumph as he opened it. Within, yellow and faded, were several papers.

"Let's get into the open air and examine these," suggested Nat, who was finding the ratty odor of the place almost overpowering. The others gladly followed him. Squatting down outside the hut in the fading light, they opened the first paper. It seemed to be a will of some sort and was signed Elias Goodale. Putting it aside for further perusal, Nat, in turn, opened and glanced at a packet of faded letters in a woman's handwriting, a folded paper containing a lock of hair, seemingly that of an infant, and at last a paper that seemed fresher than the others. This ink, instead of being a faded brown, was black and clear. The paper seemed to have been torn from a blank book.

"Read it out," begged Joe.

"All right," said Nat, "there doesn't seem to be much of it, so I will."

Holding the paper close to his eyes in the waning day, the boy read as follows:—

"I am writing this with what I fear is my last conscious effort. It will go with the other papers in the box, and some day perhaps may reach my friends. I hope and pray so. It has been snowing for weeks and weeks. In my solitude it is dreadful, but no more of that. I was took down ill three days ago and have been steadily getting worse. It is hard to die like this on the eve of my triumph, but if it is to be it must be. The sapphires—for I found them at last—are hid under the hearthstone. I pray whoever finds this to see that they are restored to my folks whom I wronged much in my life before I came out here.

"As I write this I feel myself growing weaker. The timber rats—those terrible creatures—have grown quite bold now. They openly invade the hut and steal my stores. Even if I recover I shall hardly have enough to live out the winter. The Lord have mercy on me and bring this paper to the hands of honest men. They will find details in the other papers of my identity."

"Is that all?" asked Joe as Nat came to a stop.

"That's all," rejoined Nat in a sober voice. "What do you think of it?"

"That we'd better tell Cal and see what he advises."

"That's my idea, too. Come on, let's tell him about it."

The Motor Rangers lost no time in hastening back to the camp and Cal's face of amazement as he heard their story was a sight to behold. As for Herr Muller he tore his hair in despair at not having secured a photograph of the rats as they poured out of the ruined hut.

"I've heard of this Elias Goodale," said Cal as he looked over the papers. "He was an odd sort of recluse that used to come to Lariat twice a year for his grub. The fellows all thought he was crazy. He was always talking about finding sapphires and making the folks at home rich. I gathered that some time he had done 'em a great wrong of some kind and wanted to repair it the best way he could. Anyhow, he had a claim hereabouts that he used to work on all the time. The boys all told him that the Injuns had taken all the sapphires there ever was in this part of the hills out of 'em, but he kep' right on. I last heard of him about a year ago—poor chap."

"Was he old?" asked Nat.

"Wall, maybe not in years, but in appearance he was the oldest, saddest chap you ever set eyes on. The boys all thought he was loony, but to me it always appeared that he had some sort of a secret sorrow."

"Poor fellow," exclaimed Nat, "whatever wrong he may have done his death atoned for it."

They were silent for a minute or so, thinking of the last scenes in that lonely hut with the snow drifting silently about it and the dying man within cringing from the timber rats.

"Say!" exclaimed Joe suddenly, starting them out of this sad reverie, "what's the matter with finding out if he told the truth about those sapphires or if it was only a crazy dream?"

"You're on, boy," exclaimed Cal, "I think myself that he must hev found a lot of junk and figgered out in his crazy mind they wuz sapphires and hid 'em away."

"It's worth investigating, anyhow," said Nat, starting up followed by the others.

It took them but a few seconds to reach the hut. Having entered they all crowded eagerly about the hearthstone. Cal dropped into the hole with his revolver ready for any stray rats that might remain, but not a trace of one was to be seen. Suddenly he gave a shout and seized a rough wooden box with both hands.

"Ketch hold, boys," he cried, "it's so heavy I can't hardly heft it."

Willing hands soon drew the box up upon the crazy floor, and Nat produced the rusty hammer.

"Now to see if it was all a dream or reality," he cried, as he brought the tool down on the half rotten covering. The wood split with a rending sound and displayed within a number of dull-looking, half translucent rocks.

"Junk!" cried Cal, who had hoisted himself out of the hole by this time, "a lot of blame worthless old pyrites."

"Not py a chug ful," came an excited voice as Herr Muller pressed forward,

"dem is der purest sapphires I haf effer seen."

"How do you know?" demanded Nat quickly.

"Pecos vunce py Amstertam I vork py a cheweller's. I know stones in der rough and dese is an almost priceless gollecdion."

