

JACK RANGER'S WESTERN TRIP

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CHAPTER I

FUN AT WASHINGTON HALL

"Now then, are you all ready?" inquired a voice in a hoarse whisper.

"Gallop-ing grasshoppers! We're as ready as we ever will be, Jack Ranger!" replied one from a crowd of boys gathered on the campus of Washington Hall that evening in June.

"Nat Anderson, if you speak again, above a whisper," said Jack Ranger, the leader, sternly, "you will have to play 'Marching Through Georgia' as a solo on a fine tooth comb seven times without stopping!"

"Sneezing snakes! 'Nuff said!" exclaimed Nat, this time in the required whisper. "Playing combs always makes my lips tickle."

"Now then, is every one ready?" asked Jack again. "If you are, come on, for it's getting late and we'll have to do this job quick and be back before Dr. Mead thinks it is time to send Martin the monitor after us. Forward march!"

Then the crowd of boys, from the boarding school of Dr. Henry Mead, known as Washington Hall, but sometimes called Lakeside Academy, from the fact that it was on Rudmore Lake, in the town of Rudmore, started forth on mischief bent.

It was Jack Ranger's idea,—any one could have told that. For Jack was always up to some trick or other. Most of the tricks were harmless, and ended in good-natured fun, for Jack was one of the best-hearted lads in the world. This time he had promised his chums at the academy something new, though the term, which was within a month of closing, had been anything but lacking in excitement.

"Fred Kaler, have you got your mouth organ with you?" asked Jack, turning to a lad just behind him.

"He always has his mouth-organ, or how could he speak?" asked an athletic looking lad walking beside Jack.

"That's a poor joke, Sam Palmer," commented Jack, and he ducked just in time to avoid a playful fist Sam shot out.

"Want me to play?" asked Fred.

"Play? You couldn't play in a hundred years," broke in Nat Anderson, Jack's best chum. "But make a noise like music."

"Play yourself, if you're so smart!" retorted Fred.

"Simultaneous Smithereens!" cried Nat, using one of his characteristic expressions. "Don't get mad. Go ahead and play."

"Yes, liven things up a bit," went on Jack. "Give us a good marching tune. We're far enough off now so none at the Hall can hear us."

Fred blew a lively air and the score of boys behind him began to march in step.

"What is it this time?" asked Sam in a low tone, of Jack. "You haven't let on a word."

"We're going to administer a deserved rebuke to a certain character in this town," Jack answered. "You've heard of Old Smelts, haven't you?"

"That fellow who's always beating his wife and hitting his little girl?"

"That's the old chap. Well, I heard he just got out of the lock-up for being too free with his fists on the little girl. Now if there's anything that makes me mad it's to see a kid hurt, girl or boy, it doesn't matter. I've got a surprise in store for Mr. Smelts."

"What is it?"

"You've heard of the Klu-Klux-Klan, I suppose?"

"You mean that southern society that made such a stir during the Civil War?"

"That's the one. We're going to be Klu-Klux-Klaners to-night."

"But we haven't got any uniforms."

"You'll find them in yonder wood!" exclaimed Jack in tragic tones, and he pointed to a clump of trees just ahead.

"What's this, amateur theatricals?" asked Nat, catching the last words.

"Maybe," replied Jack. "Now Fred you can pay off your orchestra," he added. "I want to do a little monologue."

The boys crowded around Jack, and he told them what he had related to Sam.

"I have provided the necessary uniforms to enable us to take the part of Klu-Klux-Klaners," he said. "Old Smelts is a southerner and knows the significance of the thing. We'll throw a good scare into him, and maybe he'll let his wife and daughter alone. Now we're to put on the sheets and the tall white helmets, and you leave the rest to me. Do just as I do when we get to Smelts's house."

"Hemispheres and hot handkerchiefs!" exclaimed Nat. "This is going some!"

Jack went to the foot of a big hollow tree, from which he pulled a large bundle. This he opened and showed a number of ghostly uniforms. He distributed these among the boys, who at once donned them, making a weird looking band in the little glade.

"Every one stand still until I put the finishing touches on," commanded Jack.

With a bottle of phosphorous he outlined waving flame lines around the holes cut for eyes, nose, and mouth on each white-shrouded figure,

"Now we're ready," announced the leader. "Smelts's house is just beyond this wood. Follow me, and, Fred, when you see me put my hand on my head that means I want slow tremulous music, like they have in the theater when, the heroine is dying."

"Your wishes shall be obeyed," spoke Fred, in hollow tones, whereat the others laughed.

"Silence!" commanded Jack.

It was a good thing those in charge of Washington Hall could not see the pupils just then. If they had the prank would have cost the participators dear. But, after all, as Jack said, it was in a good cause. On they went until their leader held up a warning hand.

"Arrange yourselves in a circle about me," he whispered. "I am going to beard the lion in his den."

He walked up to a small cottage that stood some distance from any other dwellings on a lonely street in the village, and knocked loudly.

"Who's there?" came a voice, in answer, a few seconds later from an upper window.

"Tobias Smelts, come forth!" called Jack in deep tones. "We would hold speech with thee!"

The boys could see a man thrust his head further out of the casement.

"Come forth and linger not!" called Jack.

"Oh! Oh! It's the Klu-Kluxers! It's the Klan! They're after me!" exclaimed Smelts. "Oh, what shall I do?"

"Come forth if ye would not have us drag ye out!" cried Jack. "We have business with thee!"

"What'll I do?" wailed Tobias.

"Better go 'fore they come in here after ye," a woman's voice could be heard to say. "Remember what they did to Pete Baker in South Carolina!"

The head was drawn in, with many a groan.

"Get ready, he's coming," whispered Jack.

A few minutes later a very much frightened man, clad in his shirt and trousers came out on the front steps, around which the boys in their ghostly disguise were gathered.

"Advance!" commanded Jack, and Tobias, his knees trembling, walked on until he stood in the midst of the frolicking students.

"Bind him to the stake!" commanded the leader.

A small, pointed stake had been prepared and with a hammer it was driven into the ground. Then the man was fastened to it with several coils of clothes line.

"Now the faggots!" said Jack, and the boys dropped some pieces of wood at the victims feet. A second later Jack had emptied the phial of phosphorous over the wood, and the lurid light shone forth.

"They're burning me alive!" yelled Tobias. "Save me!"

"This is the fate dealt out to all who beat their wives and children!" chanted Jack. At the same time he raised his hand to his head and Fred played tremulous music on the harmonica, lending a weirdness to the scene.

"Please don't kill me, good Mr. Klu-Klux-Klan men," begged Tobias. "I'll never do it again. I promise you I never will!"

"Do you promise by the great seal of the United States?" inquired Jack, in sepulchral accents.

"Yes, Oh yes; I'll promise anything!"

"'Tis well! This was but the first trial by fire. The next time will be more severe!" and with that Jack kicked aside the phosphorous covered sticks and signaled to those holding the ends of the ropes to loosen them.

Tremblingly Tobias crawled into the house.

"Be ye dead, Tobias?" asked his frightened wife, yet she was not a little gratified that her husband had made the promise the mysterious visitors exacted.

"Jest about," was the answer. "Oh, this is a terrible night!"

"Hence, my brave men," spoke Jack solemnly. "We have work elsewhere. But remember, Tobias Smelts, if thou dost so much as raise a finger to a woman or child we shall hear of it through our ghostly messengers and will visit thee again."

"I'll be good! Oh, I'll be good!" promised Tobias.

Then at a nod from Jack the white-robed figures filed away into the darkness, Fred playing a dirge.

"Say, that was the best sport yet," said Sam, when they were at a safe distance.

"Yes, and it was a good thing," said Jack. "That old codger'll not beat his wife any more, I reckon."

And it might be said in passing that he did not for a while. The visit of the masquerading Klu-Klux-Klan was a most effective remedy, and the whole village wondered what had cured Tobias temporarily at least, of his bad habit.

"Say, but you're all right," remarked Bob Movel to Jack, as the boys rid themselves of the costumes in the woods a little later.

"Towering tadpoles! I should say he was!" exclaimed Nat. "What will you do next?"

"I guess we'd better be getting back to the Hall," said Jack. "Professor Grimm might take a notion to sit up late and spot us."

While the boys were slipping quietly back to their rooms, having enjoyed a night's fun, which also had its useful side, we may take this opportunity of introducing them more formally to the reader.

Those who read the first volume of this series, entitled "Jack Ranger's Schooldays; Or, The Rivals of Washington Hall," need not be told how it was that our hero and his friends came to be at that seat of learning. Jack was a bright American lad, who lived with his three maiden aunts, Josephine, Mary and Angeline Stebbins, in the village of Denton. Jack was to inherit some money when he became of age, but the conditions under which it was to come, as well as the secret of who his father was, bothered him not a little.

In the first volume of the series I told of his life in Denton, and the lively times he and Nat Anderson had before they were sent to the Academy. There things were even more lively, and there occurs a sort of sequel to a strange occurrence that happened in Jack's town.

At Denton, one night, Jack saw a man rob a jewelry store, but the only thing he took, as it developed, was a strange ring. It was one with a big moss agate, with the outline of a pine tree on it, and a lot of emeralds and rubies set around its center. This ring belonged to Jack's aunts, who had sent it to the jeweler's and when Jack told his relatives of the theft, and described the appearance of the man, they were much excited. However, they would tell him nothing.

At the academy, after many other adventures, including aiding and abetting the fighting of a mock duel between Professor Garlach, the German teacher, and Professor Socrat, the French instructor, Jack made the acquaintance of one John Smith, a half-breed Indian who had come to the academy for instruction. John had considerable Indian blood in his veins, as he proved on more than one occasion. Nevertheless, he and Jack Ranger became great chums.

One day John Smith disappeared. His friends found that his room had been entered at the school, and there were evidences of a hurried search having been made. Nat discovered, in John's absence, a curious ring under a steam radiator. It was the exact counterpart of the one the burglar stole in Denton. Jack was much puzzled at this, and more, when it developed that John had been kidnapped by some mysterious men. At last the semi-Indian lad was saved by Jack and Nat.

John Smith told Jack as much of the secret as he knew. It appeared that his father had given him the ring just before his death, and

told him if he was ever poor or in trouble to take it to a man named Orion Tevis, and state who the bearer was.

Some time before that, the elder Smith had been in Oregon and Tevis came to him to get him to be a guide to a wild forest country in the far north. There he had bought five thousand acres of valuable land. Some schemers had stolen the papers connected with it and were making for the place, to take possession first, as that would give them a sort of title.

Tevis was too sick to make the journey himself, and got Smith to go with some of his own companions. John's father took a man named Clark and one called Roberts with him. Mr. Roberts, or Robert Ranger, which was his real name, was Jack's father. Because of some strange circumstances he had not seen his son in many years.

Roberts, for so he was known many years, Clark, and Smith succeeded in claiming the land for Tevis. He gave them each ten thousand dollars for their work and had three rings made as mementoes. They were like the one stolen from the jewelry store.

In addition Tevis said that at any time the men or their relatives needed his help they could have it.

Clark, later, was killed, John Smith's father retired on his little fortune and Jack's father got into trouble. It seemed that the land schemers offered him a large sum to help them contest Tevis's title. He refused, but learned that, if they could get him into court, they could throw the timber claim into litigation, and force Tevis to pay a large sum to compromise. Rather than do this Roberts told Smith he would become a wanderer over the earth.

Mr. Ranger sent his money to his sisters, Jack's aunts, for the use of his son, and then disappeared. He knew that if he could evade legal service for eleven years he would be free, and that was why he never sought to see his boy or sisters.

The Indian student believed that the man who stole Jack's aunts' ring, and those men who made an unsuccessful attempt to get his, thought they could, by use of the emblems send two boys, pretending to be Jack and John to Tevis, and get a lot of money from him.

John Smith's only knowledge of Tevis was that his address could be secured from the Capital Bank, at Denver, Colorado, and that he was somewhere in the Rocky Mountains, in retirement. Jack having heard this story, resolved that he and John Smith, would, some day, go in search of Mr. Ranger. However, Jack's aunts said he must finish his term at the academy, and this time was nearly up.

The students returning from their adventure were now approaching

Washington Hall, and walking quietly along. Jack and John Smith were in the lead, and the others were strung out behind them.

Suddenly around a bend in the road there swung a big touring automobile. No lights were on it, and only for the subdued roar of the motor the car's approach would not have been noticed. As it was, Jack did not see it until it was almost upon him.

"Look out!" cried John Smith suddenly.

At the same time he sprang forward and pushed Jack to one side. To do this he had to get almost in the path of the car, and was struck by one of the projecting springs. He was knocked to one side, but not before he had pushed Jack out of harm's way, the latter being hit only a glancing blow.

"Why don't you look where you're going?" called an angry voice, as the car sped on.

"Are you hurt, John?" cried Jack, springing to pick up his friend.

"No, only bruised. They have nerve to go running without lights and then ask us where we're going. I wonder who they were."

"I have an idea." said Jack. "That voice sounded like Adrian Bagot's."

"What, that sporty new student?"

"That's who."

"Well, he'd better go a bit slow, I'm thinking."

CHAPTER II

JACK IN TROUBLE

The boys crowded around Jack and John, anxious to know if they were hurt. All were loud in their indignation when they learned what had happened.

"Let's pay that snob back!" suggested Dick Balmore.

"Make him sleep with you one night," suggested Fred, for Dick was so tall and thin that he had been christened "Bony" by his chums.

"Dry up!" exclaimed Dick. "I'd rather be thin than a wandering minstrel like you."

"Easy now!" suggested Jack. "No noise, we are too near quarters. Ouch! I think I've sprained my ankle, or that auto did it for me."

He tried to walk but had to limp, and was forced to accept the aid of Sam and John, on whose arms he leaned. In this manner he entered the Hall just as the monitor was closing up for the night. The other boys slipped to their rooms, but Jack had to be helped upstairs.

As the trio were passing through the corridors they met Professor Grimm. Now, Mr. Grimm was an old enemy of Jack's, since Jack had once caught him smoking, a violation of the school rules.

"Ha! More skylarking!" the instructor exclaimed. "What does this mean, Ranger?"

"I sprained my ankle," replied our hero.

"What are you doing out at this hour? And what are the others doing?"

"We had permission to go to the village," replied Jack, truthfully enough, for Dr. Mead had allowed the boys to go; though the object of the trip, of course, had not been disclosed to the master.

"Go to your rooms," commanded Professor Grimm. "I will look into this."

"I wish he hadn't seen us," said Jack, when his two chums had taken him to his dormitory.

"Why?" asked Sam. "Where's the harm?"

"I have a sort of queer feeling that something is going to happen," Jack replied. "I want to finish out the term with a good record, for my aunts' sakes. If there are any pranks played tonight, Grimm will be sure to suspect me."

"Don't cross a bridge until it trips you up," said Sam. "Now, let's have a look at that ankle."

They found it was not as bad as Jack had feared.

"I've got a bottle of arnica somewhere," he said. "I think I'll put some on."

His chums found the bottle, and were rubbing the swelling with the medicine when there came a knock at the door.

"Who's there?" asked Jack.

"Professor Grimm," was the reply. "I want to see if you are really in your room."

Sam opened the door and the cross-grained professor entered.

"So you're not fooling this time, eh?" he sneered, as he smelled the arnica and saw the swelling on Jack's ankle. "It's a good thing you were not."

"Nice old party, isn't he?" murmured Sam, when the teacher had withdrawn. "Well, I think I'll say good-night, Jack. Hope you sleep good. Say, but that Klu-Klux business was the limit!" and chuckling over the night's fun, he went to bed, leaving Jack and the Indian student together.

"A few weeks more and we'll not have to sneak around this way to have a little fun," said Jack. "Vacation will soon be here. I hope I can carry out a plan I have in mind, John."

"What is it, Jack?"

"I want to go out west and search for my father. I ought to be with him in his trouble. Besides, the time must be almost up, so he could come back to civilization again."

"I hope you do find him," said the semi-Indian.

"I wish you could help me, John."

"I wish so, too. Perhaps I can. But you'd better get to bed now. We don't want Grimm coming around again."

Jack fell asleep dreaming he was crawling through a deep canyon after his father, who was being carried away captive in a birch bark canoe by Indians. But in spite of this he slept so soundly that he did not hear a number of unusual noises under his window. Perhaps it was as well for his peace of mind that he did not.

It was about half past seven o'clock the next morning when Jack awoke with a start.

"I wonder what's the matter," he said to himself. "It seems as if something had happened. Oh, I know, I haven't heard the morning bell."

It was the custom at the academy to awaken the students by ringing the big bell in the tower every morning, and Jack had come to depend

on it as a sort of alarm clock.

"I wonder what's the matter," he went on. "Can Martin have forgotten to sound the tocsin? It's the first time he ever slipped up."

A little later there came the sound of persons moving in the hall, and then voices could be heard calling one to the other.

He got out of bed, finding that his ankle was much better and looked from the window. There was nothing out of the ordinary to be seen. He turned toward his door, just as a loud knock came on the portal.

"Who's there?" he asked.

"Martin, the monitor," was the reply. "Dr. Mead wants to see you at once in the office."

"Trouble! I knew it!" exclaimed Jack to himself. "Well, I wonder what it is now. Hope word of that Klu-Klux-Klan business hasn't reached here already. But I'm not afraid of that. Even Dr. Mead will admit we acted from a right motive. All right, Martin," he called. "I'll be there as soon as I dress. Anything special?"

"I'm afraid it is," replied the monitor, as he hurried down the hall.

Jack made a hasty toilet and then went to the office of the head of the academy. He found a number of the teachers gathered there, including Professor Grimm, who looked more angry than usual. The latter was speaking as Jack entered:

"This positively has to stop, Dr. Mead," he said. "I will put up with this no longer. Either Ranger or I must leave."

"What have I done now?" asked Jack.

"Something more serious than usual, Ranger, if it turns out that you are guilty," answered Dr. Mead.

"Of course he's guilty," burst out Mr. Grimm. "Haven't I proof?"

"Last night," said Dr. Mead, speaking slowly and sternly, "the big bell was taken from the tower. It was carried and placed in front of Professor Grimm's room, and tied to his door so that when he opened it the bell was pulled into his room. In this way some valuable sea shells he had on the floor were broken."

"What makes you think I did it?" asked Jack. "I was laid up with a sprained ankle."

"That's just how I know it was you and some of your chums," cried Professor Grimm. "Tied on the bell, where it had been used, so the sharp edge would not cut one's fingers, was this rag. There it is. Smell of it. What does it smell like?" and he thrust it under Jack's nose.

"Why-why-it smells like arnica," replied our hero, wondering what was coming next.

"Arnica! Yes, I guess it does. What was it you were pretending to put on your ankle last night, Ranger? Arnica, wasn't it? Of course it was. I've caught you this time! The evidence is all against you! You didn't think you dropped that rag, and that the arnica would figure in the evidence. Dr. Grimm, I repeat, Ranger must leave or I shall!"

CHAPTER III

A THREATENING LETTER

For a few seconds there was a silence following Professor Grimm's ultimatum. Jack was so surprised he did not know what reply to make. The suddenness of the accusation, with the experience of the night before, and the upset over his sprained ankle, combined to make him hesitate before he made answer.

"What have you to say, Ranger?" asked Dr. Mead, in a sterner voice than he had ever before used toward Jack. "I know you will tell the truth, for I have never yet known you to lie. But I must tell you that if I find that you are guilty it will go hard with you this time. I have put up with a good deal from the students, but this is too much."

"I-I don't know what to say, sir," replied Jack, in a sort of daze. "I'm not guilty, I can assure you of that!"

"It's one thing to say so and another to prove it," snapped Professor Grimm. "The evidence is all against you."

"It's all circumstantial," interrupted Jack.

"But rather conclusive," went on the irate professor. He detailed how he had seen Jack and his friends out late, how he had come upon them using arnica, and mentioned some of their pranks in the past, including the mock duel arranged between Professor Socrat the French teacher and Professor Garlach, the German instructor.

"I admit I have played pranks in the past," said Jack frankly, "but I'm not guilty this time. All I ask is a chance to prove that I had no hand in this."

"You don't deserve a chance!" exclaimed Mr. Grimm.

"That's hardly fair," spoke Jack indignantly.

"Don't talk back to me!" burst out the angry teacher.

"I think your request is a fair one, Ranger," went on Dr. Mead. "I will give you twenty-four hours in which to prove that you had no hand in this. That is all now; you may go."

Dr. Mead was a man of few words, but Jack knew he would be absolutely fair. So, bowing to the head of the school, and without a glance at his accuser, Jack left the office.

"Whew!" exclaimed the youth, as he got outside. "I seem to be up against it harder than ever. Twenty-four hours to prove something that may take a week. Well, I've got to get busy, that's all."

"Hello!" exclaimed a voice as Jack was walking along the corridor toward his room. "Whasmaternow? Betcher Ic'nguess!" and the voice evolved itself into a good-natured looking lad, who stretched a big wad of gum from his mouth, and slowly got it back again by the simple but effective process of winding it about his tongue.

"Hello, Budge Rankin!" exclaimed Jack, as he saw the queer, bright lad who had lived near him in Denton, and for whom Jack had secured the place of second janitor at the school. "So you think you know what the trouble is?"

"Betcherlife," replied Budge, who had a habit of running his words together, a habit which his gum-chewing did not tend to relieve.

"What is it?"

"Accused you takin' that bell," went on Budge more slowly. "Hu! Wanterbe a detective?"

"How did you know it?" asked Jack, a little surprised at Budge's remark.

"Easy. Heard 'em talk. Transom open," was his answer.

"What do you mean about me turning detective?"

"Lookerthis," Budge said, quickly holding out a small object to Jack. "Found it in Grimm's room, 'sIsweptout."

"You found it in Mr. Grimm's room as you swept it out?" inquired Jack, not certain he had heard aright.

"'Smatter!" exclaimed Budge, that being his short-hand way of stating that was what was the matter.

"A spark plug from an automobile," mused Jack. "Well, that doesn't seem to give me much of a clue."

"Gotermobe?" asked Budge.

"No, of course I haven't an automobile," replied Jack.

"Knowoas?"

"Do I know who has? Why—By Jove! I believe I see what you mean. Say, it's lucky you found this. I'll turn detective for awhile now. I wonder how this got into Grimm's room."

"Rolled under door, I guess," replied Budge, speaking more rationally as he threw away his cud of gum. "From hall, maybe."

"That's it!" exclaimed Jack. "I see it now. Thanks Budge. I hope I succeed. I'm much obliged to you."

"'Sallright!" exclaimed Budge, as he hurried away to attend to some of his duties.

When Jack got back to his room he found quite a gathering of his chums there.

"In for it on account of that Klu-Klux business?" asked Sam Chalmers.

"Not exactly that," answered Jack, "though if I'd stayed at home It wouldn't have happened."

"Ha-ha-ha-has it g-g-gg-got anything t-t-t—" began Will Slade.

"Whistle it!" exclaimed Bony Balmore.

"Sing it!" came from Fred Kaler. "Here I'll help you out," and he began to play on his harmonica.

"Whole-wheat-whangdoodles!" cried Nat Anderson, "but tell us, Jack. Don't keep us in suspense."

"It's the bell," said Jack. "I'm accused of taking it down and putting it in Grimm's room. They found a rag with arnica on it near the ding-dong, and Old Grimm jumped to the wrong conclusion, basing

his belief on what he saw here last night in the first-aid-to-the-injured line. I've got until to-morrow to prove that I didn't do it."

"We can prove it easily enough," said Sam.

"Not so easily as you think," spoke Jack. "Grimm saw us out late, you remember, and if all of you joined in saying it wasn't I who did it, they wouldn't believe you. I guess they want to make an example of someone. No sir, I'm going to do some sleuthing on my own hook. I've got a good line and a bit of evidence to start with. I'm pretty sure I can make some folks around here sit up and take notice about this time to-morrow."

"Good for you, Jack!" exclaimed Dick. "If you want any help call on us!"

"Thanks," replied Jack. "Now I guess we'd better get ready for breakfast."

His chums left him to complete his dressing, and, when they were gone, Jack carefully laid aside the spark plug Budge had given him.

"First link," he said.

During the noon intermission Jack had a short but earnest talk with Socker, the school janitor. The latter nodded his head vigorously several times during the conversation.

"I'll get it for you," he said as he and Jack parted.

At the close of school that afternoon the janitor went to Jack's room with a large bundle.

"Any trouble?" asked our hero.

"Not a bit," replied Socker. "He was out and I found it rolled up in a corner, just where he had thrown it. He hasn't even cleaned it."

"So much the better," said Jack, as he gave Socker a small sum of money. "I'll keep quiet about this, don't worry."

"I hope you will," the janitor went on. "It's against the rules for me to do what I did, but I want to oblige you, and have you come out all right."

"Which I think I will," Jack added.

When he was alone he opened the bundle Socker had brought. It was a linen duster, and, as Jack saw several brown spots on it he uttered

an exclamation of satisfaction.

With his knife he scraped some substance from the garment, and placed the particles in a test tube. Then, taking this with him, he went to the laboratory, where he remained for some time.

Late that afternoon Jack, who had avoided his chums, took a walk around the campus. As he came near a small building, where some of the students kept their motor cycles, one or two small automobile runabouts, and a few of the more well-to-do, their ponies, Jack assumed a slow and halting gait. He seemed to be limping from the effects of his sprained ankle.

"I wonder if he's around," he muttered to himself. "Socker said he was going to take a spin this afternoon, and it's about time for him to start, by all accounts."

As Jack neared the entrance to the combined garage and stable he saw a group of students approaching from an opposite direction. His limp became more decided than before.

"He's there!" he said softly to himself.

"Hello, Ranger!" exclaimed a number, as Jack passed them. He knew them fairly well, but was not intimate with them as they belonged to the "fast set," a good-enough crowd, but lads who had more spending money than was good for them.

"Hello!" called Jack in reply.

"What's the matter?" came several inquiries as the students noticed Jack's limp.

"Turned on my ankle," was the reply. "A bit stiff yet."

The crowd had nearly passed by this time, and, owing to the fact that Jack had the middle of the sidewalk, and did not turn to one side, the little group separated. Some went on one side, and some on the other. Just as Jack came opposite a tall, elaborately dressed youth, he seemed to stumble. To save himself from falling Jack threw out his hand and caught the tall student on the wrist. As he did so the well-dressed youth uttered a cry.

"Clumsy! You hurt my sore wrist!"

"I beg your pardon!" exclaimed Jack, struggling to recover his balance, but still keeping his hold of the other's hand. "Awfully careless of me!"

There was quite a little jostling among the students, several trying to help Jack recover his balance. Then Jack straightened up.

"I'm all right now," he said. "I bore down on it a little too hard."

He limped on, thrusting one hand hurriedly into his pocket. As he did so, the tall student cried.

"There! I've lost the rag off my sore wrist! I sprained it cranking my auto yesterday."

Several of his companions began a search for it, but as Jack hurried on, as fast as he could, while still pretending to limp painfully he said to himself:

"I guess you'll look a long while, Adrian Bagot, before you find that rag. Maybe I can get even with you for running me down last night," and Jack pulled a piece of cloth from his pocket and smelled of it.

"That's the evidence!" he exclaimed, as he turned down a side street.

Whether it was this change, or whether it was because his ankle suddenly healed, was not in evidence, but Jack began to walk with scarcely the semblance of a halt in his step as soon as he was out of sight of the students.

The lad hurried back to his room. There he spent a busy half hour, poring over some books on chemistry. He got several test tubes, and his apartment took on the appearance of a laboratory, while many strange smells filled the air.

While Jack was engaged in pouring the contents of one test tube into another there came a knock at his door.

"Who's there?" he called.

"It's me, Sam," was the reply.

"Say, Sam, excuse me, but I can't let you in," Jack answered. "I'm working on something that I can't leave. I may have a surprise for you in the morning."

"All right," Sam answered. "Here's some mail, that's all. I'll shove it under the door."

There was a rustling of paper and several letters came beneath the portal. Jack laid aside his test tube and gathered them up. One was from his aunts at home, another from Judge Bennetty regarding the payment of certain bills Jack had contracted, while the third was in

unfamiliar handwriting.

"I wonder who that's from," said Jack. "The best way to find out is to open it."

He ripped the envelope down, and, as he did so, a piece of paper fluttered to the ground. Picking the missive up, Jack read:

"It's a long lane that has no turns. I'll get even with you for having me suspended and sent away from the Hall. My time will come yet.

"Jerry Chowden."

"Jerry Chowden," murmured Jack. "So he's trying to scare me, eh? Well I guess he'll find I don't scare."

Jack slowly folded the letter and placed it back in the envelope. He glanced at the postmark, and saw it was stamped "Chicago."

"Wonder how he got out there," he mused. "Well, I'm glad he's far away," and he gave little more thought to the matter of the bully, a nephew of Professor Grimm's, whose vain attempt to cast disgrace on Jack, in the matter of painting a pipe on the professor's portrait, had rebounded on his own head. He had been suspended for two months for the escapade, which Jack was accused of, but which our hero managed to prove himself innocent of, and, since leaving the Hall, nothing had been heard of him.

"Maybe I'll meet him if I get out west on that strange hunt of mine," thought Jack, as he went on with his chemical tests.

He worked far into the night, and when he put out his light he said to himself:

"I think I've got things just where I want them."

CHAPTER IV

A LESSON IN CHEMISTRY

Jack was awakened next morning by a knock on his door.

"Who's there?" he asked.

"Martin, the monitor," was the reply. "Dr. Mead wishes to see you at

once.”

”Great Scott! I’ve overslept!” exclaimed Jack, as he jumped out of bed and saw it was after eight o’clock. ”No wonder, being up half the night. Tell Dr. Mead I’m sorry and I’ll be right down,” he went on.

Jack almost made a record for dressing, and went to Dr. Mead’s office, where he found the same gathering that had confronted him the previous morning.

”Well, Ranger,” began the head of the school, ”the time you asked for has expired. Have you anything to say?”

”I have, sir,” replied Jack. ”But first I would like to request that this hearing be adjourned to the laboratory. I also request that Sam Chalmers, Dick Balmore, Fred Kaler, Budge Rankin and Adrian Bagot be summoned.”

”Do you accuse all of them?” asked Dr. Mead, in some astonishment.

”I accuse no one,” Jack replied. ”I want to make a demonstration, and let the facts speak for themselves.”

”This is all nonsense!” exclaimed Professor Grimm. ”This boy is guilty and he knows it. He is only seeking to delay matters. I demand his expulsion!”

”I think it only fair to grant his request,” said Dr. Mead. ”Professor Gales, will you kindly summon the students mentioned. Professor Hall, please see that the laboratory is opened.”

In a few minutes Jack was leading the way to the latter room. He carried several bundles, while Socker, the janitor, bore a rack of test tubes he had taken from Jack’s room. The lads mentioned attended, wondering what had happened.

”What’s this all about?” demanded Adrian, haughtily. ”I haven’t had my breakfast yet.”

”The time was up an hour ago,” said Dr. Mead sharply, glancing at the new student, who seemed disposed to take life as easily as possible.

”May I speak?” asked Jack, of Dr. Mead.

”Since you are the accused it is but fair that you be given a chance to clear yourself,” was the reply. ”But as you have given a certain publicity to this matter, I shall tell these other students what it is all about.”

Dr. Mead then explained the charge against Jack. There was an uneasy movement among the other boys, and Adrian Bagot was seen to shift about. He even started to walk around as though to leave the room, but the monitor stood at the door and Adrian did not want to make any confusion by forcing past him. So young Bagot remained in the laboratory.

"When Professor Grimm accused me of playing this trick I denied it, as I am innocent," Jack said, when Dr. Mead had finished and looked at him as if inviting him to speak. "Perhaps if the matter has been made public the fellows who took the bell would have come forward and admitted it. As it is I asked twenty-four hours to prove that I did not do it. I believe I have succeeded.

"In the first place," Jack went on, "I wish to exhibit this garment," and he held up to view a long linen coat, commonly called a duster. "You will observe," he went on, "that there are several brown lines on it. I have measured these and they are exactly the shape and size that would be made by the sharp rim of a bell, if it was rested on the garment when some one was wearing it."

"You will have to have better evidence than that," sneered Professor Grimm.

"I think I will have," announced Jack quietly. "Of course those marks might have been made by any sharp, rusty object. Now the bell metal rusts scarcely at all, but the iron clapper of a bell does. The rust from that runs down inside a bell, and gets on the edges. I took some iron rust from the clapper of the stolen bell and placed it in a test tube. I assumed, for the purpose of experimenting, that I did not know that it was iron rust, but only suspected it. I applied the proper chemical tests, and I got the results that showed me there was iron present in the test tube. Here, I will show you."

Jack mixed a few chemicals and soon the brown mixture in the tube turned red.

"That is from the bell clapper," the young chemist went on. "Here is a solution made from scraping the lines on the duster. I will apply the test and see what happens."

While the others looked on anxiously Jack dropped some of the mixture into the second tube. In an instant it turned red.

"There!" exclaimed Jack, holding up the two tubes, side by side. "The same color coming in both mixtures from the same strength of chemicals that I used, shows that the iron rust on the duster and that on the bell clapper are the same."

"What does that prove, except that you might have worn the duster?"

asked Dr. Mead.

"That is all, as yet," Jack admitted. "But I will prove that the duster is not mine, and that I never wore it. I have something else here," he went on.

From among a pile of things on the laboratory table Jack took a white object, with brown spots. Walking rapidly across the room he handed it to Adrian.

"The rag off my sprained wrist!" exclaimed the sporty student. "Where did—"

Then he stopped, seeming to realize he had said too much.

"I will ask Professor Grimm to smell of that," Jack continued, thrusting the rag under the teacher's nose.

"Arnica!" exclaimed the instructor. "The same that you used, and which enabled me to discover it was you who played the trick."

"It is arnica," Jack admitted, "but it happens I was not the only one who used it that night. I have also to show this article, which was picked up in your room, Professor Grimm," and Jack extended the spark plug Budge had given him.

"Ha! What is that?" asked Mr. Grimm.

"It is some part of an automobile," Dr. Mead said. "Who, of our students, has one. Ah! I begin to see," he added.

"Adrian Bagot, I will return your duster to you," Jack went on, walking forward and passing the rust-stained automobile garment to young Bagot. "I had to borrow it from your room, but I am through with it now. You may also have your spark plug, and this rag I had to take from your wrist rather unceremoniously last night."

"You're a thief!" burst out Adrian, but Jack stopped him with a gesture.

"I'll not take that from you or any one else," exclaimed Jack. "Dr. Mead," he went on, "I ask that you inquire of my friends, Sam Chalmers, Dick Balmore and Fred Kaler when they last saw Adrian in his auto."

"When did you?" Dr. Mead asked the boys.

"The night the bell was stolen," answered Sam, and the others agreed with his testimony. Jack told the story of the collision and how his

ankle was injured.

"Is there anything else?" asked Dr. Mead.

"I think not," was our hero's answer, "unless Bagot has something to say."

"So you did it, eh?" asked Professor Grimm, turning to the new student. "I demand that he be punished, Dr. Mead," and Mr. Grimm did not even take the trouble to beg Jack's pardon for having falsely accused him.

"What have you to say, Bagot?" asked the head of the academy. "Circumstances point strongly to you,"

Bagot mumbled something about it being only a harmless joke, and seemed quite confused.

"I will not ask you to tell on your companions," Dr. Mead went on sternly. "There must have been several of them. If they choose to come forward and admit their part, well and good. I will go no further with this, since the chief culprit is known. Ranger, you are fully vindicated, and I congratulate you on the effective manner in which you have proved your innocence."

"As for you, Bagot, seeing that it is your first offense, I will be lenient. I will suspend you for one week, and you are to make up all the studies you lose in that time. That is all."

With a scowl on his face, and an angry look at Jack, Adrian shuffled from the laboratory. The teachers followed Dr. Mead out, while Jack's friends gathered around to congratulate him.

"Didn't know you were such a chemist," spoke Sam.

"I'll have to play a march of victory on the jew's-harp and mouth organ at the same time!" burst out Fred Kaler.

"Well," admitted Jack, "it came out about as well as I expected."

"Betcherwhat!" exclaimed Budge, as he walked off, stretching his gum out at arm's length.

The news soon spread that Jack had been vindicated, and there was an impromptu celebration in his room.

"Lopsided lollypops!" exclaimed Nat Anderson. "We ought to do something to get even with Bagot, Jack."

"Oh, I'm satisfied, let it go as it is." "But we're not," Sam Chalmers put in. "You got vindicated all right, but an insult to you is one to all this crowd you travel with. I'll bet Dr. Mead has a sort of idea that some of us had a hand in the joke. We may not be able to prove we didn't, but we can get even with that sneak Bagot for making all the trouble."

"L-l-l-lets puncture h-h-h-is t-t-t-t-ti—" sputtered Will Slade.

"What's that about his necktie?" asked Sam with a grin.

"W-w-w-who s-s-s-said n-n-neck t-t-ti-?"

"I thought you were trying to, and I wanted to help you out," replied Sam.

"I-I-I ni-m-m-meant his autototototo—"

"Toot-toot!" sung out Fred. "All aboard! Where does your train stop, Will?"

"I know what you mean," put in Jack, coming to Will's relief. "But I don't want to do anything like bursting his auto tires. That's not my way."

"We can easily enough find a plan," Sam went on. "Will you join us, Jack?"

"You know I'm always ready for anything that's going."

"Then I'll try and think up something," Sam concluded. "But we'd better hustle now. Chapel bell will ring in five minutes."

CHAPTER V

TURNING THE TABLES

For several days after this there were review examinations so that all the students at the academy were kept busy, and there was little time for anything but study. At the end of the week Adrian Bagot returned from his period of suspension. He did not seem to have suffered much, and the boys heard him boasting of having ridden nearly a thousand miles in his auto.

One evening Sam and some of his chums paid a visit to Jack Ranger.

"Got anything on to-night?" asked Sam.

"Nothing special, why?"

"Well, I'll not tell you the particulars, and then, if anything happens you can truthfully say you never knew a thing about it. But if you want to see something, put on an old pair of slippers, so you can walk through the corridors softly, and follow us."

"Some fun?" asked Jack.

"Well, we wouldn't go to all this trouble if it was work or study," replied Sam with a grin. "But say nothing, only saw wood and come on."

Jack, nothing loath, did as he was told. He got an old pair of felt slippers, and noticed that the others were also wearing similar foot-gear.

"First to Professor Socrat's room," whispered Sam when the boys, including Will Slade, Fred Kaler and Bony Balmore were out in the corridor.

"He's not going to fight a duel with Professor Garlach, is he?" asked Jack, recalling an occasion when the two teachers nearly did.

"Not this time," replied Sam, "but there may be a fight in it."

With Sam in the lead the boys went to the room of the French professor.

"Now stay back in the shadows," advised the leader. "You can see and listen, but keep quiet."

Sam knocked on the door, and, in his most polite tones said:

"I was asked, my dear professor, to leave this with you with the compliments of the sender."

"Ah, I zank you extremely, sir," said Professor Socrat, bowing low, "I zank ze giver, an' I zank you for ze most polite attention you have bestowed on me."

"You are very welcome, I'm sure," murmured Sam, as he hurried away to join his waiting comrades.

"I don't see anything funny about that," said Jack.

"Wait until he opens it," whispered Sam.

A few seconds later the hidden boys heard the door of the French teacher's room open, and saw him come out.

"It is some meestake," they heard him murmur. "Zis ees for Professor Grimm. I will take it to heem," and he walked along the corridor toward the elderly instructor's apartment.

"Act one," whispered Sam. "Now for the second."

Silently in their slippers the boys followed the French professor to Mr. Grimm's room.

"What is it?" asked the latter when the Frenchman had knocked.

"I come wiz a package, left by mistake wiz me," Mr. Socrat remarked, in his usual polite way. "It is addressed to you inside, but ze outside wrapper was wiz my name inscribed. I ask your pardon."

"Thanks," said Mr. Grimm shortly, as, with a polite bow, Mr. Socrat went back to his room.

Professor Grimm left his door open a little way, and the boys could see him quite plainly. They saw him take off the wrapper, and disclose a small white box. This he opened and, as he took the cover off, there dropped out something that gave a musical clang.

"A bell!" exclaimed Jack in a whisper.

"Hush!" cautioned Sam. "Let's hear what he says."

"Ha!" exclaimed Mr. Grimm. "So this is a joke, eh, Mr. Frenchman? Well, we'll see about this!"

He grasped the bell, which was a small one, by the handle, and started down the corridor, a scowl on his face, as the boys could see by a flickering gaslight, as they were hidden around the corner.

"Now back to Mr. Socrat's room for the third act," said Sam. "Come on."

Without the formality of a knock, Mr. Grimm entered the French teacher's room.

"So this is your idea of a joke, eh?" he cried, shaking the bell under Professor Socrat's nose. "I'll report you to Dr. Mead for this. You frog-eater you!"

"Sir-r-r-r!" fairly shouted Professor Socrat. "You call me a frog-eater-r-r-r-r?"

"Yes, and a donkey also!" exclaimed Mr. Grimm. "You knew how I've felt since that bell joke, and you dare to send me a miniature one!"

"I sent nossing!"

"Didn't I see you just bring this?" demanded Mr. Grimm, holding out the bell.

"It was addressed to you on ze paper!"

"Yes, and you did it!"

"I did not!"

"I say you did!"

"Zen you mean zat I tells a lie?"

"If you want to take it that way!"

"Zen I say you also are one who knows not ze truth!"

"Don't call me that name or I'll—"

What the excited professor meant to say was not disclosed as, at that moment, in shaking his fist at Professor Socrat he let slip the bell, which, with a clang struck the French teacher on the chest.

"A blow! I am insult!" Mr. Socrat exclaimed. "It must be wiped out wiz ze blood of my insulter!"

He caught up a book to throw at Mr. Grimm, and let it fly, just as Adrian Bagot entered the room. The sporty student caught it full in the face.