"Hooroo!" yelled Cal, "we'll all be rich."

He stepped quickly forward and prepared to scoop up a handful of the rough-looking stones, but Nat held him back.

"They're not ours, Cal," he said, "they belong to the folks named in that will."

"You're right, boy," said Cal abashed, "I let my enthoosiasm git away with me. But what are we going to do about it? Them folks don't live around here."

"We'll have to find them and——Hark!"

The boy gave an alarmed exclamation and looked behind him. He could have sworn that a dark shadow passed the window as they bent above the dully-gleaming stones. But although he darted to the door like a flash, nothing was to be seen outside.

"What's the matter?" asked Cal, curiously.

"Nothing," was the quiet rejoinder, "I thought I saw another timber rat, but I guess I was mistaken."



## CHAPTER XXIV. FACING THEIR FOES.

"Nat, wake up!"

"*Nat!*"

"NAT!"

Joe's third exclamation awoke the slumbering boy and he raised himself on the rough couch on one arm.

"What is it, Joe?" he asked, gazing in a startled way at his chum. Joe was sitting bolt upright on the rough, wooden-framed bed, and gazing through a dilapidated window outside upon the moon-flooded canyon.

"Hark!" whispered Joe, "don't you hear something?"

"Nothing but the water running down that old flume behind the hut."

"That's queer, I don't hear it any more either," said Joe; "guess it was a false alarm."

"Guess so," assented Nat, settling down once more in the blankets. From various parts of the rough hut came the steady, regular breathing of Ding-dong Bell, Cal and Herr Muller. The latter must have been having a nightmare for he kept muttering:—

"Lookd outd py der sapphires. Lookd outd!"

"No need for him to worry, they are safe enough in the hiding place where Cal used to keep his dust when he had any," grunted Joe, still sitting erect and on the alert, however. Somehow he could not get it out of his head that outside the hut he had heard stealthy footsteps a few moments before.

The Motor Rangers and their friends had arrived at Cal's hut in the canyon that afternoon. Their first care had been to dispose safely of the box of precious stones in the hiding place mentioned by Joe. The evening before their last act at the camp by the ruined hut had been to consign the remains of the dead miner to

a grave under the great pines. Nat with his pocketknife had carved a memorial upon a slab of timber.

"Sacred to the memory of Elias Goodale. Died——."

---

And so, with a last look backward at the scene of the lonely tragedy of the hills, they had proceeded. Nat had not mentioned to his companions that he was sure that he had seen some one at the window, as they bent over the sapphires. After all it might have been an hallucination. The boy's first and natural assumption had been that whoever had peeped through the window was a member of Col. Morello's band, sent forward to track them. But then he recollected the burned forest that lay behind. It seemed hardly credible that any member of the band could have passed that barrier and arrived at the hut at almost the same time as the Motor Rangers. Had Nat known what accurate and minute knowledge the colonel possessed of the secret trails and short cuts of that part of the Sierras he might not, however, have been so incredulous of his first theory.

The same afternoon they had reached a summit from which Cal, pointing downward, had shown them a scanty collection of huts amid a dark sea of pines.

"That's the place," he said.

Half an hour's ride had brought them to the canyon which they found had been deserted even by the patient Chinamen, since Cal's last visit. His hut, however, was undisturbed and had not been raided by timber rats, thanks to an arrangement of tin pans set upside down which Cal had contrived on the corner posts. The afternoon had been spent in concealing the sapphire chest in a recess behind some rocks some distance from the hut. A short tour of exploration followed. As Cal had said on a previous occasion, the camp had once been the scene of great mining activity. Traces of it were everywhere. The hillside was honeycombed with deserted workings and mildewed embankments of slag. Scrub and brush had sprung up everywhere, and weeds flourished among rotting, rusty mining machinery. It was a melancholy spot, and the boys had been anxious to leave it and push on to Big Oak Flat, ten miles beyond. But by the time they reached this decision it was almost dark and the road before them was too rough to traverse by night. It had been decided therefore to camp in Cal's hut



that night.

"Pity we can't float like a lot of logs," said Joe, as he stood looking at the water roaring through the flume which was a short distance behind the hut.

"Yep," rejoined Cal, "if we could, we'd reach Big Oak Flat in jig time. This here flume comes out thereabouts."

"Who built it?" inquired Nat, gazing at the moss-grown contrivance through which the water was rushing at a rapid rate. There had been a cloudburst on a distant mountain and the stream was yellow and turbid. At other times, so Cal informed them, the flume was almost dry.