"Pardon, my dear young friend!" exclaimed the French teacher, seeing his missile had gone wide of one mark, though finding another.

"What does this mean?" demanded Adrian, as he saw the two belligerents.

"Leave the room, sir!" ordered Professor Grimm. "This is none of your affair!"

"I was asked to come here," said Adrian.

"Ha, so this is another part of your plan to play a joke on me," cried Mr. Grimm, glaring at the Frenchman. "You ask this student, who was responsible for the original trouble to come here to see a

repetition.”

”Your talk, it ees of ze incomprehensible!” exclaimed Mr. Socrat. ”I have sent for no one.”

”I got a note, signed with your name, asking me to call at your room at eight o’clock,” said Bagot.

”Hold me, some one, before I die laughing,” whispered Sam to his chums. In fact they were all laughing so that only the excitement on the part of the three in Mr. Socrat’s room prevented the boys from being discovered.

”Let me see ze writing,” said the French teacher.

Adrian showed it to him.

”I nevair wrote that, nevair, nevair, nevair!” exclaimed the representative of France.

”But you brought me the bell,” put in Mr. Grimm.

”I did, because your name, it was on ze covair of ze box. I not write heem.”

”Then if you didn’t, who did?” asked Mr. Grimm.

”I am no readair of ze mind,” replied the Frenchman.

”I’ll bet it is one of Jack Ranger’s tricks,” said Adrian. ”It is just like him.”

”Are you sure you had no hand in it?” asked Mr. Grimm suspiciously, turning to Bagot.

”You don’t think I’d risk another suspension with graduation so near, do you?” asked Bagot.

”I guess you’re innocent this time,” admitted Mr. Grimm unwillingly. ”If I discover who did this I’ll settle with him.”

”You’ve got to catch ’em first,” murmured Sam.

”Well I guess I’ll go,” went on Mr. Grimm.

”I have been insult, I demand satisfaction,” said Mr. Socrat, drawing himself to his full height and glaring at the other teacher. ”Will you name a friend, sir, to whom I can send my representative?”

"You—you don't mean to fight a duel, do you?" asked Professor Grimm, nervously.

"Of a certainly yes! I have been struck! I have been insult! I must have ze satisfaction!"

"If it comes to that so have I," said Adrian, rubbing his face where the book had hit him.

"I have apologized to you. I beg your ten thousand pardons, my young friend," said Mr. Socrat, bowing low. "I know when I am at fault. It was all an accident. Still, if you demand satisfaction I am bound to give it you. I will send ze—"

"Oh, I accept your apology," said Adrian, hastily.

"But I have been called ze eater of ze frogs, an' I have been struck by—by a—person!" exploded the Frenchman. "I must see ze blood flow, or—"

"Oh, I'll apologize, if it comes to that," said Mr. Grimm, rather awkwardly. "I didn't mean to hit you with the bell. As for calling you names, why—why I was all excited. I beg your pardon."

"Zen you have made ze amend honorable, an' I accept it," said the Frenchman, bowing almost to the floor. "We will regard ze incident as closed."

"I'll not, by a long shot," murmured Bagot. "I want satisfaction from whoever got me into this and I'll find out sooner or later."

"Mostly later," murmured Sam.

"Where did you get the package?" asked the sporty student of Mr. Socrat.

"It was brought to me a little while ago, by one of ze students. It was dark in ze hallway and I could not see ze face of heem."

"Luck for me," murmured Sam.

"I see my name on ze wrappair," went on Professor Socrat. "Zen I open it an' I see ze name of Mr. Grimm. I go to heem. Ha! Zings begin to what you call happen—after zat!"

"Vamoose!" whispered Sam. "I guess we've seen all the fun. They'll disperse now. Everyone to his room and undress. Be studying in bed. If there's an investigation we can't be accused."

A little later the boys heard Professor Grimm tramping to his room, muttering dire vengeance on his tormentors. They heard him open his window and throw something out. It fell with a tinkle to the ground.

"The bell," whispered Sam, as he hurried to his room.

"How did you manage it?" asked Jack an hour or so later when Sam had entered his chum's apartment, matters having quieted down.

"It was too easy," explained Sam. "I did up the bell, and left it with Socrat. I purposely addressed it double. I figured out what would happen. Then I sent a fake note to Bagot, telling him Socrat wanted him. It came out better than I expected."

"I hope there's no trouble over it," Jack said.

There was none, for neither of the professors cared to have the facts made public, and Bagot did not want to let it be known that he had been fooled.

CHAPTER VI

A PLAN THAT FAILED

One afternoon Dr. Mead announced that there would be an evening lecture, in preparation for final examinations, and he stated that he expected every student to be present.

"The only excuse that will be accepted for non-attendance," he said, "will be illness. As there are no students sick now, I shall regard with grave suspicion any reports of indisposition between now and the time for the lecture."

"What do you say to a swim?" asked Sam, of Jack, as they filed out from the auditorium where Dr. Mead had made his announcement.

"I'll go," replied Jack. "Any of the other fellows going along?"

"Dick, Nat and Bill Slade are coming," said Sam. "I left them going for their suits. Come on."

"Wait until I get mine," spoke Jack, and he hurried off, to join Sam a few minutes later.

On the way to a quiet spot in Rudmore Lake, where the boys were in the habit of taking their swimming exercises, Jack and Sam were

joined by the others.

"Did you hear the latest?" asked Bony Balmore, making his anatomy rattle in a way peculiar to himself.

"No, what is it?" asked Jack.

"Two new students arrived," went on Bony. "They're chums of Sport Bagot's I guess, 'cause I saw them walking with him."

"Who are they?" asked Sam.

"Ed Simpson and John Higley," replied Sam. "I heard they were regular cut-ups, and got fired out of one school. Their guardians sent them here to finish the term. I s'pose they'll try some funny work."

"L-l-l-et 'em t-t-t-try it!" spluttered Will. "I-i g-g-g-guess we c-c-c--"

"Oh, whistle it!" exclaimed Sam.

"Pzznt!" exploded Will, which seemed to get his vocal cords in shape again. "We'll fix 'em if they try any tricks!"

"Now you're talking," said Jack.

The boys lost little time in getting into the lake. They were splashing about in the water, when Jack, who happened to swim near shore, was startled by a cautious hail. He looked up, to see Budge Rankin half hidden in the grass, making signals to him.

"What is it?" asked Jack.

"Geasynow!" exclaimed Budge, in a hoarse whisper, tossing aside a wad of gum that he might talk more plainly.

"Go easy about what?" asked Jack.

"They're going to play a trick on you," said Budge.

"Who?" inquired Jack, while the other boys, attracted by the conversation drew near.

"Adrian Bagot and the two new students," went on Budge. "They're on their way here. Goin' t' steal your clothes an' make you late for th' lecture. I heard 'em talkin' about it. Thought I'd warn you. 'Sthmatterithfoolinem?" Budge had taken a fresh chew of gum, which accounted for the way in which he inquired what was the matter with fooling the enemy.

"True for you!" exclaimed Sam. "How we going to do it?"

Jack pondered a moment, idly splashing the water with his opened hand. Then he exclaimed:

"I have it! How long before they'll be here, Budge?"

"'Bout ten minutes I reckon."

"Long enough. Come on boys."

"What you up to?" asked Nat.

"Say nothing but follow me," was all Jack replied.

He scrambled up the bank to where he had left his clothes. Catching up the garments into a bundle he placed them further along the bank, on a little bluff that overlooked the edge of the lake. The clothes were in plain sight.

"They'll see them there," objected Fred.

"That's what I want," Jack replied. "Do as I do."

Wondering what was up the others obeyed. Jack then ran to a small boathouse, close to the swimming place, and returned with three long, thin ropes, used to tie the craft to the dock.

For a few minutes Jack's fingers flew nimbly. Then he placed three rope circles, hiding them well in the grass, each one just in front of each of the three piles of clothes. He carefully carried the long ends of the ropes down the bank and into the water.

"Oh, I see!" exclaimed Sam, with a chuckle. "Say, this is great!"

"Now, Budge," said Jack, when he had finished his preparations. "You hide in the bushes. When you think it's time, you toss a stone into the water. Do you understand?"

"Betcherlife!" replied Budge, shortly.

"Get down under the bank, then, fellows," said Jack to his companions. "Keep well in shore, and when you hear the stone splash, pull. That's all!"

"But they may take our clothes," objected Will, who did not seem to understand.

"I don't believe they will," replied Jack, grimly.

The boys entered the water again, and, crouched close under the bank, sinking down so that only the tip of their noses were above the surface. It was almost impossible to tell they were there.

Had any one been up on the bank a few minutes later he would have observed three lads come creeping along, as if they were afraid of being seen. Adrian Bagot was in the lead.

"I don't see them" spoke one of the trio.

"Keep quiet, Ed Simpson," cautioned Adrian. "That Ranger chap has sharp ears. Do you see 'em, John?"

"There's their clothes in little piles, just ahead," replied John Higley. "They couldn't have left 'em better for us. Come on; we'll hide 'em, and then we'll see what happens."

"Guess they won't be so fresh after this," spoke Bagot.

Slowly the trio crept forward. Well might Jack and his chums worried for the fate of their garments had they seen the three conspirators. But Budge was on the watch.

Just as the three sneaks were about to reach down and gather the swimmers' clothes, a stone sailed through the air, and fell with a splash into the water. An instant later there was a wild scene on the bank.

Three youths went flying toward the edge of the lake as though propelled by unseen hands. They seemed to have ropes attached to their legs, ropes which were being pulled from below.

Then three well-dressed lads were struggling in the water, while five other youths stood up in the shallows looking on.

"I guess we turned the tables that time," remarked Jack.

CHAPTER VII

FOILING A PLOT

"Save me! Save me!" yelled Adrian Bagot.

"I'm drowning!" screamed Ed Simpson.

"I'm sinking!" shouted John Higley.

The three conspirators were floundering about in the water. Because of the rope nooses about their feet their efforts to stand upright were not entirely successful.

"Who did this?" inquired Bagot angrily, as he tried to get rid of a mouthful of water.

"If-if I-I die they'll hang for this!" spluttered Ed Simpson.

"No danger of your drowning, you're too mean," said Jack. "Besides it's only up to your knees. Stand up and wade out."

By this time the three lads, their clothing dripping with water, had managed to stand upright. They reached down under the dancing wavelets and loosened the nooses.

"You'll pay for this, Jack Ranger," shouted Adrian, shaking his fist at our hero.

"All right, I'm ready whenever you are," was the cool answer. "Come on, fellows, we don't want to be late for the lecture," and he started from the water, followed by his chums.

"I'll have you arrested for damaging my clothes," exclaimed Ed.

"And I suppose you'd tell on the witness stand about what you intended to do to ours," went on Jack. "I guess you'll cry 'quits,' that's what you'll do. You tried to play a trick on us, but you got left. So long. Don't miss the lecture."

He scrambled ashore, his comrades doing likewise, while the three lads who had taken such an unexpected bath waded out as best they could. They were sorry looking sights.

"But I don't exactly un-d-d-d-erstand how it it h-h-h-appened?" stuttered Will, who had not had hold of one of the ropes.

"I just made slip nooses, and placed them where they'd have to step into them before they could lay hands on the clothes," explained Jack. "Budge gave me the signal when they were inside the ropes."

"And then we just pulled," put in Nat. "Wow! It was a corker, Jack! How did you think of it?"

"It just happened to come to me. Say didn't they come down off that bank sailing, though?"

"I pulled as if I was landing a ten pound pickerel," said Fred. "I wonder who I had."

"Didn't stop to notice," Jack said, as he slipped on his coat. "They all came together. What a splash they made!"

By this time the three conspirators had crawled up the bank. They were so soaking wet that it was hard to walk. Their shoes "squashed" out water at every step. They sat down on the grass, took them off, and removed some of their garments, which they proceeded to wring out.

"Better hurry up," advised Jack, as he finished dressing. "Lecture begins in about two hours, and you're quite a way from home."

"I'll—" began Ed Simpson, when Adrian stopped him with a gesture.

"Sorry we have to leave you," Sam went on. "If you'd sent your cards we would have had the water warmed for you. Hope you didn't find it too chilly."

The three cronies did not reply, but went on trying to get as much water as possible from their garments. Leaving them sitting on the grass, as the afternoon waned into evening, the swimmers hurried back to the academy.

When the roll was called at the evening lecture, which was at an early hour, Jack and his friends replied "here!"

For a week or more after the episode at the lake, matters at the academy went on in a rather more even tenor than was usual. One night Sam, who finished his studying early went to Jack's room.

"Boning away?" he asked.

"Just finishing my Caesar," was the reply. "Why, anything on?"

"Nothing special," replied Sam. "Do you feel anything queer in your bones?"

"Not so much as a touch of fever and ague," replied Jack with a laugh. "Do you need quinine?"

"Quit your fooling. I mean don't you feel as if you wanted to do something?"

"Oh I'm always that way, more or less," Jack admitted. "I'm not taking anything for it, though."

"I'd like to take a stroll," said Sam. "I think that would quiet me down. I feel just as if something was going to happen."

"Probably something will, if we go out at this hour," Jack said. "It's against the rules."

"I know it is, but it wouldn't be the first time you or I did it. Come on, let's go out. Down the trellis, the way you did when you discovered Grimm smoking."

"I don't know," began Jack.

"Of course you don't," interrupted Sam. "I'll attend to all that. Come on."

Needing no more urging, Jack laid aside his book, turned his light low, and soon he and Sam were cautiously making their way from Jack's window, along a trellis and drain pipe to the ground.

"There!" exclaimed Sam, as he dropped lightly to the earth. "I feel better already. Some of the restlessness has gone."

"Keep shady," muttered Jack. "Some of the teachers have rooms near here."

They walked along under the shadow of the Hall until they came to a window from which a brilliant light streamed forth. It came from a crack between the lowered shade and the casement. It was impossible to pass it without seeing what was going on inside the apartment. At the same time they could hear the murmur of voices.

"Adrian Bagot, and his two cronies up to some trick!" whispered Jack, as he grasped Sam by the arm.

The two friends saw the three new students bending over a table, containing a pot of something, which they seemed to be stirring with a long stick.

"What are they up to?" whispered Sam.

"Experimenting with chemicals, perhaps," said Jack.

"Don't you believe it," retorted Sam. "They're up to some game, you can bet. I wonder if we can't get wise to what it is."

Cautiously they drew nearer to the window. They found it was open a crack.

"Will it make much of an explosion?" asked Ed Simpson.

"Hardly any," replied Higley. "Only a puff and lots of smoke, but it will leave its mark all right, and I guess those fresh friends of Jack Ranger's will laugh on the other corner of their mouths."

"I'd like to get even with them before the term closes," put in Adrian.

"We'll do it all right," went on Ed.

"Don't be too sure of that," whispered Jack.

It did not require much effort on the part of Jack and Sam to understand what the three conspirators were up to. Their conversation, which floated through the opened window, and their references to certain localities put the two listeners in possession of the whole scheme.

"Well, if that isn't the limit," said Jack in a whisper. "I wouldn't believe they'd dare to do it."

"How can we foil their plans?" asked Sam.

"Hark, some one is coming," said Jack, dropping down on his hands and knees, an example which Sam followed. Then came a cautious signal, a whistle.

"It's John Smith, my Indian friend!" exclaimed Jack. "He must have just got back," for the half-breed had been away for a few weeks, as one of his relatives was ill. Jack sounded a cautious whistle in reply, and soon the Indian student was at his side. There were hurried greetings, and Jack soon explained the situation.

"Let me think it over a minute," said John Smith. "It takes me rather suddenly."

For a few seconds John remained in deep thought. Then he exclaimed:

"I think I have it. Have you any chemicals in your room, Jack?"

"Plenty," was the answer. "I've been boning on that lately, and I got a fresh supply from the laboratory the other day to experiment with."

"Then I think we'll make these chaps open their eyes."

The three friends hurried to Jack's room, where they were busy for some time, behind carefully drawn shades. At the end of about two hours, Jack, who had been keeping watch from a window, exclaimed:

"There they go with the stuff. It's time we got a move on."

"They'll not set it off until midnight," spoke Sam, "That's what they said. We'll have time enough to do what we are going to."

The three friends worked hurriedly. When they had finished they had several packages. Down the trellis they went and out on the campus, which was shrouded in darkness.

They made their way to the foot of a statue of George Washington, which stood on a broad base in front of the school. There stood the Father of His Country, with outstretched arms, as if warning invaders away from the precincts of learning.

"They've been here!" said Sam in a whisper.

He pointed to some straggling black lines at the base of the figure, and to a thin thing like a string: which led over the grass toward the room of Adrian Bagot.

"They've put our initials in powder here," said Jack. "Trying to throw the blame on us when it goes off."

"We'll soon fix that," replied Sam. The three boys made some rapid movements around the statue, and then cut the thin thing which led to the room of young Bagot.

"I guess when he touches off that fuse he'll wonder what has happened," observed John Smith.

"Have you enough of the other fuse?" asked Jack.

"Plenty," replied the Indian student. "Have you changed the initials?"

"Every one," said Sam.

"Then I think we can go back," said John. "Take care of my fuse. Don't get tangled up in it."

The boys made their way quietly to a spot just under the window of Bagot's room. There they placed what seemed to be a piece of board.

"Now back to your room, and wait until they start the fun," said John.

The three friends had not long to wait. A little after midnight they heard Bagot's window cautiously open. There was the sound of a match striking, and then Sam called to Jack:

"Let her go!"

A second later a thin trail of fire spurted along the ground from the sporty student's room. It was followed by a larger one from the foot of the trellis by which Jack had descended. A few seconds later it seemed as if a Fourth of July celebration was in progress.

Sparks of fire ran along to the statue of the first President. Then there was a puff of smoke, and in front of the hero of the Revolution there shot up dancing flames.

At the same time there sounded several sharp explosions, as though the British were firing on the Minute Men at Lexington, and the latter were replying as fast as they could load and discharge their flintlocks.

Windows began to go up here and there, and heads were thrust forth.

"What is it?" "What's the matter?" "Are there burglars?" were some of the cries.

Brighter now burned the fire at the foot of the statue, which was enveloped in a cloud of flame and smoke, and, had the original been alive he must have delighted in the baptism of gunpowder.

Then there came a louder explosion. It was followed by a shower of sparks, and a trail of sparks began running along the ground, toward the college.

An instant later there blazed forth on a board as on an illuminated sign, in front of the room of Adrian Bagot the words in letters of fire:

WE DID IT.

Underneath, in smaller characters were the initials;

"A.B. E.S. J.H."

"Wait until Dr. Mead sees that," said Jack, as he looked out on the campus, which was now a scene of brilliancy.

CHAPTER VIII

THE BURGLAR SCARE

The whole academy was now aroused. Several students and teachers, in

scanty attire, had come from their rooms and were hurrying down to see if the place was on fire. For several minutes the blazing words and initials shone out amid the darkness. Then they died away in a shower of sparks, and windows could be heard being put down.

"That's excitement enough for one night," remarked John Smith. "It succeeded better than I thought it would."

"That was a great idea," said Jack.

"Glad you think so," the Indian went on.

"I've seen soldiers at the Canadian forts play all sorts of tricks with gunpowder and slow fuse so I just adopted some of them. It was easy enough, after they laid the powder train, with the initials of you, Sam, and Bony, to change them into a general serpentine twist with their initials in the midst of it. By ramming some of the powder down into the holes in the foundation it exploded with quite a noise."

"Lucky you had those chemicals in your room, Jack, or I'd never been able to make that board with the words 'We did it' on and stick it up in front of Adrian's window. I used part of their own long fuse, and it was a good one."

"Seemed to do the work all right," agreed Sam.

"It sure did," observed Jack. "I wonder what they thought when they saw the fire coming their way?"

"Hush! Here comes some one!" exclaimed Sam. and the boys put out their light, which was burning low.

"It's Dr. Mead; I know his step," said Jack.

"I'll bet he's on his way to Bagot's room," spoke Sam. "Cracky! I'm glad it isn't me."

"It's only good luck it isn't!" put in Jack. "If we hadn't gone out they might have exploded their powder, and, in the morning our initials would have been found at the bottom of the statue, burned in the stone."

A little later loud talking was heard from the direction of Adrian's room. It quieted down, after a while. But there was a strenuous session at chapel the next morning, and Adrian and his cronies were given extra lessons to do.

For a week or more after this all the students had to buckle down to hard study, as the annual examinations were approaching. Jack and his

chums had little time for sports of any kind, as they had a number of lessons to master in addition to their regular work. But by diligence they kept up with the requirements, and, about two weeks before the time set for the closing of the school, they found themselves on even terms.

"I'm ready for some fun," announced Jack, one evening. "I've been good and quiet so long I can feel my wings sprouting."

"Better go easy," cautioned John Smith.

"I'm going to; as easy as I can," replied Jack. "But I've got to do something or break loose."

"Shivering side-saddles!" exclaimed Nat Anderson. "Let's have a burglar scare."

"How?" asked Sam.

"I'll think of a plan," Nat went on. "Howling huckleberries, but I too am pining for a little excitement, Jack."

"Well, trot out your plan," Jack said. "We haven't got much time."

"Let me think a minute," begged Nat, and, while he assumed an attitude as though he was trying to solve a problem in geometry, Fred drew out a little tin fife and played such a doleful air that Nat cried:

"How do you expect me to think with that thing going?" and, with a quick grab he snatched it from Fred's hand and sent it spinning across Jack's room.

"I have it!" Nat exclaimed, when the excitement had somewhat subsided. "You all know what timid creatures Professors Gale and Hall are. They room together, and I believe they'd scream if they saw a mouse. Not that they're a bad sort, for they have both helped me a lot in my lessons. But men ought not to be such babies. Now what's the matter with a couple of us disguising ourselves as burglars and going into their rooms about midnight? The rest of us can hide and hear the fun."

"Maybe they'll shoot," suggested Sam.

"Shoot! They'd be afraid to handle a revolver," was Nat's comment.

"Well, as long as it won't do any real harm, and as we positively have to have something happen, let's go on with it," said Jack. "Who'll be the burglars?"

"Nat'll have to be one," spoke John Smith, as he proposed it."

"L-l-let me be t-t-the o-o-o-other," said Will Slade haltingly.

"What? And when you demand their money or their lives how would you say it?" asked Sam.

"Nice sort of a burglar you'd make. 'G-g-g-give m-m-m-me y-y-y-your m-m-mon—"

Sam stopped suddenly and dodged back, as Will aimed a blow at him. In doing so he stumbled over a pile of books and went down in a heap.

"Serves you right," said Jack. "Just for his making fun of Will I vote we elect Will as one of the burglars."

The others agreed, even Sam, and Will regained his good nature.

"How about masks?" asked Sam.

"I'll make some," replied Jack, and, from some pieces of black cloth, he quickly cut two false-faces.

"I-I-I've g-g-got t-t-t have a g-g-g-g—" came from Will.

"Are you trying to say a pair of gum shoes?" asked John Smith. "I'll lend you a pair of moccasins."

"I guess he means gun," volunteered Nat. "But these will do just as well," and he got a couple of nickel-plated bicycle pumps from a drawer. "They'll shine in the dim light just like revolvers," he went on.

"Guess I'll take a stroll down the corridor and see how the land lies," said Jack. "We don't want to burglarize a room that has no one in it, and they may not be in when the second story men get there."

"That's so, how are we going to get in?" asked Nat.

"Easy," replied Jack. "Their room is on the ground floor, and you can just raise the screen up and drop in. They always leave their window open a bit, as they're fresh air fiends."

While Jack went to take an observation, the two amateur burglars made their arrangements. They turned their clothing inside out, and, with the two pieces of black cloth across their faces, while ragged caps were drawn down close over their foreheads, they looked the part to perfection.

Jack soon returned, to report that the coast was clear, and that both assistants were in the room.

"Gales is reading Shakespeare, and Hall is manicuring his nails," the spy reported. "But it's too early yet. Let's go take a stroll and about midnight will be the right time. We can hide in the bushes opposite the room and hear 'em call for help. Then we can rush up and pretend we came to the rescue. That will be a good excuse in case we're caught watching the game."

Both assistants retired early, and the boys knew that twelve o'clock would find them both sound asleep. After a stroll about the college grounds, taking care not to venture into the light but keeping well in the shadows, Jack announced it was the hour for the show to commence.

"Better let Nat do the talking," Jack advised Will. "Have you got anything to disguise your voice, Nat?"

"I can talk down in my throat."

"Better put a peanut in your mouth," Jack went on passing over several. "That will make you sound more like a desperate villain."

Accordingly, Nat stuffed one of the unshelled nuts into his cheek, and then, seeing that Will was ready, he led the way from the shadow of the bushes toward the window of the room where the assistants slept. It was a dark night, which was favorable to their plans.

As Jack had said, the only bar to entrance was a light screen in the casement. Nat raised this, and, listening a few seconds, to make sure the teachers were asleep, he crawled into the room.

Will followed him. For a moment after they had entered the boys did not know what to do. They were unaware of the method of procedure common among burglars. They were in doubt whether to announce their presence, or wait until the sleepers discovered it.

Chance, however, took charge of matters for them. In moving about Will hit a book that projected over the edge of a table. It fell down, bounced against a cane standing in one corner, and the stick toppled against a wash pitcher, making a noise as if a gong had been rung.

"Now be ready to throw a scare into 'em!" whispered Nat to Will. "That's bound to rouse 'em."

It did. They could hear the sleepers sitting up in bed. Then Mr. Hall demanded:

"Who's there?"

"Don't move as you value your life!" exclaimed Nat, in his deepest tones.

"We-we-we!" began Will forgetting the instructions to let Nat do the talking. His companion, however, silenced him by a vigorous punch in the stomach.

"We're after money!" Nat went on.

There was a sudden click and the room became illuminated. Mr. Hall had pulled the chain that turned on the automatic gaslight. The two teachers were sitting up in their beds, staring at the intruders.

Nat drew his bicycle pump, and Will followed his example.

"Money or your life!" exclaimed Nat, in dramatic accents.

"Why—why—I believe they're burglars!" cried Mr. Gales.

"The impudence of them!" almost shouted Mr. Hall. The next instant he sprang out of bed and advanced on Nat and Will with long strides. This was more than the boys had bargained for.

Seizing Nat, Mr. Hall, who proved much more muscular than his build indicated, fairly tossed the boy out of the window. Fortunately he fell on the soft grass and was only shaken up.

"Get out of here, you scoundrel!" exclaimed the athletic teacher, making a rush for Will.

"D-d-don't h-h-h-hurt me!" pleaded the bold burglar. "I-I-I-I we—"

As Mr. Hall grabbed him the black mask came off and the instructor, seeing the lad's face cried out:

"It's Will Slade!"

He was about to send the burglar flying after his companion, but this discovery stopped him. At the same instant, the hidden crowd, thinking it was about time to do the rescue act, had started forward.

"Keep back!" cried Nat. "It's a fizzle!" and he limped from under the window as fast as he could.

CHAPTER IX

NAT'S INVITATION

The boys needed no other warning to make themselves scarce. They had reckoned without their host in planning the trick on the two teachers.

"Where's Will?" asked Jack of Nat.

"I guess they've caught him," the limping "burglar" said.

"That means trouble," put in Sam. "How did it happen?"

The conspirators were now some distance away from the Hall, and out of hearing distance.

"It happened because they weren't the milksops we thought them," said Nat; rubbing his elbow. "The way he grabbed me felt as if I was being hugged by a bear."

"Then they didn't get frightened?"

"Not a bit. Came right at me."

The boys looked back. The brilliantly lighted window of the teacher's room shone out plainly amid the blackness of the night. As the boys watched, they saw a figure climb over the sill.

"There comes Will," spoke Sam.

"I wonder if they're not going to report us," said Jack. "Say, It will be the first time a teacher didn't take an opportunity of getting even."

As soon as Will found himself on the ground he set off on a run, toward where he supposed his friends to be in hiding.

Jack gave the usual signal-whistle of his crowd, and Will, hearing it, came up quickly.

"What happened?"

"Didn't he make a row?"

"Are they going to report it?"

"How'd you get away?"

These were some of the questions to which the throng of boys demanded answers.

"I-I-I-c-can't t-t-tell h-h-h-."

"Here! you quit that!" exclaimed Jack sternly, thinking to frighten Will out of his stuttering.

The rebuke had the desired effect, and, for once Will forgot to mix his words and letters.

"When he saw it was me," he explained, "he didn't seem to know what to say. Then he laughed and Gales laughed, and I felt pretty foolish; I tell you.

"Gales asked me who was with me, but Hall cut in and said he didn't want me to tell. I wouldn't anyhow, only it was white of him not to insist."

"It sure was," murmured Jack. "Oh, I can see trouble coming our way."

"Well," went on Will. "He looked at me a little longer, and I heard Gales mutter something about 'boys will be boys,' then Hall made a sign to him, and Gales went back to bed."

"What did you do?" asked Jack.

"Why, Hall motioned to me to climb out of the windows and I did, mighty quick, you can bet"

"Wait until chapel to-morrow morning," said Nat. "Maybe we won't get it! Never mind, the end of the term is almost here, and they can't do any more than suspend us. Though I hate to have the folks hear of it."

There were several anxious hearts beating under boyish coats when the opening exercises were held the next morning. The burglar schemers watched the two assistants file in and take their usual places on the raised platform.

"How do they look?" whispered Nat to Jack.

"Don't seem to have an awful lot of fire in their eyes," was the answer.

"Wait until Dr. Mead begins," whispered Sam, a sort of Job's comforter.

But to the boys' astonishment, there was no reference to the night's prank. The exercises went off as usual, though every time Dr. Mead cleared his throat, or began to speak on a new subject, there was a nervous thrill on the part of the conspirators.

"I have one more announcement to make, and that will end the exercises for the day," the head of the Academy said.

"Here it comes," whispered Jack.

"Will Slade and Nat Anderson are requested to meet Professors Hall and Gales after chapel," was what the doctor said.

There was a little buzz of excitement among the students, for the story of the escapade had become generally known.

"Glad I'm not in their shoes, but I suppose we'll all come in for it," said Sam, as he and the others filed out of the assembly room. Will and Nat remained, their spirits anything but pleasant.

Their companions stayed out on the campus, waiting for them, instead of dispersing to their rooms to prepare for the first lesson period. As the minutes dragged away there was a general feeling of apprehension.

"Don't s'pose they'll get a flogging do you?" asked Sam.

"Against the rules of the institution," replied Jack.

"Here they come," announced Fred Kaler. "I don't know whether I ought to play a funeral march or 'Palms of Victory.'"

"Probably the former," put in John Smith.

"Well?" asked Jack, as the two "burglars" came within hailing distance, "what did they do to you?"

"It's all right!" exclaimed Nat. "Say, they're bricks all right, Gales and Hall are! They took us to Dr. Mead's little private office, and we thought sure we were in for it. I didn't know how they recognized me until Gales gave me my handkerchief, which I had dropped in the room. It had my name on it."

"Skip those details!" interrupted Sam. "Get down to business. Did they fire you?"

"Not a bit of it," replied Nat. "They asked me if I was hurt in the—er—the—jump I took from the window. I said I wasn't. They then made some remarks about the night air being bad toward the end of the term, and they told us to go to our classes. Not a word about it. I

call that white, I do.”

”Right you are!” came in chorus from the others.

”We ought to send ’em a vote of thanks,” suggested Sam.

”No, I think I’d let it rest where it is,” came from Jack. ”They want to show that they could have made trouble if they wanted to. We’d better let it drop. I wonder if Dr. Mead knows it?”

”I don’t believe they told him,” was Nat’s opinion. ”You see there wasn’t much of a row, and it was all over in a little while. But it certainly is one on us.”

To this they all agreed. Yet one good thing came of it, for the boys had a better understanding of the characters of the two instructors. They felt an increased respect for them morally as well as physically, and there came a better spirit between Jack’s crowd and the two professors. The latter never even referred to the burglar incident, and, whenever any of the other students spoke in rather slighting terms of either of the instructors, Jack and his friends were ready defenders.

On account of preparations for examinations there was only a half day’s session, the boys being given the afternoon off. After dinner Jack accepted an invitation from John Smith to go out in the Indian student’s canoe on the lake.

They paddled about for several hours, and were on their way back to the boathouse, when a rowing craft, in which two youths were seated, came swiftly toward them.

”Look out!” called Jack. ”Do you want to run us down?”

Whether the rowers intended that or not was not evident, but they certainly came within a few inches of smashing the frail canoe. Only John’s skill prevented it. As the rowboat swept past one of the oars fairly snatched the paddle from Jack’s hand.

”What’s the matter with you?” he demanded angrily.

The only answer was a mocking laugh, and, as the boat was now far enough past to show the faces of the rowers, Jack looked to see who they were.

”Jerry Chowden!” he exclaimed. ”I thought he was in Chicago,” and he recalled the threatening letter.

”Guess he’s here to see the closing exercises,” remarked John. ”Who’s that with him?”

"Adrian Bagot" replied Jack. "Well, they're a nice team. I shouldn't wonder but there'd be some trouble for some one if they stay long."

"Not many more days left," John observed. "Grab your paddle," and he swung the canoe around to where the broad blade floated.

In his room that evening Jack's meditations as to what Chowden's return might mean were interrupted by the entrance of Nat Anderson. He seemed quite excited and was waving a letter over his head.

"Great news," he exclaimed.

"What is?" asked Jack. "Some one left you a thousand dollars?"

"No, it's an invitation from my uncle, Morris Kent, who has a big ranch near Denville, Colorado, to come out and spend the summer vacation with him."

"Fine!" cried Jack.

"But that isn't the best part," added Nat. "He says I can bring two chums with me, and I want you to be one."

"Do you mean it?" asked Jack.

"Sure."

"Who else will you take?"

There was a noise in the corridor.

CHAPTER X

A MEETING WITH CHOWDEN

"Studying or talking?" asked a voice in the hall outside of Jack's room, and the door was pushed open to admit John Smith. Jack and Nat looked at each other. The same thought seemed to come to both of them.

"Him!" they exclaimed together.

"What's this, a game, or a joke?"

"A little of both," Jack said. "Tell him about it, Nat."

Nat explained the receipt of his uncle's invitation.

"We were just wondering who would make the third member of the party, when you came in," he said, "and we both decided on you."

"It was very kind of you to invite me," John said. "I guess I can arrange to go. Where is this ranch?"

"Near Denville, Colorado," replied Nat.

John started and looked at Jack.

"Nothing the matter with that place, is there?" asked Jack.

"No. On the contrary it couldn't be better," replied John. "That's where we want to go to settle the mystery—"

He stopped, evidently on account of Nat's presence.

"Oh, Nat knows all about it," said Jack. "I see what you're driving at."

"Yes," went on John. "Denville is not many miles from Denver, and at the latter place, you remember, we can go to the Capital Bank, and get the address of Orion Tevis."

"Yes, and then maybe we can locate my father," Jack exclaimed. "Say, Nat, this couldn't have happened better. It's fine of you to think of me."

"The same here," put in John.

"Well, I don't know of any fellows I'd rather have than you two," replied Nat.

"Thanks," his two friends answered.

"I'm going to write a reply at once," Nat went on. "I'll go to town and mail it to-night. I guess Dr. Mead will let me."

"Let's all three go," suggested Jack. "I'll ask permission. We've not been caught in any scrapes lately, and our records are fairly good. It's early."

Dr. Mead readily gave permission for the three chums to go to the village where the post-office was.

"But you must be in by eleven o'clock," he stipulated. "I shall instruct Martin to watch out for you, and if you are not in at that hour it will mean demerits all around. I would not let you go, only you have had very good records of late." On their way to the village the three chums talked of nothing but the proposed trip. To Nat it was enough excitement to think of merely going west. But to Jack, who wanted to solve the mystery of his father it meant much more. He hoped since the eleven years of voluntary exile were almost up, to induce his father to come east and make his home.

"That is, if I can find him," thought Jack. "I hope I can. First I'll have to locate Orion Tevis, to see what he knows."

"I'll be glad to get out on a range once more," said John Smith. "I've got enough Indian blood in me to feel cooped up in a house. It will be sport out there, riding ponies and seeing the cattle."

The boys reached the post-office about nine o'clock and Nat mailed his letter.

"It's early to go back," said Jack. "Isn't there something that we can do?"

"There's a moving picture show in town," said John. "Let's go to it for awhile."

This was voted a good idea. The boys enjoyed the scenes thrown on the screen, and were particularly taken with a depiction of a cowboy roping a steer.

"That's what we'll soon see in reality," whispered Nat.

They started through the village, and, as they turned down a quiet street that led toward Washington Hall, Jack saw a dark figure sneaking along on the opposite side, in the shadow of some buildings.

"Looks as if some one was following us," said Jack to himself.

As our hero pulled out his handkerchief there flew out with it a letter. The sight of it reminded him that he had promised Professor Hall to mail it that evening. It had slipped his mind, even though he had been in the post-office.

"I'd better run right back with it," said Jack. "Mighty stupid of me. Well, there's no help for it, and I don't want to disappoint Hall. He's a good friend of ours."

He picked the letter up, and held it in his hand to insure that it would not be forgotten again.

"I say!" called Jack to his companions, who were now some distance ahead of him. "I've got to run back and mail a letter. Go on and I'll catch up to you."

"All right," said John. "We'll walk slow."

Intent on rectifying his forgetfulness, Jack turned back on the run. He did not see three figures sneaking into the shadow of a dark doorway just as he turned.

"We'll have him just where we want him," whispered one of the youths who had been following the students.

"You're not going to be three to one, are you?" asked one of the trio.

"No, I guess Jerry Chowden is a match for Jack Ranger any day," was the answer. "You two can look on, and see me wallop him."

Jack made good time back to the post-office, and came hurrying along the street, whistling a lively tune. In the meantime the three plotters had walked ahead, taking care not to get too near Nat and John. The latter, however, had walked faster than they intended, so that they were a good quarter of a mile ahead of Jack.

As the latter came opposite the last building that stood on the edge of where there were a number of vacant lots, he was surprised to hear a hail.

"Hold on there!" someone cried.

"Who are you?" asked Jack, looking around. Then, as three figures emerged from the shadows and blocked his path, he exclaimed:

"Oh, it's you, is it, Jerry Chowden? Well, what do you want?"

"I want to get square with you," replied the bully, in an angry tone.

"And you bring two of your toadies along to help you, I suppose," said Jack, unable to keep a sneer from his voice.

"Look here!" exclaimed one of Jerry's companions. "I don't know who you are, except by name, but I'm not going to have you insult me. Jerry is a friend of mine—"

"Sorry for you," interrupted Jack coolly.

"None of your lip!" exclaimed the other strange youth.

"Jerry says he has a bone to pick with you," the one who had first addressed Jack went on. "He told us he was going to have it out with you, and invited us along. We're not going to take any part, you can rest assured of that, and there'll be fair play. But if you're afraid, why that's another matter."

"Who said I was afraid?" demanded Jack hotly.

"You seem to act so."

"I don't know that I ever did you any harm, Jerry Chowden," Jack said, more quietly, "but if you feel so why I can't help it."

"I do, and I'm going to get even," spoke Jerry, advancing closer to Jack.

"Stand aside," demanded Jack, as the bully almost brushed against him.

"Not until you've given me satisfaction."

"What do you mean?"

"You know well enough what I mean."

"Do you want to fight?" asked Jack calmly.

"Certainly I do!" exclaimed the bully, aiming a blow at the lad in front of him. Jack stepped quickly back, Jerry nearly lost his balance and just saved himself from falling.

"You're a coward!" cried Jerry angrily.

"I am, eh?" cried Jack. "Well, if I must fight I'm going to do it for all I'm worth!"

The next instant he had his coat off, and was ready to defend himself. Jerry, nothing loath, closed in, and there in the darkness, illuminated only by the stars, the fight began.

Jerry was well built and strong, but he had little science. On the contrary, though Jack was not as muscular nor as heavy as his antagonist, he more than made up for it in his quickness and his ability to hit hard. Jerry came up with a rush, and aimed a vicious blow at Jack's face. Jack cleverly dodged it, and countered, landing on Jerry's chin with a force that made the bully see stars.

"I'll pay you for that!" he cried.

He would have done better to have kept quiet, since he took his attention from Jack's fists, which, in the darkness, were hard enough to see at best. A second later Jerry found his nose stopping a solid blow, straight from the shoulder.

"Ow!" yelled Jerry, in spite of himself.

Then he clenched with Jack, and the two went at it rough-and-tumble. Jack got in a number of good blows, and Jerry tried his best to get away and deliver some in return. He did manage to punch Jack on the body, causing that worthy's breath to come in gasps.

Back and forth went the fighters, the two spectators dancing about to see all they could of it. They kept their word not to interfere, and it was a fair struggle between Jack and Jerry.

Though Jack did his best he could not avoid getting some severe blows, and one, on his eye, he felt had done considerable damage. But he more than paid Jerry back for it, and, in a little while the bully was fairly howling for mercy.

"Help!" he cried. "He's not fighting fair."

"Don't be a baby!" Jerry's friends called to him, somewhat disgusted with his actions. "Give it to him!"

Jerry made one more effort to deal Jack a blow that would win the victory, but in his eagerness he lowered his guard. Our hero shot out a swift left, and it landed full on Jerry's chin. He staggered for a second, and then went down in a heap.

He was up again in a couple of seconds, not much the worse, but all the fight was gone out of him. He held his head in his hands for a while, and then fairly ran up the dark street, while his two friends, surprised at the sudden outcome of the fight, followed more slowly.

"I'll get even with you yet!" Jerry called back.

"Well, if you do I still will have the satisfaction of knowing that I trounced you good and proper," Jack said, as he held a cold stone to his bruised eye.

Just then, from across the lots there came a hail:

"Hey, Jack! Where are you?"

"Coming," was Jack's reply.

He heard some one running toward him as he began to pick up his coat, and put on his hat.

CHAPTER XI

A GRAND WIND UP

"What's the matter?" demanded John Smith, as he and Nat joined their comrade.