"Why," said Cal, in reply to Nat's question, "it was put up by some fellows who thought they saw money in lumbering here. That was after the mines petered out. But it was too far to a market and after working it a while they left. We've always let the flume stand, as it is useful to carry off the overflow from the river above."

Somehow sleep wouldn't come to Joe. Try as he would he could not doze off. He counted sheep jumping over a fence, kept tab of bees issuing from a hive and tried a dozen other infallible recipes for inducing slumber. But they wouldn't work. Nat, after his awakening, had, however, dozed off as peacefully as before.

Suddenly, Joe sat up once more. He had been electrified by the sound of a low voice outside the hut. This time there was no mistake. Some human being was prowling about that lonely place. Who could it be? He was not kept long in doubt. It was the voice of Dayton. Low as it was there was no mistaking it. Joe's heart almost stopped beating as he listened:—

"They're off as sound as so many tops, colonel. All we've got to do is to go in and land the sapphires, and the kid, too."

"You are sure they have them?"

"Of course. Didn't I see them in old Goodale's hut? You always said the old fellow was crazy. I guess you know better now. These cubs blundered into the biggest sapphire find I ever heard of."

Joe was up now, and cautiously creeping about the room. One after another he awoke his sleeping companions. Before arousing Herr Muller, however, he clapped a hand over the German's mouth to check any outcry that the emotional

Teuton might feel called upon to utter.

Presently the voices died out and cautiously approaching the window Nat could see in the moonlight half a dozen dark forms further down the canyon. Suddenly a moonbeam glinted brightly on a rifle barrel.

"They mean business this time and no mistake," thought Nat.

Tiptoeing back he told the others what he had seen.

"Maybe we can ketch them napping," said Cal, "oh, if only we had a telephone, the sheriff could nab the whole pack."

"Yes, but we haven't," said the practical Nat.

Cal tiptoed to the door and opened it a crack. If there had been any doubt that they were closely watched it was dispelled then.

Zip!

*Phut!*

Two bullets sang by Cal's ears as he jumped hastily back, and buried themselves in the door jamb.

"Purty close shooting for moonlight," he remarked coolly.

"What are we going to do?" demanded Joe.

"Well, thanks to our foresight in bringing in all the rifles and ammunition, we can make things interesting for them coyotes fer a long time," rejoined Cal.

"But in this lonely place they could besiege us for a month if need be," said Nat.

Cal looked grave.

"That's so, lad," he agreed, "we'd be starved and thirsted out before long. If only we could communicate with Big Oak Flat."

Nat dropped off into one of his deep studies. The boy's active mind was revolving the situation. It resolved itself into a very simple proposition. The colonel's band was well armed. They had ample opportunities for getting food and water. Situated as the Motor Rangers were, the others could keep them

bottled up as long as they could stand it. Then nothing would be left but surrender. Nat knew now from what Joe had told him, that it was no fancy he had had at the hut. Dayton had been on their track and had unluckily arrived in time for his cupidity to be tempted by the sight of the sapphires. His injury when the man-trap fell must have been only a slight one. Nat knew the character of the outlaws too well to imagine that they would leave the canyon till they had the sapphire box and could wreak their revenge on the Motor Rangers.

True, as long as their ammunition held out the occupants of the hut could have stood off an army. But as has been said, without food or water they were hopeless captives. Unless—unless——

Nat leaped up from the bedstead with a low, suppressed:—

"Whoop!"

"You've found a way out of it?" exclaimed Joe, throwing an arm around his chum's shoulder.

"I think so, old fellow—listen."

They gathered around while in low tones Nat rehearsed his plan.

"I ain't er goin' ter let you do it," protested Cal.

"But you must, Cal, it's our only chance. You are needed here to help stand off those rascals. It is evident that they are in no hurry to attack us. They know that they can starve us out if they just squat down and wait."

"Thet's so," assented Cal, scratching his head, "I guess there ain't no other way out of it but—Nat, I think a whole lot of you, and don't you take no chances you don't have to."

"Not likely to," was the rejoinder, "and now the sooner I start the better, so good-bye, boys."

Nat choked as he uttered the words, and the others crowded about him.

"Donner blitzten," blurted out Herr Muller, "I dink you are der pravest poy I effer heardt of, und——"

Nat cut him short. There was a brief hand pressure between himself and Joe, the same with Ding-dong and the others, and then the lad, with a quick, athletic

movement, caught hold of a roof beam and hoisted himself upward toward a hole in the roof through which a stone chimney had once projected. Almost noiselessly he drew himself through it and the next moment vanished from their view.