"Did you get lost?" asked Nat.

"No, only sort of delayed," answered Jack.

"What makes you talk so funny?" inquired John.

"I expect it's because my lips are swollen," was the reply.

"Did some one hold you up and try to rob you?" cried Nat, in alarm.

"Well, it was a hold-up, but no robbery," said Jack, and then he related what had happened.

"Why didn't you yell for help?" asked John. "We'd have come back."

"I didn't need any," replied Jack. "It was a fair fight enough. I guess he'll not forget that one on the chin in a hurry," and he laughed in spite of his swollen lips and blackened eye.

"Much damaged?" asked Nat.

"I'm afraid I've got a shiner," Jack replied. "They're sure to notice it at the Hall, and what will I say?"

"Steal their thunder," advised John. "Let's hurry back, and report at once to the doctor."

"Good idea," spoke Jack.

They made good time back to the academy, and arrived a little before eleven.

"Dr. Mead says I'm to mark down just the time you come in," said Martin, the monitor.

"That's right," agreed Jack. "Is the doctor in his study?"

"I believe he is."

"We want to see him," went on Jack.

"Been fighting." said Martin to himself. "My, my! What boys they are! Always into something!"

"Come in!" called the head of the Academy in answer to Jack's knock on his door, and the three lads entered.

"Ah, Ranger! And Smith and Anderson. Well, what can I do—Ha! Fighting, eh!" and the tone that had been a genial one became stern.

"Yes, sir," admitted Jack boldly. "I came to tell you all about it, before you heard a garbled report from some one else."

Then he related exactly what had happened, Nat and John confirming what he said. The boys' stories were so evidently true that Dr. Mead could but believe them.

"That's enough," he said when Jack had finished. "I believe you. Don't let it—well, there, I don't suppose it was your fault. Fighting is a bad business—but then—well boys, now get to bed. You have plenty of hard work before you go in the next week with all the examinations. Good night!"

"Good night!" echoed the lads.

"That was the best way out," agreed Jack, when they were in the corridor. "Now I've got to get some vinegar and brown paper for this optic or I'll look a sight to-morrow."

Examinations held sway for nearly a week thereafter. But "it's a long lane that has no turning" and, at last there came a time when the boys could say:

"To-morrow's the last day of school."

The term was at an end, and the whole academy was in a ferment over it. The students were busy packing their belongings, the graduates had already departed, and there was almost as much excitement as at the annual football or baseball games with a rival institution.

The night before the day of the closing exercises, Jack's room was a gathering place for all his chums. Fred Kaler was so excited he tried to play a mouth organ, a jews'-harp and a tin flute, all at the same time, with results anything but musical, while Will Slade stuttered as he never had before.

"What will we do for a final wind-up?" asked Sam.

"Let it be something worthy of the name of Washington Hall," exclaimed Jack.

"We ought to work Professors Garlach and Socrat into it somehow," suggested Bony. "They're more fun than a bunch of monkeys."

"Get 'em to fight another duel," put in Sam.

"They'd suspect something leading up to that," spoke John Smith.

"Let's see if we can't make one outdo the other in politeness." suggested Jack. "I have a sort of scheme."

"Trot it out!" demanded Sam.

"I'll get Garlach to write Socrat a note," said Jack.

"Where's the fun in that?" asked Bony.

"Then I'll have Socrat send a little missive to Garlach."

"What's the answer?" demanded Nat.

"Garlach will write in French and Socrat will pen a few lines in German, and I'll tell 'em what to write," Jack went on. "Do you see my drift, as the snow bank said to the wind?"

"Good!" exclaimed Sam. "Go ahead."

The boys soon got together over the plan, and Jack was given plenty of suggestions to perfect it. He made up a number of sample notes, and then, being satisfied, he announced:

"Now I'm going to start in. Just hang around, you fellows, and see what happens."

It was about nine o'clock, but as it was the night before the last day of school, hardly any of the teachers or the pupils had thought of going to bed.

Jack went to Professor Garlach's room. He found the instructor busy packing up his books preparatory to the vacation.

"Ach! It iss young Ranger!" exclaimed the German instructor. "Velcome. Come in. It is goot to see you."

"Thanks, Professor," said Jack. "I suppose you are all ready for the long rest?"

"Sure I am, Ranger."

"Well, we all are. I saw Professor Socrat packing up as I came past."

At the mention of the French teacher's name Professor Garlach seemed to bristle up. There was always more or less ill feeling between them on account of their nationalities, but of late it was especially acute.

"Ach! Speak not of him!" growled Garlach.

"I think he wants to make friends with you," went on Jack, trying not to smile. "In fact he said as much to me. He said he would like to write you a farewell note and apologize for anything that might have given you offense."

The German's manner changed. Jack was speaking the truth, though he had been instrumental in bringing the matter about. He had previously paid a visit to Socrat, and, broaching the subject of the cold feeling between the two teachers had suggested that it would be a fine thing if Mr. Socrat would say he was sorry for it, and would do all in his power to heal the breach.

It was no easy task to bring this about, but Jack had a winning way with him, and really made the Frenchman believe it was more a favor on his part to apologize than it was of Mr. Garlach to accept it. In the end Professor Socrat had agreed to write a little note to his former enemy.

"Only I know not ze Germaine language," he said.

"That's all right, I'll do it for you," said Jack. "I can fix it up."

"Then write ze note and I sign heem," said the Frenchman.

"So he vill my pardon ask, iss it?" inquired Mr. Garlach when Jack had explained to him.

"I believe that's his intention. Why can't you two meet out in the chapel and fix things up. Exchange letters so to speak. He's going to write to you in German, and you can write to him in French."

"I know not de silly tongue!" grunted Mr. Garlach.

"I'll write it for you," Jack said, turning aside his head to conceal a grin. "I'm pretty good at French."

"Den you may do so," said Mr. Garlach. "I haf no objections to accepting his apologies, and being friends mit him."

"Then here's the note," said Jack, handing over one he had prepared. "Sign it and be in the chapel in ten minutes. Mr. Socrat will be there, and we'll have a sort of farewell service."

"Fine!" exclaimed the German. "Und we vill sing 'Der Wacht am Rhein!'"

"And maybe the 'Marseilles,' too," added Jack softly as he went to deliver a note written in German to Mr. Socrat. The missives had cost him and the other boys no little thought.

"Now, you fellows want to lay low if you expect to see the fun," cautioned Jack to his chums, when he returned and told of his success. "Garlach and Socrat will be here in about ten minutes. There must be only a few of us around. Bony, I'll depend on you to act when I give the signal."

"I'll be there," promised Bony.

A little later all but a few of the boys had concealed themselves behind benches in the chapel. Jack was out of sight but could see what was going on. A few students stood conversing in one corner.

Mr. Socrat was the first to enter. He came in, holding a note in his hand.

"It is now zat I prove ze politeness of ze French," he murmured.

A moment later Mr. Garlach entered from the other side.

"Goot effning, Herr Socrates," he said, with a stiff bow.

"Bon jour!" exclaimed Mr. Socrat. "Only, if it pleases you my dear Professor Garlick, my name ees wizout ze final syllable."

"Und mine it iss Garla-a-ach, und not like de leek vat you eat!" exclaimed the German.

"They're off!" said Jack in a whisper to Sam.

"Your pardon!" came from Mr. Socrat. "I am in error. But I have here a note in which I wish to greet you wiz the happiness of parting. It iss in your own language!"

"Ach! So! I too have a missive for you," went on Mr. Garlach, somewhat modified. "It iss in your tongue as I belief, but I am not so goot in it as perhaps you are."

"It is charming of you," spoke Mr. Socrat, bowing low. The two professors exchanged notes, and then stepped over to a flaring gaslight where they could read them.

"Now watch out!" exclaimed Jack.

"Ha!" cried the German. "Vas ist dis?"

"Pah!" cried Mr. Socrat. "Diable! I am insult!"

"Dot Frenchman iss von pig-hog!" came from Mr. Garlach.

"See! So I will treat ze writair!" exclaimed Mr. Socrat, tearing the note to shreds and stamping on the pieces.

"I vill crush the frog-eater as I do dis letter!" muttered Mr. Garlach, as he twisted the slip of paper into a shapeless mass and tossed it into the air.

"Scoundrel!" hissed Mr. Socrat

"Vile dog vat you iss!" came from Mr. Garlach.

Then, unable to restrain their feelings any longer they rushed at each other.

"Ready!" called Jack, and the next instant the lights went out, leaving the chapel in darkness.

CHAPTER XII

HO! FOR THE WEST!

For a few seconds there was the sound of a confused stumbling about. Blows were struck, but they seemed to land on desks and tables. Mingled with them were the murmurs of strong French and German words, and the heavy breathing of the two teachers.

Then, as the door at the farther end of the room opened, allowing light from the hall to come in, a voice asked:

"What's the matter?"

"Matter enough! I am terrible insult!" exclaimed Mr. Socrat from behind a table where he was crouching.

"I must be apologized by alretty!" muttered Mr. Garlach, in deep tones.

"What is this all about?" demanded Dr. Mead, who had made the first inquiry. "What does it mean?"

"Ach! I will tell you!" spoke the German teacher.

"I will leave at once razzar zan stay where he iss!" came from the Frenchman.

"Come to my office," said Dr. Mead. "I am afraid it's another of the boys' pranks."

The two Instructors, muttering against each other, followed the head of the academy down the corridor.

"Now's our chance to sneak!" exclaimed Jack. "Say, it was the best ever!"

"What was in the notes that made them so mad?" asked Sam.

"Why, the one Garlach got stated that the Germans were a race of thieves and robbers and would never be anything better. Professor Garlach, on the other hand, seemed to have written to his French friend that the latter nation was nothing but a lot of long-legged frog-eaters, who were more ladies than they were men!"

"No wonder they went up into the air!" exclaimed Bony Balmore. "It was like a match to gunpowder."

"Lucky we could turn the lights out," commented Nat Anderson, "or they'd be fighting yet."

"Maybe they will have a duel," suggested John Smith.

But in some way Dr. Mead managed to patch matters up. Nor was any punishment visited on the boys. The doctor evidently made allowances for the closing of school, and the consequent slacking of discipline that was bound to occur. The next day, though the French and German professors glared more darkly than usual at each other, there was no reference to the notes.

The closing exercises were soon over and then, after a few formal words of farewell for the term from Dr. Mead, Washington Hall was declared closed until the fall.

"Whoop!" yelled Jack, as he came with a rush from chapel where the final program had been rendered. "Hold me down, someone!"

"I will!" exclaimed Nat, jumping on his chum's back, and bearing him to the earth.

"I'll help!" cried several, and soon half a dozen had piled upon Jack, in the middle of the campus.

"Down!" he cried, half smothered. "That's enough!"

"Fall in line for a grand march!" shouted Fred Kaler, as he tooted on a tin fife. "L-l-M-let m-m-m-me-l-l-l-Pzzant!" spluttered Will. "Let me lead!"

"Too late!" cried Sam, as he ran out and got at the head of the impromptu procession.

"Come on and get Socrat and Garlach in line!" called Jack. "We'll make 'em march side by side and forget all their troubles."

The idea was received with shouts of laughter. Off the lads started on a run for the rooms of the two professors.

"Come on!" cried Jack to Mr. Garlach.

"Ach! Vat iss it now?" inquired the instructor, vainly struggling against the hold Jack had of him. "You boys vill drive me to distraction!"

"Got to take part in the grand march!" went on Jack.

Before Mr. Garlach knew what was happening, he found himself being hustled out of his chambers and fairly carried along in a rush of the students.

Sam Chalmers had in the meanwhile gone to Professor Socrat's study.

"Come on!" he cried. "Take part in the grand salute to the French flag."

"La belle France!" cried the teacher. "Vive l' Republic!"

"That's the cheese!" fairly shouted Sam. "Hurry up!"

And, before Professor Socrat could catch his breath he found himself being hurried along the corridor and out on the campus.

"Hurrah for France!" cried a score of voices.

"My compliments!" exclaimed Mr. Socrat, bowing low to the assemblage of students.

"Long may the German flag wave!" came another cry.

"Ach! Dot is goot to mine heart!" said Mr. Garlach.

"Zat is an insult to me!" spluttered the Frenchman, as Sam hurried him on.

"Don't mind 'em. They don't know what they're saying," was Sam's comment.

"Vy do they shout for dot frog-eating nation?" inquired Mr. Garlach of Jack.

"Mistake I guess," was the reply. "The boys are not very good on language yet."

Then, before either of the instructors could protest, they found themselves side by side, being carried along in a press of students who marched around the academy, singing at the top of their voices, and each one rendering a different air.

"Whoop! Isn't this great!" shouted Jack in Nat's ear.

"The best ever!" was the answer. "It only happens once in a lifetime!"

But all things must have an end, and at last the grand march came to a close. The students fairly outdid themselves, and had to halt every now and then to rest from the combined exertion of laughing and leaping as they paraded.

"Three cheers for Washington Hall!" called Jack.

The volume of sound was deafening.

"Now three for Professor Garlach!"

How the boys did yell. The professor looked as pleased as a lad with his first pair of trousers, and bowed low to Mr. Socrat whom he had detected in the act of cheering for him,

"Three cheers for Professor Socrat!" yelled Jack.

Mr. Garlach joined in the cries for his late enemy, and then the two teachers shook hands, while the boys cheered again.

"Now good loud ones for Dr. Mead and all the rest of the teachers!" called Jack, and by this time the cheering habit was so implanted that the lads cheered everything they could think of from vacation to

Socketer the janitor.

Now the crowd began to break up. Several students found they must catch trains, and there were general leave takings. Good-byes were being said on every side, and there were many promises to write letters and keep up new friendships or cement old ones.

Jack found so many wanting to bid him farewell for the term that he was kept busy shaking hands, and the number of boys he promised to let hear from him during vacation would have kept two private secretaries busy.

Finally, however, matters began to quiet down. Most of the students had left the campus to pack up their belongings while a number had already departed for home. Jack, Nat Anderson and John Smith found themselves alone at least for a few minutes.

"Well, this is like old times," said Jack.

"Wow!" exclaimed John in true Indian tone. "Heap big time!"

"Reminds me of a circus broken loose," commented Nat. "But say, Jack, our train goes in an hour. Are we going to take it or stay over—"

"Not on your life!" exclaimed Jack. "Washington Hall will be as lonesome as a desert island in about an hour and I'm off."

"I think I'll go also," said John.

"Now, about our western trip," put in Nat. "Where will we connect with you. John?"

"Well," replied the Indian student. "I am going up to Canada to pay a short visit to some friends of my father's, who were very kind to him before he died. I think I will be with you in a week, and I can come on to Denton."

"That will do first-rate," said Nat. "Jack and I will be on the lookout for you. We'll be ready to start in a week, I guess."

"The sooner the better for me," put in Jack.

"That's so, I forgot you are anxious to solve the mystery of your father's disappearance," Nat said. "Well, perhaps we can hurry a bit."

"No, I guess that time will be about right," Jack went on. "I'll have to spend some time with my aunts, and I want to have a talk with Judge Bennett and get some further details. I guess we'll let it

stand at a week.”

”Well, good-bye until then,” said John, shaking hands with his two friends, and he was soon on his way to the Rudmore station. The others followed a little later. Several hours’ riding found Jack and Nat at Denton.

”I wonder if they’ll have the brass band out to meet us,” suggested Jack.

”Perpetual porous plasters! They would if they only knew what a reputation we have achieved!” exclaimed Nat, as the train rolled in. ”Hello, there’s some of your folks!”

”That’s so! My three aunts!” cried Jack, as he saw from the window the three maiden ladies with whom he had lived so long. Aunt Mary caught a glimpse of him, and waved her handkerchief, an example that was followed by the other two. The next instant Jack was being hugged and kissed as though he had been away ten years instead of a few months.

”We were so afraid the train would be late, or that you wouldn’t come until the night one,” said Aunt Josephine.

”Couldn’t think of staying away from you any longer,” Jack replied, his eyes a trifle moist as he realized the love his aunts bore toward him, and he hugged and kissed them in turn.

”So long!” called Nat, as he walked up the station platform. ”I’ll see you later. Got to pack for our trip.”

The next few days were busy ones for Jack. In the first place he had to tell his aunts all about his school experience, that is such parts of it as he thought they might care to hear and this took time. Then he had to see Judge Bennett, and the family lawyer explained further details about Jack’s father. Jack also asked the judge for the curious ring, as he thought he might have to use it on his western trip.

”You must take good care of it, Jack,” the lawyer said. ”No telling what may hinge on it.”

”If anyone gets it away from me he’ll have the hardest proposition he ever tackled,” Jack said earnestly.

In fact our hero was kept so busy, between this, arranging for his trip, and renewing his acquaintances with the town boys, that he was all unprepared when, one day, John Smith rang the door bell.

"Well, where in the world did you come from?" asked Jack.

"Straight from Canada. Didn't you get my letter?"

"By Jove! So I did, but I clean forgot to-day was Friday. Come right in."

Jack's aunts graciously received John, whom they welcomed for the part his father had played in the life of Mr. Ranger. It was decided that the Indian student should stay at Jack's house until Monday, when the start for the west was to be made.

Jack's aunts had, after an effort, given their consent to his making the western trip. More particularly as they felt it might lead to the discovering of his father. Once they got to this point it was clear sailing and they helped Jack to pack up.

There were final instructions from Judge Bennett to Jack. There were good-byes, said over a dozen times, from the aunts. There were farewell calls from a host of boys who envied Jack, Nat and John the experience they were about to have.

At last, though it seemed it moved on leaden feet, Monday came, and, at least an hour before train time, the three boys started for the depot. They had valises with them, but their trunks had been sent on ahead.

"Bounding buffaloes and copper-colored cowboys!" exclaimed Nat, as the whistle of the train sounded. "Here she comes!"

"Well, I'm glad of it," observed Jack. "I was getting tired waiting for it."

"It will seem good to get out on a range again," spoke John. "I'm counting on it."

"Westward ho!" cried Jack, as he jumped aboard the train, and waved his hand in farewell to his aunts, while the other two boys shook their hats in the air in salute to several lads who had come to see them off.

CHAPTER XIII

AN OLD ACQUAINTANCE

The boys, under the advice of Judge Bennett, had planned to go to

Chicago. From there they would take a train on another road, which made connections with the line that would land them in Denver. From Denver they had to change to still another railway to get to Fillmore, the nearest station to Denville. Nat's uncle had promised to meet them there a week from the day they started, since he wanted to allow them plenty of time to get to Colorado, and there were sometimes delays in connecting with trains.

From Fillmore the lads were to be driven about twenty miles to where Mr. Kent's ranch was located. He had written to Nat that in case he was not in Fillmore when the boys arrived they were to put up at a hotel and wait for him. Also, in case they missed connections and were late in getting there, he would wait for them.

"We want to try and find where Orion Tevis is located," said Jack, "and to do this we will have to go to the Capital Bank in Denver. That may take a little time, as we may have to prove our identity."

"Ought to be easy to do that with the rings you and John have," answered Nat, the Indian student having secured his gold circlet from Dr. Mead, who had been keeping it for him.

"It may be and it may not," John said.

"There are a lot of things mixed up in this affair, and no one can see how it will turn out. But I don't expect any trouble in getting Mr. Tevis's address. The hard part will be to find him."

"I'll find him if it's possible," Jack put in. "I want to end my father's wanderings and bring him back with me."

"And I'll help all I can, and I know my uncle will, too," said Nat, with ready sympathy.

The boys had arranged themselves comfortably in the train, which, by this time, had speeded several miles from Denton. The car was not well filled as it was early and no large cities had been reached. As station after station was passed, however, passengers began to take the seats until the cars were comfortably filled.

The boys had taken passage in a through sleeper to Chicago, and got their meals in the dining car ahead. They had supper in Scranton, where the train waited about half an hour to connect with another. As the boys came back to their seats in the sleeper, which had not yet been made up, they saw several new passengers.

One was a tall, rather rough looking man, who seemed to have suddenly acquired wealth. His clothes were good but did not fit him well, and he seemed ill at ease in them. There was a big diamond in his shirt front, and he had a heavy gold chain across his vest.

"Guess I'm entitled to the best that's goin'," he said in a loud tone as he sat in one seat and put his big feet up in the one opposite. "I've paid for this whole section an' I'm going to use it. I ain't worked hard all my life for nothing. Just sold my share in a coal mine," he said to the boys, whose seats were near his. "Now I'm going to enjoy myself. Going to the 'Windy City'! that's what I am. Got friends in Chicago that'll be glad to see me an' my pile," and he pulled out a big role of bills. "My name's Josh Post, an I'm set in my ways," he added.

The boys did not make any answer, but, at the sound of the big man's voice a passenger in the seat ahead of him turned and looked to see who was speaking. As he did so the former mine owner happened to be displaying his money, and the eyes of the other passenger gleamed in a dangerous sort of way.

As he turned around to get a glimpse of the miner, Jack got a look at the face of the passenger who had shown such curiosity. The boy started. "Where have I seen him before?" he thought to himself. "I can't seem to place him." Then he leaned over and whispered to Nat. "Make an excuse to go to the end of the car, and on your way back take a look at the man in the first seat."

"All right," said Nat, who did not ask the reason. A little later he sauntered to the water cooler. He could hardly repress a start as he passed the man Jack had mentioned.

"Know him?" asked Jack, when his chum had regained his seat.

"Sure, in spite of his disguise, his new way of wearing his hair, and the fact that he has shaved off his moustache."

"Marinello Booghoobally?" asked Jack, in low tones.

"Otherwise known as Hemp Smith," whispered Jack. "I wonder what he's up to now."

"I shouldn't be surprised if he would like to annex the roll of one Mr. Josh Post," observed Nat. "We'd better keep our eyes peeled. Put John next to the game."

Thereupon the Indian student was told the story of the man who had posed as an Oriental mystic and a professor of whatever he thought he could delude people into believing, as it suited his fancy, and netted him cash.

"We certainly got the best of him in the haunted house affair," said Jack. "Guess the professor won't tackle another job like that in hurry," and he silently laughed as he thought of the trick (told of

in the first volume) the students played on the fakir when a phonograph was used to produce ghostly noises.

"Yes, sir, I'm out for a good time," said Mr. Post, as if some one had doubted his word. "Where you boys going?"

"Out west," replied Jack, thinking it would do no harm to reply civilly to Mr. Post.

"Excuse me for coming into this conversation," spoke Marinello Booghoobally, otherwise Hemp Smith. "I'm going out west myself, and if I can do anything to help you boys or you, Mr. Post, I'll be only too glad to do so."

"Help yourself to our money and his too, I guess," murmured Jack.

"Well now, that's kind of you, stranger," said Mr. Post, who seemed ready to accept any one as a friend. "What might your name be?"

"It might be almost anything I guess," muttered Nat. "Let's hear what he says. I wonder how he got here, anyhow."

"I'm Professor Punjab," replied Hemp Smith. "As you can understand by my name I am from East India, but I have been here so long I have acquired some of the habits."

"Most of the bad ones," said Jack, under his breath.

"What do you work at?" asked Mr. Post.

"Work? I do not work," replied the fakir. "I am what you might call a mind reader, a mystic, a foreteller of future events."

"Ain't no mesmerizer, are you?" asked Mr. Post.

"Yes, I can do that also," replied Professor Punjab. "Shall I give you a sample?"

"I'd rather have you give me a sample of your fortune telling," said the miner. "What's going to happen now?"

Professor Punjab seemed to go into a deep thought trance. Then he gave a sudden start.

"The train is going to stop quickly because there is an obstruction on the track!" he exclaimed.

An instant later, to the surprise of the boys, no less than Mr. Post, there was a quick application of the air brakes, so much so that the passengers were nearly thrown from their seats. Then with a grinding

and shrieking the train came to a stop.

"What did I tell you?" inquired Professor Punjab.

"Well I'll be horn-swoggled!" exclaimed Mr. Post.

"What's the matter?" asked several travelers.

The boys had hurried to the front of the car. They were met by a brakeman.

"Don't be alarmed," he said. "There is no danger."

"What was the trouble?" asked Jack.

"There was some obstruction on the track, a couple of ties, I believe, that fell from a passing flat car," the brakeman explained. "The engineer saw it and stopped just in time."

Professor Punjab pulled a book from his pocket and began to read, as if prophesying that trains would suddenly stop was the most natural thing in the world.

CHAPTER XIV

PROFESSOR PUNJAB'S TRICK

"Well, I call that goin' some," spoke Mr. Post. "If you can do that just sitting still I wonder what you can do when you begin moving"

"A mere trifle," said Professor Punjab. "I will be pleased to give you a further evidence of my powers later on. But now I am fatigued. I have studied hard to-day on the great mystery of the future life, and I find I must take a little nourishment,—very little. A bit of cracker and a glass of water," and with that he went forward to the dining car.

"Yes, I'd just like to see him get along with a cracker and a glass of water," murmured Jack. "I'll bet corned beef and cabbage is more in his line."

"But how do you suppose he knew the train was going to stop?" asked Ned speaking aloud. "That looks queer."

"He's a wonder, that's what he is," said Mr. Post. "I want to see some more of him," and he got up to go back to the smoking

compartment, leaving the three boys alone in the forward part of the car.

"Maybe he just made a guess at it," put in John Smith. "I've seen some of our Indian medicine men pretend to prophesy and it turned out they only made good guesses."

"Perhaps he did." Nat admitted.

Jack had moved over to the seat vacated by Professor Punjab. He pressed his face close to the window and looked ahead. As he did so he uttered an exclamation.

"Come here, John and Nat!" he said in a low tone. "This will explain how it was done."

The two boys took turns looking from the window.

"See it?" asked Jack.

"Sure!" they chorused.

"We were just rounding that curve," Jack went on. "He happened to look from the window and he saw the ties on the track. Any one could as the electric light from that freight station is right over them. He knew the engineer would stop in a hurry, and, sure enough, he did. It's easy when you know how, isn't it?"

"But it certainly was strange enough when he made that statement, and then to have the train slack up," spoke Nat. "I was beginning to believe that, maybe, after all, he had some strange power."

"He's a fakir clear through," was Jack's opinion. "You wait a bit and you'll see him try some trick on this miner. He's after his money."

"We ought to put a stop to that," said Nat, "Galloping greenbacks! But we don't want to see the man robbed, even if he isn't as nice and polite as he might be."

"And we'll not, either," remarked Jack. "We'll be on the lookout, and maybe we can make Professor Hemp Smith Punjab wish he hadn't traveled on this line."

The ties on the track were soon cleared away and the train resumed its journey. The porter came in to make up the berths, and while this was being done the three boys had to take seats in other sections of the car.

In the meanwhile Professor Punjab returned. He was picking his teeth as though he had dined more substantially than on a mere wafer and a

sip of water.

"You boys going far?" he asked.

"Quite a way," replied Jack in a low voice. He was afraid the former experience the man had passed through might be recalled to him if he heard the voices of the students, and so did not use his natural tones.

But Professor Punjab did not seem at all suspicious. Besides he had never had a good look at the boys, and there was so much talking going on the time they played the trick on him it is doubtful if he remembered any one's voice.

"Where are you from?" the fakir asked next, but Jack was spared the necessity of replying by the return of Mr. Post from the smoking compartment.

"Well, well, Professor," the miner said, "that certainly was a slick trick of yours. Haven't any more of 'em up your sleeve, have you?"

"That was no trick," returned the "professor" in an injured tone. "I do not descend to tricks. If I am gifted with certain powers I must use them. I can not help myself. There is something within me—some spirit—that moves me. I saw that the train would have to stop and I had to announce it."

"You bet you saw it all right," muttered Jack. "So could any one else who had been sitting in your seat. It was easy."

"No offense, no offense, Professor," muttered Mr. Post, seeing he had made a mistake. "I'm much interested in this thing."

"I welcome real interest in my work," the fakir went on, "I will be happy to illustrate matters to you as far as my poor talents enable me to. You have perhaps heard of the celebrated Indian manifestation of making a plant grow in a few hours?"

"Not guilty," said Mr. Post solemnly.

"Then these young gentlemen have," the professor went on, turning to the three boys.

Jack nodded silently.

"It is a strange power that we mystics have over the forces of nature," the pretended philosopher went on. "We have but to plant a seed in the soil, and, lo! a plant bearing fruit shoots up."

"That would be a good thing to sell to farmers," said Mr. Post.

"It can not be sold. Only an adept can perform it," said Professor Punjab. "I would do it for you, only the conditions are not just right here. But I can, perhaps, show you something you probably never saw before."

With a flourish he drew from his pocket a large black handkerchief. This he shook to show there was nothing in it. He spread it over his extended left arm, which was crooked at the elbow. Then he placed his right hand under it, and brought out a large orange.

"Well I'll be blowed!" exclaimed Mr. Post.

"Ain't got any more of 'em there, have you, Professor?"

"There is only one," was the reply, as the man returned the handkerchief to his pocket and passed the orange to Mr. Post. "It is difficult to produce one, I assure you."

"Not when you have them concealed in your coat, where you probably put it when you were in the dining car," was Jack's comment, made to himself.

"Well you're a wonder," exclaimed the miner. "I'd like to take lessons off you."

"I can impart the secrets to only those of the inner circle," said the professor, with an air of great wisdom. "But I am allowed to show those who appreciate my doings some of the workings of my art. Perhaps you would like to see a little more of what I am able to do."

"I sure would," replied Mr. Post.

"What I am about to do," Professor Punjab went on, "is so remarkable that I am allowed to show it to but one person at a time. Therefore I invite you, Mr. Post, into the smoking compartment with me. Later I will be glad to show my young friends, one at a time."

"Not any for mine," muttered Jack, as the miner, who was much interested in what he had seen, followed the fakir to the compartment he had recently left.

"I wonder what he's up to," said Nat, when the two were out of hearing.

"Something crooked, on the professor's part, you can make up your mind," Jack answered.

"Let's find out what it is," suggested Nat.

"How?" inquired Jack.

"I think I can manage it," put in John Smith. "I have very good hearing, and I can move around easily. Suppose I go and hide near the compartment. Maybe I can hear what they say."

"Good!" exclaimed Jack. "Then you come back and tell us, and we'll see what we can do in the way of tricks."

John put on a pair of moccasins he had in his valise, and moved through the aisle, now completely hemmed in with the curtains from the various berths. The other boys began to undress within their narrow sections but they did not take off all their clothes, so as to be in readiness for whatever should happen.

Jack managed to get into an unoccupied berth next to the smoking compartment. By placing his ears to the partition he could just distinguish what the professor was saying to Mr. Post.

"Well, that's about the limit!" John exclaimed softly to himself. "I think we can spoil that proposition for him."

Having learned all he wanted to know, the Indian lad returned to his friends.

"Professor Punjab is planning to get possession of the miner's money," he said in whispers, as the three boys held an impromptu conference in the lavatory, where Nat and Jack had gone to clean their teeth before retiring.

"How's he going to do it?" asked Jack.

"He has told Mr. Post that he has the power of making money increase over night," John explained. "He says if a certain sum is put in a mysterious box which he has, it will be doubled in the morning."

"And the miner believed him?" asked Jack.

"Sure. He agreed to put his roll in the box the fakir has, and it is to be placed under Mr. Post's berth. He is not to open it until morning."

"And when he does it will be full of brown paper," said Jack. "I've read about such tricks."

"It won't if we can help it," put in Nat. "I guess here is where we get busy."

The boys held a further conference and agreed on a plan of action. They went back to their berths, and, a little later, they heard the fake professor and Mr. Post coming back from the smoking room.

"Do I put it at the head or foot?" they heard the miner ask.

"At the foot," replied the plotter.

"So he can get it easier," muttered Jack.

Nat's berth was right opposite that of Mr. Post, so it was arranged he was to do the main work. In a little while the sleeping car became a quiet place, and deep breathing from one berth after another told that the occupants were slumbering soundly. Pretty soon Nat heard a snore from the berth of the miner.

"I'd better do it now, before Professor Punjab gets busy," he thought.

Then with his umbrella, which had a crook for a handle, Nat reached out between the curtains and began to feel around under Mr. Post's bed for the box. He had to work cautiously, but at length his efforts were rewarded. He felt the umbrella crook fasten on the object, and he pulled it across the aisle toward him.

When it was near enough he reached his hand down and took it up into his berth.

"Have you got it?" asked Jack in a whisper from the next sleeping compartment.

"Sure," replied Nat

"Take out the money and put in our messages," Jack added, and Nat did so. Then he placed the box back where he had found it.

In a short time the three boys, who were watching from behind their berth-curtains, saw a hand protrude from beneath the hangings around Professor Punjab's bed. The hand felt around a bit, and then went under Mr. Post's berth. In a few seconds it came out and the box was in it. A moment later it moved back again, and seemed to replace the box.

"That's where he put a dummy in place of what he thinks is the one with the bills in," thought Nat, who was watching closely. "He'll skip out soon, I guess."

His conjecture was right. A few minutes later Professor Punjab, who had not undressed, stole from his berth and walked softly to the end

of the car.

"I wonder if he'll jump off," thought Nat.

But the fakir had no such intentions. The train began to slacken speed, as he probably knew it would, having to stop at a station, which fact he could ascertain by consulting a time-table. The cars came to a halt, with a grinding noise of the brakes, and Nat leaned over toward the window of his berth.

He could see the station platform, and caught a glimpse of Professor Punjab as he jumped from the sleeper. Then, while the boy watched, the fakir opened the box he had in his hand.

All he pulled out were three cards, on which were written the names of the three boys.

"Fooled!" exclaimed Nat as the train started off leaving the professor, a picture of rage, on the platform.

CHAPTER XV

SHOOTING AN OIL WELL

The professor made a move as though he was about to jump back on the train, but evidently thought better of it. He gave another look at the cards, and then put them into his pocket.

"Looks as if he wanted to remember us," thought Nat.

By that time the train moved so far ahead that the professor was no longer to be seen.

"How about it?" asked Jack, sticking his head through his curtains over toward Ned's berth.

"He was mad enough to bite a ten-penny nail in two," said Nat.

"Did he find out he was fooled?" asked Jack, who had not been able to see the fakir from the car window.

"I guess yes," spoke Nat, and he told Jack the details, which were related to John, who was in the berth beyond.

"Had we better tell Mr. Post?" asked Nat.

"Wait until morning," suggested Jack. "Keep the money safe though."

"Right you are," came from Nat, and then the three boys quieted down and went to bed, though it was some time before they fell asleep, so full of excitement were they.

They awoke early, and, without dressing kept watch on the berth where Mr. Post was sleeping. They thought he would soon awaken to see if his money had increased as he had foolishly taken the fakir's word that it would. It was hardly daylight before the boys saw a hand emerge from the miner's berth and grope under his bed.

"Where is it?" they heard Mr. Post mutter.

Then, as his fingers closed on the box which Professor Punjab had put in place of the one the miner had originally left, they could hear him exclaim:

"Here's where I double my money!"

About three seconds later there arose such a yell from Mr. Post's berth that the porter came running from his quarters in alarm.

"Who's bin done committed murder?" the darky demanded.

"Murder!" exclaimed Mr. Post. "I'll murder some one, that's what I will! Look out! I'm a bad man when I'm mad, and I'm mad clear through now!"

"What's de matter?" asked the frightened negro. "Who done sumfin to yo', boss?"

"Matter?" cried the miner. "I've been robbed, that's what's the matter. Did you take my money, you black rascal?" and Mr. Post leaped from his berth and made a jump for the porter.

Just as he grabbed the negro by his kinky wool the conductor, who had been asleep in his berth, emerged. He was struck squarely by the porter, and the two went down in a heap in the aisle, with Mr. Post on top of them.

"What's this all about?" inquired the conductor, as soon as matters had quieted down a bit.

"I've been robbed, that's all," replied Mr. Post, who had partly dressed.

"Tell me about it," demanded the conductor, and then the miner, realizing that he had been a bit foolish, explained the

circumstances.

"Serves you right for trusting a stranger," said the conductor.

"But he said he was able to double my cash," protested Mr. Post. "I've got to have it back. It will ruin me to lose it."

"Here it is," said Nat, who, with the other boys, had donned his clothes. He thought matters had gone far enough. "We had it for safe keeping," he explained.

"Well douse my safety lamp! Where did you get it?" asked Mr. Post, his eyes big with wonder.

Nat explained briefly, telling how he and his chums had watched Professor Punjab, and had fooled him.

"Say, you boys are all to the good!" exclaimed the miner. "Saved my money for me, that's what you did. I didn't know I could be so foolish until I tried. Well, it will take a slick one to beat me again."

Mr. Post began counting over his roll. Meanwhile the other passengers had gathered around, and the story became generally known.

"Smart lads, them," commented an elderly man. "Ought to get a reward."

"And that's what they will, too," put in the miner, overhearing the words. "Nobody can say Josh Post forgot a good action. Here's a couple of hundred for you."

"No, thanks," said Nat firmly, and his companions shook their heads. "We can't take money for that. Besides, it was pay enough to fool the professor. We've had dealings with him before."

Mr. Post tried to force the money on the boys, but they refused to listen to him, and he finally understood that there was a higher standard than cash to repay kindness.

"Then shake hands!" he cried heartily, and the boys were almost sorry they consented, for the miner's grip was anything but a light one. However, he showed how much in earnest he was.

"I'll never forget you boys," he said. "Josh Post never forgets a favor, and if ever you want a friend just you call on me."

The boys thought little of this at the time, but there was an occasion when they remembered it and profited by it.

The excitement over, the boys went to breakfast. Mr. Post insisted on going with them, and in fact he did not seem to want the boys out of his sight. He was continually referring to his narrow escape at the hands of the fake professor. The boys got to like him better as the hours passed, for he showed that he had a good heart, beneath a rather rough and repelling exterior.

At noon the train arrived at the center of the Pennsylvania oil region. The evidences of the great industry were on every hand, and the sight of the tall derricks, the refineries, the storage tanks, and the pipes where natural gas was continually burning, were such interesting ones that the lads never grew tired of looking from the windows.

They delayed longer than usual at a small station, and some of the passengers going out to see what the trouble was, reported that the locomotive had broken down and that it would take three hours to repair it.

"Here's a chance to get out and see the country," suggested Jack. "What do you say?"

"Fine," replied John. "I've always wanted to see an oil well."

"Any objection to me going along?" asked Mr. Post, who had overheard the talk.

"Guess not," replied Nat heartily. "Come along."

The four had no sooner alighted from the train than a roughly-dressed man rushed up to the miner, grasped him by the hand, clapped him on the back with a sound like a small explosion, and exclaimed:

"Don't tell me this is Josh Post!"

"All right, Jim Baker, then I'll not do anything of the sort if you don't want me to," was the answer.

"Well land of living! Where'd you come from?" asked Jim Baker.

"Where you going?" demanded Mr. Post, not answering.

"Going to do what I've been doing for the last ten years," was the reply. "Shoot a well."

"So you're not dead yet?" asked Mr. Post.

"The day isn't over," was the answer, "and I've got two big holes to drop the go-devil down."

Then the two friends began to discuss old times with a vengeance, until the miner, suddenly remembering himself called a halt and cried:

"Jim Baker, let me introduce you to three of the best friends I got. They saved a fool from being parted from his money," and, introducing the boys he explained what he meant.

"You'd better get a nurse," said Mr. Baker sarcastically as his friend finished.

"I've put an advertisement in for one. Got to be a good one though, to keep me straight."

"Do you really shoot oil wells, with nitroglycerine, the way I've read about?" asked John Smith of Mr. Baker.

"I sure do, son. Want to see me?"

"I would like to, very much."

"Excuse me," put in Mr. Post. "I think I hear some one calling me," and he made as if to hurry away.

"There's not a bit of danger," called Mr. Baker. "Hold on, Josh, better come along."

"Guarantee you'll not blow us up?"

"Sure I will."

"What, give the guarantee or blow us up?" asked Jack with a laugh.

"I guess Josh knows he can trust me," said the well-shooter. "Now if you want to come along I've got room in the wagon, and the first well is only about a mile out. You'll have time to see it before they get the engine fixed."

The boys at once decided they would go. It was a new experience, and, though they realized the danger, they felt comparatively safe with Mr. Baker.

"I'll bring the wagon right around," said the shooter. "Wait here."

In a few minutes he reappeared with a big two horse vehicle, containing two wide seats.

"Get aboard!" he called, and the boys and Mr. Post scrambled up. The horses started off slowly, Mr. Baker driving, and they turned from the single street of the little village and emerged into a country

road.

Arriving at the well which was to be shot the boys saw a number of men. They had just finished using the borer, and had gone down a number of hundred feet without striking oil. It was, therefore, decided to "shoot it," that is, tin cylinders, containing in all about two hundred pounds of nitro-glycerine, were to be lowered into the hole, one on top of the other. Then a heavy cylindrical weight was to be dropped down on them. The concussion would set off the explosive.

The powerful stuff, it was expected, would blow a hole down through the sand and rock, and release the imprisoned oil.

Mr. Baker lost no time in getting to work. Carefully as though he was handling eggs, he lowered the tins of nitro-glycerine into the deep but narrow hole. The boys, as well as Mr. Post and the workmen, had moved a safe distance away. The final arrangements were made, and then all was in readiness for dropping the "go-devil," as it is termed.

Mr. Baker gave a last look around to see that all were far enough back. Then, with a wave of his hand he stooped over the hole. The next instant he was running like a deer.

"He's dropped it!" exclaimed Mr. Post. "Watch it now!"

It seemed as if the running man would never get to a place of safety. The boys watched with their hearts in their mouths.

Suddenly there sounded a subdued roar. Then came a curious trembling of the earth, a shaking of the solid ground. Two seconds later there spouted from the hole a column of black liquid that seemed to envelope the derrick which had not been taken down. At the same time there was a roaring, whistling noise.

Suddenly Mr. Post, who was watching the spouting well, shouted:

"Run boys! Run for your lives! Follow me!"