"Now then to cover his retreat," said Joe, seizing his rifle.

The others, arming themselves in the same way rushed toward the window. Through its broken panes a volley was discharged down the canyon. A chorus of derisive yells greeted it from Morello's band.

"Yell away," snarled Cal, "maybe you'll sing a different tune before daybreak."

In the meantime Nat had emerged on the roof of the cabin. It was a difficult task he had set himself and this was but the first step. But as the volley rang out he knew that the attention of the outlaws had been distracted momentarily and he wriggled his way down toward the eaves at the rear of the hut. Luckily, the roof sloped backward in that direction, so that he was screened from the view of any one in front.

Reaching the eaves he hung on for a second, and then dropped the ten feet or so to the ground. Then crouching like an Indian he darted through the brush till he reached the side of the old flume.

He noted with satisfaction that the water was still running in a good stream down the mouldering trench. With a quick, backward look, Nat cast off his coat and boots, and flinging them aside picked up a board about six feet long that lay near by.

The water at the head of the flume traversed a little level of ground, and here it ran more slowly than it did when it reached the grade below. Extending himself full length on the board, just as a boy does on a sleigh on a snowy hill, Nat held on for a moment.

He gave one look about him at the moonlit hills, the dark pines and the rocky cliffs. Then, with a murmured prayer, he let go.

The next instant he was shooting down through the flume at a rate that took his breath away. All about him roared the voices of the water while the crosspieces over his head whizzed by in one long blur.



## CHAPTER XXV. THROUGH THE FLUME.

Faster than he had ever travelled before in his life Nat was hurtled along down the flume. Water dashed upward into his face, half choking him and occasionally his board would hit the wooden side with a bump that almost threw him off. His knuckles were bruised and bleeding and his head dizzy from the motion. It was the wildest ride that the lad, or any other lad for that matter, had ever undertaken.

Suddenly, ahead of him—above the noise of the rushing water—came another sound, a deep-throated, sullen thunder. As he shot along with the speed of a projectile, Nat realized what the strange sound betokened. The end of the flume. Cal had told them that the raised water-course discharged its contents into a big pool at that point. With a sudden sinking of the heart Nat realized that he had forgotten to inquire how high the drop was. If it was very high—or if there was but little water in the pool below the flume—he would be dashed to pieces, or injured so that he could not swim, and thus drown.

But even as the alarming thought was in his mind, Nat felt himself shot outward into space. Instinctively his hands came together and he dived downward, entering the water about twenty feet below him, with a clean dive.

For a space the waters closed above the lad's head and he was lost to view in the moonlit pool. When he came to the surface, out of breath and bruised, but otherwise uninjured, he saw that he was in what had formerly been used as a "collection-pool" for the logs from the forest above. He struck out for the shore at once and presently emerged upon the bank. But as he clambered out, the figure of a Chinaman who had been seated fishing on the brink galvanized into sudden life. The Mongolian was poaching in private waters under cover of the darkness and was naturally startled out of a year's growth at the sudden apparition.

With an ear-splitting screech the Mongolian leaped about three feet into the air as if propelled by a spring, and then, with his stumpy legs going under him like twin piston rods, he made tracks for the town.

"Bad spill-it! Bad spill-it! He come catchee me!" he howled at the top of his voice, tearing along.

As he dashed into the town a tall man dressed in Western style, and with a determined, clean-cut face under his broad-brimmed sombrero, stepped out of the lighted interior of the post-office, where the mail for the early stage was being sorted.

"Here, Sing Lee," he demanded, catching the astonished Chinaman by the shoulder and swinging him around, "what's the matter with you?"

"Wasee malla me, Missa Sheliff? Me tellee you number one chop quickee timee. Me fish down by old lumbel yard and me see spill-it come flum watel!"

"What?" roared Jack Tebbetts, the sheriff, "a ghost? More likely one of Morello's band; I heard they were around here somewhere. But hullo, what's this?"

He broke off as a strange figure came flying down the street, almost as fast as the fear-crazed Chinaman.

"Wow!" yelled the sheriff, drawing an enormous gun as this weird figure came in view, "Halt whar you be, stranger? You're a suspicious character."