CHAPTER XVI

MR. POST'S ADVENTURE

For an instant Jack Ranger and his two comrades did not realize what Mr. Post was saying. They could see no danger near them.

"What's the matter?" asked Nat.

"Don't stop to ask questions! Run! Run! Run!" yelled the miner.

The boys needed no further urging, but set off at top speed after Mr. Post. He halted his run to allow the boys to catch up to him. Then, as he gave a glance backward, he yelled:

"Too late! Duck!"

The boys found themselves being pushed forward. They stumbled and fell, and it seemed as if some heavy weight toppled on top of them. Then came an explosion that sounded like a thirteen-inch gun being set off close to their ears.

They were stunned by the shock and frightened half out of their wits by the unknown terror. An instant later it was as if the sky was raining gravel, stones and sand.

"You can get up now," Jack heard Mr. Post saying. "That was about as narrow a squeak as I ever had, and I've been in some pretty tight places."

"What's it all about?" asked John Smith, as he rose and began brushing the dirt from his hair.

"That's what I want to know," put in Jack.

"Snooping sand fleas! But I feel as if I had been digging a tunnel!" cried Nat.

"Mighty lucky you didn't get blown down into one, or an oil hole," said Mr. Post.

"Anybody hurt?" asked Mr. Baker, running up at that moment. "My! I thought you'd all be killed!"

"More good luck than good management that we weren't," replied the miner. "How could you do it, Jim?"

"First time I ever was so careless," replied the well-shooter. "You can bet it'll never happen again."

"What was it?" asked Nat.

"Just an explosion of about twenty pounds of nitro-glycerine about as close to us as I ever care to have it," said Mr. Post.

"Yes, and if it hadn't been for Josh, I don't know where you boys would be now," put in Mr. Baker. "He saved your lives, all right. That's what he did."

"It wasn't anything," the miner interposed. "You see." he went on, "Jim sort of got careless and left one of his cans of nitro-glycerine lying on the ground. I didn't notice it, and I guess he didn't either, until he shot the well. Then, when I saw the shower of rock and stones, shooting up with the oil, and bearing right over toward where the can of juice lay, I figured out there was going to be trouble. That's why I yelled to you to run."

"I knew if any stones fell and hit that can we had a first-class passage to kingdom come all bought and paid for, with through tickets. I could see a lot of stones hurling up in the air, and I knew, there wasn't anything to stop them from coming down. And the majority of them were headed right for that can of death and destruction."

"That's all right, as far as it goes," said Mr. Baker, when the miner had ceased. "But he hasn't told you all. When Josh saw there was going to be an eruption, then and there, for one big stone was almost on top of the can, he just shoved you boys ahead of him, and then fell on you to shield you with his body. That's what I call being a hero."

"Hi! You drop that!" exclaimed Mr. Post, making a grab for his old friend. "I didn't do any more than any one would have done. It was all your fault, anyhow, Jim Baker."

"I know it was," admitted Mr. Baker, in contrite tones. "But that don't alter what I said, Josh."

"Well if I ever hear you making any remarks about it, I'll inform the oil well authorities how careless you're getting and you'll lose your job," put in the miner. "Now I reckon you boys have seen enough for one day."

"Well, I guess we have," said Jack. "Besides our train will leave pretty soon."

By this time quite a number of oil workers had gathered around. There was considerable excitement, as it had been rumored a number were killed. As soon as matters quieted down men began attending to the oil well, which was spouting away at a lively rate, the thick oil running in many directions.

The hole was piped, and then the stream of crude petroleum was turned into a channel whence it flowed into a reservoir. It had been a successful shooting.

As they walked back to the wagon, having brushed the dirt from their clothes, the boys saw a big hole in the ground, not far from where Mr. Post had protected them from injury by sending them on the run out of danger.

"What did that come from?" asked Nat.

"Nitro-glycerine," replied Mr. Baker. "The juice is powerful stuff."

The boys agreed with him.

"Call in and see me any time you're in this direction," said the well-shooter, as he shook hands at parting with Mr. Post and the boys.

"I will," replied the miner, "when you've gone into the grocery business or taken an agency for a life insurance company. Otherwise it's too risky."

When the travelers got back to the station they found the engineer putting the finishing touches to the repairs he and the fireman had been making. The train was about to start.

"Where have you been?" asked the conductor as the boys and the miner got aboard.

"We've been having a race with death and it nearly won," replied Mr. Post, more solemnly than he had yet spoken.

"What's the matter with him? Is he one of those religious fanatics?" asked the conductor, as the miner hurried into the car.

"Not much," answered Jack. "We had as narrow a call as I ever want to experience." While the train was getting under way he told the ticket-taker what had happened.

The next stop of importance which was reached early the next morning was at Cleveland, and there the boys learned they would have to wait seven hours for another train, as there had been some change in the schedules.

"Couldn't be better," said Mr. Post, when he heard about it. "I've always wanted to see a big body of water and here's my chance. What do you boys say to a trip out on Lake Erie? The trolleys go there, I heard a brakeman say."

The three chums, who had learned to like their new acquaintance more and more, thought it would be a fine trip to pass away the time. Accordingly after dinner, they boarded an electric car which took

them in the direction of the lake.

"Shall we go inside or ride on the platform?" asked the miner, as he paid the fares.

"Let's stay outside," suggested Nat. "Tumbling trolley cars! But this is quite a town. Let's see all we can."

So the four remained on the rear platform. It was not crowded, but, in a little while a number of men got on. The boys and Mr. Post were obliged to move back into the corner. Still they could see well from there.

One of the men who was standing close to the miner was smoking a large cigar. He seemed particular of the ashes, and appeared to be trying for a record in the matter of the length of them. They extended from the burned part of the rolled tobacco more than an inch, and at every lurch of the car, the smoker was quite solicitous lest they be knocked off.

At length the man standing in front of him jostled against him, as the car gave a sudden jerk. The ashes flew in a shower over Mr. Post, who was standing directly behind the smoker.

"What's the matter with you? Don't you know how to ride on a car?" demanded the man with the cigar, of the one who had jostled him.

"I beg your pardon, I'm sure," said the other humbly. "It was not intentional, I assure you."

"You're a clumsy fellow," the other went on, in a loud voice. "Look here; you've made me knock ashes all over this gentleman," and he turned to Mr. Post.

"That's all right," the miner said pleasantly, for he felt sorry for the other man. "He couldn't help it."

"He ought to be made to help it," the smoker went on, as if very indignant. "People who don't know how to ride on cars ought to keep off. I shall write a letter to the papers about it. Allow me to dust the ashes off your vest."

The man drew from his pocket a large white handkerchief, with which he began wiping the cigar ashes from Mr. Post's clothing.

"Awfully careless of me, too," he murmured. "Hope you take no offense."

"Not at all," the miner was saying. "It was all an accident, I'm sure. You—"

Then, the miner's tone, which had been mild, suddenly changed. He made a grab for the hand of the young man who was dusting his vest off, and cried:

"No, you don't, you scoundrel! Now I see what your game is! Let go my diamond pin or I'll shoot you!" and he made a motion toward his pocket, while the other passengers on the platform made hasty movements to get off.

CHAPTER XVII

THE WILD STEER

Mr. Post had the cigar smoker tightly by the wrist. The young man tried to break away, but as there were other persons between him and the car steps he was hemmed in. He made a rapid motion toward the passenger whom he had so berated for jostling him.

"Ah, I thought so!" exclaimed the gray-haired man, who had remained a quiet spectator of the excitement. "It's about time I took a hand in the game."

He made a rapid motion, intercepted the hand of the smoker which had been extended to the original cause of the disturbance, and grabbing something from it said:

"There's your diamond, stranger. Take care of it until I put the nippers on these thieves!"

The gray-haired man tried to edge his way around the crowd to get close to the two men who seemed to be the principal actors in the adventure. As he did so, the man who had been smoking—making a flying leap over the back platform railing, darted up the street. At the same time the man who had been accused of causing the cigar ashes to scatter over Mr. Post's vest, slipped from the steps and made a hurried run for the sidewalk.

"After him, some one!" cried the gray-haired man. "I'll get the other chap. He's the main one. The other is only a confederate," and he was off in a trice.

The car did not stop, though several men, understanding what it was all about, called the conductor.

"Can't delay," replied the knight of the bell-rope. "If you want to

see the fun, get off. Pickpockets are too common to stop the car for."

"Well, I reckon I blocked his game that time," said Mr. Post, as he looked at the diamond which had lately adorned his shirt front. "I don't read the newspapers for nothing, and they'll find Josh Post is hard to beat."

"What did he do to you?" asked some of the passengers.

"Tried to frisk me out of my sparkler," replied the miner. "It's a new way of working an old trick, but I read about it in a New York paper last week."

"How did he do it?" asked Jack.

"There were two of 'em," Mr. Post went on. "That fellow had his cigar, with lots of ashes on it, already for me. Then the other fellow bunked into him, and he flicked the ashes on me. Of course he made a play to pretend it was the other fellow's fault, and he started to brush me off. But while he was doing it with his big handkerchief, he was taking out my diamond. I caught him just in time."

"But who was the man who chased him, and gave you back your diamond?" asked Jack.

"Detective, I reckon," replied the miner. "They're often riding on the cars on the lookout for just such things as that."

"That's who he was," the conductor explained. "There's been a lot of pickpockets here lately, and the detectives are riding back and forth all day. Hope he catches that fellow."

"Don't worry me any," said Mr. Post "I've got my diamond back," and he placed the sparkling stone in his pocket for safe keeping.

Whether the detective ever caught the slick thief the boys never learned. They made the trip out to Lake Erie, and when they had looked at the big body of water and taken a short trip in a launch they returned to the station to find it was nearly the hour set for the departure of their train.

"Things seem to be coming our way," remarked Mr. Post after they had been riding half an hour. "We've had lively times since we met, boys. But I'll have to leave you in Chicago."

"Perhaps we'll see you again," said Nat. "Have you ever been out west?"

"In my younger days," replied the miner. "I had a friend once named Travers-um-no-that wasn't exactly his name either. Travis-Trellis-Tennis"

"Tevis!" exclaimed Jack, struck by a sudden inspiration.

"That's it!" cried Mr. Post. "I knew it was something that sounded like a grape vine. He and I used--"

But what Mr. Tevis, or Trellis, used to do was not told then, for a second later there sounded a grinding crash and every one in the car was thrown from his seat while above the sound of hissing steam arose the shrill cries of several women.

"Wreck!" yelled Mr. Post, struggling to his feet and starting up the aisle of the car, which was tilted at a steep angle. "We've hit something!"

By this time, most of the other passengers, who had been thrown here and there, had extricated themselves from more or less undignified positions. There were anxious inquiries on every side, and a number of women fainted. For a while there was a lot of excitement, one lady going into hysterics at the sight of the bloody hand of a man, who was cut by a broken window.

Mr. Post had hurried from the car. He came back in a little while, just as the boys, who were feeling themselves to discover if any bones were broken, had made up their minds to follow him and learn what the trouble was.

"What is it?" half a dozen asked the miner.

"We side-swiped a freight car," was the answer.

"Side-swiped?" inquired John Smith, who was not so well up on Americanisms as the others.

"Why a car projected over the end of a switch," explained Mr. Post. "Our train came along full tilt, and the engine hit it a glancin' blow, or a side-swipe, as the railroad men call it."

"Much damage?" asked an elderly gentleman.

"Well, they can't use that freight car without sendin' it to the hospital," replied Mr. Post, with a smile. "And our engine suffered minor bruises and contusions, as the papers say when a man is hurt. I reckon we'll be delayed a bit and it's somethin' I didn't count on."

Mr. Post looked at his watch, and then consulted some papers he took from a big wallet.

"I've got to be in Chicago at five o'clock to-morrow night," he said to the boys, "and at the rate we've been delayed I'm going to be late. It will mean a big loss to me, too, for I counted on putting a deal through with a friend of mine, Lemuel Liggins. He's to meet me in the stock yards. I don't suppose you boys are in any great rush, are you?"

"Well," remarked Jack, "it doesn't make any great difference when we arrive, but we're supposed to be in Denville at a certain time. A little delay more or less will not hurt us, but I have something to do in Denver, and I may need more time than I'm likely to get now."

"Then I'll tell you what I'm going to do," said Mr. Post, "I'm going to transfer to another line."

"Then we'll do the same," said Jack.

The Chicago train on the other line was on time, and the four passengers boarded it and were soon being pulled toward the great city of the Lakes with more comfort than they had experienced on the other train.

"Ever see the Chicago stock yards?" asked Mr. Post, as they pulled out of the last station before reaching the big city. "It's a sight worth looking at," and he went on as the three chums admitted they had not. "I may not get a chance to show 'em to you, but if you want to you can get out there with me, and look at 'em on your own hook. Then you can go into the city."

The lads decided this would be a good plan, and arranged to have their baggage go to a hotel where they were to stop over night. Mr. Post prevailed on the conductor to stop the train at a way station, close to the stock yards, and, when this was reached, he and the three boys alighted.

It was about four o'clock in the afternoon, and Mr. Post found he was a little ahead of time. He hired a two-seated carriage in which he and the boys drove to where he was to meet Mr. Liggins.

Soon after leaving the way station the boys were aware of a curious roaring sound that filled the air. It sounded like distant thunder.

"What is it?" asked Jack.

"It's the cattle in the stock yards," said Mr. Post. "There's thousands of 'em, and they keep that noise up all the while. Look ahead, and you can see some of the pens."

The boys looked. In a net work of railroad tracks they saw fenced-in yards that seemed filled with a living brown mass. From them came impatient bellows and a shuffling, stamping sound, that told of the movement of innumerable cows and steers.

"Drive over that way," said Mr. Post to the coachman. "That's where Lem said he'd meet me."

They were now in the midst of the stock yards. The pens extended on every side, and the strong odor of the cattle, the noise and seeming confusion, the tooting of engine whistles, the puffing of locomotives, the movement of trains, and the wild notes of the imprisoned animals made a scene the boys never forgot.

"There's my man!" exclaimed Mr. Post. "Hello, Lem! I'm right on time!"

"So I see," remarked a tall lanky individual, who was standing near what seemed to be a small office in the midst of the stock yards. "A little ahead. It's only half past four."

"Everything all right?" asked Mr. Post.

"Sure thing. Who are your friends? Come along to see fair play?"

"Some boys who are going out west," replied Mr. Post. "Now let's get down to business. Excuse me for awhile, boys. Make yourselves to home, and I'll be with you after a bit. Look around all you like."

Mr. Post and his friend Lemuel Liggins retired into the small office. The boys alighted from the carriage, which drew up under a shed, and then the lads began to take in the various strange sights about them.

"I didn't suppose there were so many cows and steers in all the world," said Jack.

"Galloping grasshoppers! Neither did I," admitted Nat.

"You've just begun to see the west," said John Smith. "It's a great place, and a big place."

"Well, we're likely to see some of it in the next few weeks," said Nat. "I reckon Colorado is a good place to get a wide view from."

"None better," admitted John. "It has a fine climate, and when we get there—"

At that instant the attention of the boys was attracted by a loud shouting behind them. They turned, to see a crowd of men and boys

running after a big brown animal.

"One of the cows has got loose," said Nat.

"Cows?" exclaimed John. "It's one of the wild steers, and it looks like a dangerous one. Better duck for cover."

With a bellow the steer, which had broken from one of the pens, made straight for the boys. In close chase came the crowd.

Suddenly the pursuing party throng parted, and, with a yell, a horseman, waving a lasso above his head, galloped after the beast. He was close to him when the steer, which was near the small office where Mr. Post and his friend were, turned sharply and darted off to the right. The horse man, at that instant had made a throw, but the rope went wild, and, a second later, trying to turn his horse quickly the steed stumbled and fell.

The steer, with a mad bellow, turned around and started back for the crowd, that had halted. With lowered head, armed with long, sweeping, sharp horns, the angry animal leaped forward.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE OLD STOCKMAN

"Someone will get hurt!" cried Jack.

"Here, hold my coat and hat!" exclaimed John, as he thrust those articles of wearing apparel into Nat's hands.

"What are you going to do?" asked Jack.

"I'm going to rope that steer!" yelled the Indian lad.

He ran to where the cattleman had fallen from his horse. The rider's leg was caught, and when he tried to stand, as John helped him up, it was seen that it was broken.

"Is the horse a fast one?" John asked, pulling in the lariat, and coiling it.

"He sure is," was the answer, while the man stretched out on the ground to wait for aid, which was on the way.

A moment later John had mounted the horse and was off on a gallop

after the steer, which was circling around in a wild endeavor to escape into the open. Its wild bellows were producing a panic among the other animals, that were dashing about in the pens, in imminent danger of knocking the sides down.

As John, who seemed to be perfectly at home in the saddle, rode at the animal, it gave a snort and dashed off down a railroad track. Just ahead of it a freight train was coming, but the steer did not see it, as it dashed on, with lowered head.

Straight down the track after the steer, raced John, urging the horse to top speed. Above his head swung the lasso, which the boy handled almost with the skill of a veteran.

"Come back!" yelled Mr. Post. "Don't you see the train?"

Evidently John did see, but he was not going to stop. He realized that unless he stopped the maddened steer it would dash ahead on into the locomotive. While it could not do the ponderous machine any harm, there was every chance of derailing it, if the wheels ground over the lifeless body, and a wreck might follow.

"He's a plucky fellow!" exclaimed the cattleman, as some of his friends came to carry him to a place where his injured leg could be set.

The pony John was riding entered into the spirit of the race. It was work for which he had been trained, and, though chasing after wild steers down a railroad track was not like doing it out on the plains, it was "all in the day's work." With nimble feet the pony leaped from tie to tie, on and on and on after the maddened brute.

The engineer of the freight was blowing the whistle in frantic toots to warn the steer from the track, but the animal did not heed.

"He'll never make it," exclaimed Jack.

"Timbuctoo and turntables!" cried Nat. "He's a brave one. Never knew he could ride like that."

John dug his heels into the pony's side to urge it to another burst of speed. Then, with a shout, he whirled the lasso in ever widening circles about his head. Suddenly he sent it whirling straight ahead. Like a thin snake the rope hissed forward, and then fell in coils about the neck of the steer. John had taken a turn or two about the pommel of the saddle, and, true to its training, the little pony settled back on its haunches.

The next instant it seemed as if the steer had met a cyclone. It went down in a heap, a wild mixture of horns and flying hoofs. And, not a

second too soon, for, as it rolled from the track, being fairly snatched from the rails by the taut-ness of the rope, the train came gliding up, though under reduced speed, and severed the lariat.

Then John, with a motion of his wrist, guided the pony from the path to the train, which the engineer was doing his best to bring to a stop. The boy and steed easily got out of the way, and then, turning the pony, John rode to where he had left his companions. The steer, all the desire for fight gone, stood dejectedly beside the track, and a number of men, who had hurried up, took charge of it.

[Illustration: IT SEEMED AS IF THE STEER HAD MET A CYCLONE-
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"Say, that was the best bit of work I ever saw done!" commented Mr. Post, as he came from the office where he and Mr. Liggins had been talking. "I watched you through the window. Put it there, pardner," and he extended his hand, which John grasped.

"Where'd you learn to ride, young man?" asked Mr. Liggins, in business-like tones.

"Some of my Indian relatives taught me," replied John modestly, as he dismounted. "I'm not very good at it though. Haven't had any practice."

"You don't need it!" exclaimed Mr. Liggins.
"Say, young fellow, I'd like to hire you. I need you out here. We have accidents like this every day, only not so sensational, and if you can save a steer that way once in a while you'd more than earn your salary."

"Much obliged," John said, "but I can't take your offer."

"Why didn't you tell us you could rope a steer and handle a cow pony?" inquired Jack,

"You never asked me," was John's reply. "You see I have some Indian traits in me, even if I am only a half-breed."

"Well, you certainly can throw a rope," Jack admitted. "Wish I could do half as well."

"Rollicking rattlesnakes! But I'm going to learn as soon as we get out on the ranch," put in Nat.

"I guess you'll both have plenty of opportunity," John remarked.

"Well, what are you boys going to do now?" asked Mr. Post. "I'm through with my business, and I've got to stay in town a few days,

but I'll be so busy I'm afraid I'll not get much chance to see you. Besides you're going right on, aren't you?"

"That's our plan," said Jack.

"Well, I'll leave you then," went on the miner, "got to see another man in the yards. I may meet you again, some day, and I may not. This world's an uncertain place. Anyway, I'm glad I met you, and if you ever get into trouble and I can help you, why just wire me. My general address, for a year or two, will be Chicago, care of Lemuel Liggins. He'll see that you get into the city from here, all right, and will take good care of you. Now I'm off," and shaking hands with the boys and with Mr. Liggins, the miner hurried away down the maze of stock yards.

"Come inside the office and rest a bit," invited Mr. Liggins. "You've got lots of time, and I'll drive you to town later."

"Wait a minute!" cried Jack, darting after Mr. Post.

He ran from the office and started down the maze of tracks in the direction the miner had taken. But Mr. Post was not to be seen. He had either met some acquaintance and gone into one of the numerous small offices and shacks that dotted the yards, or else was lost in the crowds. Jack soon came back, looking disappointed.