Nat, out of breath, wet through, bruised, bleeding and with his clothing almost ripped off him, could not but admit the truth of this remark. But as he opened his mouth to speak a sudden dizziness seemed to overcome him. His knees developed strange hinges and he felt that in another moment he would topple over.

The sheriff stepped quickly forward and caught him.

"Here, hold up, lad," he said crisply, "what's ther trouble?"



"One o'clock. We ought to be hearing from Nat soon."

Cal put his old silver watch back in his pocket and resumed his anxious pacing of the floor. The others, in various attitudes of alertness, were scattered about the place. Since Nat's departure they had been, as you may imagine, at a

pretty tight tension. Somehow, waiting there for an attack or for rescue, was much more trying than action would have been.

"Do you guess he got through all right?" asked Joe.

"I hope so," rejoined Cal, "but it was about as risky a bit of business as a lad could undertake. I blame myself for ever letting him do it."

"If Nat had his mind made up you couldn't have stopped him," put in Joe earnestly.

"H-h-h-hark!" exclaimed Ding-dong.

Far down the canyon they could hear a sound. It grew closer. For an instant a wild hope that it was the rescue party flashed through their minds. But the next instant a voice hailed them. Evidently Col. Morello had made up his mind that a siege was too lengthy a proceeding.

"I will give you fellows in the hut one chance," he said in a loud voice, "give up that boy Nat Trevor and the sapphires and I will withdraw my men."

Cal's answer was to take careful aim, and if Joe had not hastily pulled his arm down that moment would have been Morello's last. But as Cal's white face was framed in the dark window a bullet sang by viciously and showered them with splinters.

"That's for a lesson," snarled Morello, "there are lots more where that came from."

But as he spoke there came a sudden yell of alarm from his rear.

"We're attacked!" came a voice.

At the same instant the sound of a distant volley resounded.

"Hooray! Nat made good!" yelled Cal, leaping about and cracking his fingers.

The next instant a rapid thunder of hoofs, as the outlaws wheeled and made off, was heard. As their dark forms raced by, the posse headed by Sheriff Tebbetts and Nat, fired volley after volley at them, but only two fell, slightly wounded. The rest got clear away. A subsequent visit to their fortress showed that on escaping from the posse they had revisited it and cleaned all the loot out of it that they could. The express box stolen from Cal's stage was, however,



recovered.

As the posse galloped up, cheering till the distant canyons echoed and re-echoed, the besieged party rushed out. They made for Nat and pulled him from his horse. Then, with the young Motor Ranger on their shoulders, they paraded around the hut with him, yelling like maniacs, "'For he's a jolly good fellow!'"

"And that don't begin to express it," said the sheriff to himself.

"He's the grit kid," put in one of the hastily-gathered posse admiringly.

And the "Grit Kid" Nat was to them henceforth.

The remainder of the night was spent in the hut, Nat telling and retelling his wild experience in the flume. The next morning the posse set out at once at top speed for the fortress of Morello, the sapphire chest being carried in the auto which accompanied the authorities. Of course they found no trace of the outlaws; but the place was destroyed and can never again be used by any nefarious band.

Nat and his friends were anxious for the sheriff to take charge of the sapphire find, but this he refused to do. It remained, therefore, for the Motor Rangers themselves to unravel the mystery surrounding it.

How they accomplished this, and the devious paths and adventures into which the quest led them, will be told in the next volume of this series. Here also will be found a further account of Col. Morello and his band who, driven from their haunts by the Motor Rangers, sought revenge on the lads.

Having remained in the vicinity of Big Oak Flat till every point connected with Morello and his band had been cleared up, the boys decided to go on to the famous Yosemite Valley. There they spent some happy weeks amid its awe-inspiring natural wonders. With them was Herr Muller and Cal. Bismark, as Cal had foretold, returned to the hotel at Lariat and Herr Muller got his money.

But all the time the duty which devolved upon the Motor Rangers of finding Elias Goodale's heirs and bestowing their rich inheritance on them was not forgotten. Nat and his companions considered it in the nature of a sacred trust—this mission which a strange chance had placed in their hands. How they carried out their task, and what difficulties and dangers they faced in doing it, will be related in "THE MOTOR RANGERS ON BLUE WATER; OR, THE SECRET OF THE DERELICT."

THE END.

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**Transcriber's Notes:**

Obvious punctuation errors repaired. Varied hyphenation was retained.

Page 54, "attampt" changed to "attempt" (and an attempt made)

Page 160, "penertate" changed to "penetrate" (could not penetrate into)

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