"What did you want of him?" asked Nat.

"I wanted to find out more about Orion Tevis," replied Jack. "You remember he spoke of him just before the accident when we collided with the freight, and I meant to ask him if he knew the man on whom the finding of my father may depend. But I forgot about it in all the excitement. Now it's too late."

"Who did you want to inquire about?" asked Mr. Liggins, coming forward. "Excuse me, but I happened to hear you mention a strange sounding name."

"Orion Tevis," said Jack. "Do you know anything about him, Mr. Liggins?"

"Do I? Well I guess I do. Me and him didn't work as mining pardners for ten years for nothing. I reckon I do know Orion Tevis. So does Josh Post."

"Where is he now?" asked Jack eagerly. "I must find him. He may know where my father is, who is in hiding because of the scheming of some wicked men."

"Well, now you have got me," Mr. Liggins said. "I haven't seen Tevis for some years, not since he retired from active work. He speculates in cattle now and then, and I had a letter from him a few months ago."

"Where is that letter now?" asked Jack, his voice trembling with eagerness.

"Land live you! I guess I burned it up," replied Mr. Liggins. "I never save letters. Get too many of 'em. But it was from some place out in Colorado. A little country town, I reckon, or I'd have remembered the name."

"Try to think of it," pleaded Jack. "A lot may depend on it. I may be able to get Mr. Tevis's address from the Capital Bank in Denver, but they may refuse to give it to me, or may have lost it."

"Wish I could help you, son," said Mr. Liggins, sympathetically. "But I reckon I lost that letter. Hold on, though, maybe I can fix you up. You say his address is at the Capital Bank?"

"That's what I understand."

"Well, I wouldn't be surprised. Come to think of it now, he did write me he transacted all his business through them. More than that he sent me a sort of card to use in case I ever got out there, and wanted to see him. Said there was reasons why he didn't want every one to know where he was, so he instructed the bank to give his address to only those who showed a certain kind of card. I reckon I kept that card as a sort of curiosity."

"I hope so," murmured Jack.

The stockman began looking through a big wallet he pulled from his pocket. It was stuffed with papers and bills.

"Here it is!" he exclaimed, as he extended a rather soiled bit of pasteboard. "Queer looking thing."

Indeed it was. The card had a triangle drawn in the center. Inside of this was a circle, with a representation of an eye. In each of the angles were, respectively, a picture of a dagger, a revolver and a gun. On top appeared this:

"_In Medio tutissimus ibis_."

"Don't seem to mean anything as far as I've ever been able to make out," Mr. Liggins said. "Looks like a cross between a secret order card and a notice from the vigilance committee. And them words on the top I take to be some foreign language, but I never went to school

enough to learn 'em."

"They're Latin," said Jack, "and mean, literally, 'you will go most safely in the middle,' or, I suppose, 'the middle way is safest.'"

"That's like Orion Tevis," commented the stockman. "He was always a cautious fellow, and rather queer here,"—he tapped his forehead. "But now I don't mind giving you that card. It may be no good, and it may help you. If it does I'll be glad of it. I owe you a good turn. That was one of my steers that broke away, and I'm glad it didn't cause a freight wreck."

"I'll take good care of this," said Jack, as he put the card in his pocket, "and send it back to you."

"Well, if you find Tevis, just do as he says about it," the cattleman answered. "Now I'll drive you back to the city."

Jack was much pleased at getting the card. He felt it would help him in his strange quest after his father.

"It will be additional evidence, for us" he said to John. "Mr. Tevis might think the rings were spurious."

"Not much danger of that," the Indian answered. "Still, the card may come in handy."

Mr. Liggins drove the boys to the hotel where they were to stay over night. They consulted the time-tables in the lobby, and learned that their train did not leave until the next afternoon.

"Now for a good night's sleep," said Jack, as he and his chums were being taken up in the elevator to their rooms that night. At the sound of the lad's voice a tall, dark man, in the corner of the car started. Then, as he caught a glimpse of the boys' faces, he turned so his own was in the shadow.

"Well, well, luck has certainly turned things my way," he murmured. "Here's where I get even for the trick they played me on the train."

Little imagining they were menaced by one who felt himself their enemy, the three chums went to their rooms, which adjoined.

"Very good," whispered the dark man, who had remained in the corridor as the boys walked it. "I think I will pay you a visit to-night."

CHAPTER XIX

A THIEF IN THE NIGHT

The boys were so tired from their day's adventures, and their travel that they did not need a bit of paregoric to make them sleep, as Nat expressed it, while he was undressing. They left the connecting doors open between their rooms, and, after putting their money and valuables under their pillows, soon fell into deep slumbers.

It was about two o'clock in the morning when a dark figure stole along the corridor and came to a halt outside the door leading to Jack's room.

"Doesn't make much difference which one I go in, I s'pose," was a whispered comment from the man, who was the same that had ridden up with the boys in the elevator.

There was a slight clicking about the lock. Then something snapped.

"No go that time," whispered the man. "Try another key."

He selected one from among a bunch he held in his hand, and inserted it in the lock of the door leading to Jack's room. This time there was a different sort of click,

"That's the time I did it," the intruder remarked softly. "Now to see if I can't get some of the money they made me lose on that other deal."

Cautiously the man pushed open the door a few inches. It did not squeak, but, even when he had ascertained this, the thief did not enter at once. He paused, listening to the breathing of the three boys.

"Sound asleep," he muttered. "No trouble. This is easy."

On tiptoes he entered the room. The lights were all out but enough illumination came in from the street lights through the windows, to enable the intruder to see dimly. He noted that the connecting doors were open.

"Easier than I thought," he muttered. "Now if they're like other travelers they have everything under their pillows. If they only knew that is the easiest place to get anything from! Pillows are so soft, and you can get your hand under one without waking up the slightest sleeper, if you go slow and careful."

Up to the bedside of Jack the man stole. At every other step he stopped to listen. He moved as silently as a cat.

"I fancy the laugh will be on the other side this trip," the man murmured. "I ought to get considerable from all three of them."

By this time he had come so near to where Jack was sleeping that he could put out his hand and touch the bed. An instant later his fingers were gliding under the pillow. They grasped a leather pocketbook. Had it been light enough a smile of satisfaction could have been seen on the face of the thief in the night.

"Number one," he remarked in a soft whisper.

He moved into the next room, taking care not to stumble over a chair or stool. He easily secured Nat's valuables, and then ventured into John's apartment.

"Ten minutes more and I'm through," the burglar thought.

When he got to John's bedside, he listened for a few seconds. The Indian student could be heard breathing in his slumbers, but at the sound the man hesitated.

"A slight sleeper," was his unspoken comment. "Liable to wake up on the slightest alarm. I've got to be careful."

His trained observance, despite the evil purpose to which it was put, had at once told the intruder that John was a light and nervous slumberer. Nevertheless the thief decided to risk it. He moved his hand, inch by inch, under John's pillow. A shadow would have made no more noise. It took him nearly twice as long as it had to get the pocketbooks from Nat and Jack, but at length he was successful. Holding the three in his hand he made his way to the door whence he had entered.

"I think I'll just take a look at what sort of a haul I made, before I leave here," the man said. "No use carting a lot of useless stuff away."

There was a dim light burning in the hall, nearly opposite Jack's door. Half concealed by the portal the man paused just within the room and looked over the contents of the pocketbooks.

"Plenty of bills," he observed.

He took the money out and made it into one roll, and this he held in his hand. Rapidly he went through the other compartments of the wallets. He came across the queer card which Mr. Liggins had given

Jack.

"Might as well take that along," he said to himself. "No telling what it is, but it might come in handy. I might want to pretend I belonged to the order, for it looks like a lodge emblem. I'll stow that away."

The thief laid the wallets and the money down on the floor, while he reached in a pocket to get a card case in which he carried his few valuables. He placed the odd bit of pasteboard inside this.

"Now to toss the wallets aside and skip with the cash," he murmured, and suiting the action to his words he began to move softly into the corridor.

It was a good thing that nature had endowed John with a nervous temperament, and had made him a light sleeper. For, at that instant, or maybe a little before, some peculiar action on the Indian's nerves conveyed a message to his brain.

It was not a clear and definite sort of message, in fact it was rather confused—in the same shape as a dream. John seemed to be riding a big cow pony down a steep incline, after a big buffalo on whose back sat a dark, smooth-shaven man. The same man, John thought in his dream, he had seen in the elevator that evening.

And while John was riding for dear life after the buffalo, he thought he saw the strange man turn back and go to where the three boys had left their coats on the grassy bank of Lake Rudmore. John fancied he gave up his pursuit of the buffalo to leap off and run to where the thief was stealing his own and his comrades' possessions.

The shock of leaping from the back of a swiftly running pony, and rolling head over heels as a result, awoke John, or, rather, the peculiar action of his dream did. He sat up in bed with a jump, just in time to see the thief putting the money into his pocket, and, with the three wallets, steal out into the corridor.

It must have been the continuance of the dream that made John act so quickly. He leaped out of bed, half asleep as he was, and, with a yell that sounded enough like an Indian warwhoop to startle his two companions, he made a dash for the man.

Out of the room and down the dimly lighted hall dashed the Indian student. Before him fled the thief.

"Stop!" yelled John.

"What's the matter?" cried Jack, sitting up in bed and rubbing the sleep from his eyes. "Is the place on fire?"

"What's the matter? Have we missed the train?" Nat demanded to know.

"Thieves!" was all John replied.

By this time several guests of the hotel had awakened and there were anxious inquiries as to what was going on. The thief sped down the long corridor, with John, clad only in his nightdress, after him. The fellow tossed the wallets down, but the flat way in which they fell told John the intruder had taken their most valuable contents from them.

Well for the Indian that he was a fleet runner. Few there were who could have distanced him, and certainly the rascal who was out of training in athletic lines could not. A few more strides, and John grabbed the man by the coat.

"Now I've got you!" the Indian shouted.

A moment later the two went down in a heap, the man's legs having slipped from under him. But, even in the fall, John did not let go his hold. The man kept one hand in his pocket. In the flickering gaslight the Indian saw this, and rightly guessed that there the money was.

Quick as a flash John slipped his hand in and found the man was grasping something tightly.

"Let go!" the fellow growled.

"Not much!" exclaimed John. "I'm after our money!"

"I'll-I'll-cut you!" panted the thief.

"Police! Murder! Fire!" yelled a woman outside of whose door the desperate struggle was now going on.

With a great effort John loosened the hand that clenched the money. Then the Indian drew out the bills. The thief tried to grab them back. As he did so John tried to get up, having accomplished the main part of his purpose, that of saving his own and his chums' money. But, as he did so, the thief gave a roll, to get on top. This brought him to the edge of a flight of stairs, and, a second later the two were rolling down.

Bump! Bump! Bump! they went until they reached a landing. John's head struck the baseboard, and, for a moment he was stunned. There was a rush of feet in the corridor above.

"Hold him! We're coming!" was the cry.

John heard dimly. Then a blackness seemed to come over him. The lights faded away. He just remembered thrusting his hand containing the bills into his pocket, and then he fainted away.

The thief, with nimble feet, was half way down the second flight of stairs by now, for, finding the hold of his captor loosened, he made the best of his opportunity.

"Have you got him, John?" yelled Jack.

"Hold him until I come!" shouted Nat.

They had both run out into the hallway in time to see John pursuing the thief. They reached the top of the stairs just as the fellow fled.

The thief, as he ran down the stairs, cast up one look. Jack Ranger saw him, the light from a gas jet in the lower corridor shining full on the man's face.

"Professor Punjab! Hemp Smith!" exclaimed Jack, as he recognized the fakir who called himself Marinello Booghoobally.

"Did he get away?" asked Nat, coming up just then.

"Yes, and I guess he's killed John," said Jack, his heart failing him.

CHAPTER XX

A STRANGE SEANCE

By this time the corridors, above and below were filled with excited men, all scantily attired. Nat and Jack ran to where John was lying on the landing, and lifted his head.

"I'm all right," exclaimed the Indian, as he opened his eyes. "Got a bad one on the head, that's all. I can walk."

He proceeded to demonstrate this by standing up and mounting the stairs.

"Did he get our money?" asked Nat.

In answer John showed the roll he still held tightly clenched in his hand.

"Here are some pocketbooks," called a man from the upper hall.

"Then we're all right, after all," spoke Jack. "Money and pocketbooks safe. How did it happen? How did you land on him, John?"

"He was in our room," replied the Indian. "I woke up and saw him. Then I chased out, that's all."

The man who had picked up the pocketbooks handed them to Jack. The boy saw his own on top, and opened it, as he had a number of souvenirs and keepsakes in it. As he glanced in he uttered a cry of surprise.

"The card Mr. Liggins gave me to present to Mr. Tevis is gone!" he exclaimed. "Here! We must catch Professor Punjab! He has my card. Come on!"

Jack was about to rush down the stairs but was stopped by several of the men.

"You can't catch him," they said. "Besides, the police may have him by now. Go back and get dressed."

The boys decided this was good advice, particularly as they were getting chilled, for the halls were draughty. They donned some clothes, and were all ready when several bluecoats and a number of detectives in plain clothes arrived.

"Where'd they get in?" asked a big man, with a very black moustache. "Let's see what sort of a job it was."

"Right in here," said the hotel manager, leading the way to where the boys roomed. "From all accounts this was the only place he broke into."

"Didn't really lose anything, did you?" asked the black-moustached one of the boys.

"He got a valuable card," said Jack. "I would not like to lose it."

"What do you mean, a playing card; one you carried for luck?"

"No, I don't carry such things for luck," replied Jack. "It had a message on it."

He described the queer bit of pasteboard Mr. Liggins had given him.

"Oh I see; it was a sort of charm," interposed the detective with the light moustache.

"Well, we'll make a round of the pawnshops tomorrow. Maybe we'll locate it."

"I don't believe so," said Jack, half to himself. "It's not a thing that would be pawned."

The boy felt that Professor Punjab would be very likely to keep the card, thinking it might be some mysterious talisman, which could be used to advantage in his peculiar line of work. So Jack had little faith in what the detective said.

There was nothing more for the police or detectives to do. No trace of the thief was to be found, and, after a general look around, the officers departed and the hotel settled down to normal quietness. The boys went back to bed, but it was some time before they fell asleep.

Jack dozed uneasily, wondering how he was going to regain possession of the card which Professor Punjab had stolen.

"You ought to be thankful it wasn't our money, which it would have been, only for John," said Nat next morning. "Penetrating peanuts! When I think of what might have happened I shudder," and he gave an imitation of a cold chill running down his back.

"It's bad enough," said Jack. "Of course we need the money, but we could get more on a pinch. We can't get another card like that, though, and we may need it very much. At least I will."

"Let's go to the police and make them find it," suggested Nat.

"They'll never find it," put in John, who sat in a chair with his head bandaged. "We'll have to depend on ourselves."

The robbery, and John's slight wound, necessitated a change in their plans. They wired to Mr. Kent, Nat's uncle, that they would be delayed. Then they arranged to stay several days in Chicago.

The hotel proprietor insisted on sending a physician, to see the Indian. The medical man prescribed a rest, and, while John stayed in his room his chums paid several visits to the police. Jack impressed them with the value of the card, and the detectives really made efforts to find it, and to arrest the "professor," but without result.

One evening, as Jack and Nat came back from a visit to police headquarters, they found John much excited.

"I think I'm on the right track," he said.

"How?" asked Jack.

"Listen to this" John went on, holding up a newspaper, and he read:

"Attention, all who suffer or are in distress. Professor Ali Baba, one of the descendants of the Forty Thieves, who has devoted his life to undoing the wrong they did, will give palm readings, star gazings, trance answers, locate the lost, and, by a method learned from an Indian Yogi, double your money. Readings one dollar up."

"You're not going to be taken in by one of those foolish clairvoyants, are you?" asked Jack.

"Not exactly," said John. "But if I am right I think this Professor Ali Baba is Hemp Smith, or Professor Punjab under another name."

"What makes you think so?" inquired Nat. "Rip-snorting radiators! But if it should be!"

"That last clause about doubling your money, by the Indian method leads me to believe it," said John. "That is how Punjab tried to rob Mr. Post. Now I'm going to try this and see what it amounts to."

"But he'll know you as soon as he sees you," objected Nat.

"Not the way I fix up," replied the Indian.

The boys talked over the plan, and agreed it would do no harm for John to attend a seance of the professor, whose address was given in the advertisement.

[Illustration: Give me the card!—Page 177]

John's best friend would hardly have known him as he sallied forth the next day. He wore the bandages on his head, which was cut by his fracas with the fake professor, and, in addition, he had tied one about his jaw, as though he had the toothache.

He had no difficulty in finding the place. Outside the door was a sign reading:

PROFESSOR ALI BABA. SCIENTIST.

John was admitted by a rather slick individual, in a shining, greasy suit of black.

"The professor is busy just now," he said. "He will see you soon. Meanwhile you had better give me a dollar, and state on which particular line you wish to consult him."

John handed over a two dollar bill and said:

"Tell him to make it extra strong. I have lost a valuable article."

"I am sure he can find it for you," the sleek man said. "The professor has wonderful success."

"Well he oughtn't to have much trouble finding this if he's the man I take him for," thought John. As yet he was all at sea. He wanted to get a glimpse of Professor Ali Baba.

At last his turn came. Carefully keeping his face concealed, John was shown into a room gaudily decorated with tinsel and cheap hangings.

"Who seeks the knowledge the stars alone possess?" asked a deep voice.

Jack started. He recognized at once the tones of the recent Professor Punjab. An instant later he had a glimpse of the pretended astrologer's face and knew he could not be mistaken.

"Draw near," said the fakir. "I know what thou seekest. It is that which thou hast lost, and it is more precious to thee than rubies."

"In this particular instance it is," thought John, but he did not answer at once, as he was so excited he could hardly control his voice. He did not want the swindler to recognize him.

"Tell me but the veriest outline of that which thou seekest and I will not only describe it, but tell you where you may find it, if the stars so will," Punjab went on.

"It is very difficult," said John, speaking in a sort of whisper. He wanted to gain a little time, to think best how to proceed. He had been more successful than he dared to hope. His reasoning had been exactly right. Now he wanted to make sure of success.

"No problem is too hard for those who read their answers in the stars," replied the fakir. "Describe what you have lost."

"It is square," said John, slowly, and he drew a little closer to where the pretended astrologer sat on a divan in the midst of hangings, which let but little light into the room.

"Yes, square."

"And flat."

"Yes. Now one more little detail. I begin to see a glimmering of it before me," and Professor Ali Baba pretended to go into a trance.

"It is white with black markings on it," John went on. "In fact it is something you have right here in this house."

"What's that?" fairly shouted the professor.

"It's that card you stole from Jack Ranger!" went on John, coming close to the fakir and gripping him by the wrists. "The card you took from his pocketbook the night you broke into our rooms. I want it back! Give it up, you scoundrel, or I'll call in the police."

"Let go!" yelled the professor.

"Give me the card!" shouted the Indian, struggling to hold the man, who was trying to break away.

"Help!" cried the professor.

The curtains parted and the man who had answered John's summons at the door entered.

CHAPTER XXI

FINDING ORION TEVIS

"What's the matter?" exclaimed the slick individual.

"He's trying to rob me!" shouted the fakir.

"It's the other way around!" came from John. "I'm trying to get back something he stole from a friend of mine. Give up that card, you rascal, or I'll yell for the police!"

At the same time the Indian youth, who was strong for his age, gave the wrists of Punjab such a wrench that the man cried out in pain. Whether it was this, or the knowledge that he could not afford to have a clash with the officers of the law John never decided, but the professor muttered:

"I'll give you the card. Let go!"

"Want any help?" asked the sleek and shiny individual.

"Don't you interfere!" exclaimed John, "or I'll have you arrested too. Better keep out of this. The professor knows when he's beaten."

"Let go of me," muttered the fakir.

"Where's the card?" asked John.

"It's in my pocket, but I can't get it while you hold my hands," the pretended astrologer said.

The Indian youth released his grip, but kept close watch of the professor. The latter lifted up the gaudy robe and disclosed underneath ordinary street clothing. He reached into an inner pocket and brought out the card.

"That's it!" cried John, grabbing it before the professor had a chance to play any more tricks. "That's what I want!"

"Now you've got it, you'd better get out of my house," said Punjab, trying to assume his dignity which John had sadly ruffled.

"Only too glad to," the Indian student said, and, carrying the precious card in his hand he hurried from the place, throwing aside his bandages as he did so.

"I'll get even with you boys yet," he heard Marinello Booghoobally, *alias* Hemp Smith, *alias* Professor Punjab, *alias* Ali Baba, call after him. But John was not worried over this and soon was back at the hotel where his companions anxiously waited him.

"Any luck?" asked Jack.

"The best," replied John, and he told them all that had happened from the time he entered Ali Baba's place until he secured the card, which, he had turned over to Jack as soon as he got in. The police were notified, but the fakir was too quick for them and escaped.

"Now we'd better go straight for Denver," said Nat. "We're behind in our schedule now, and maybe my uncle will not wait for us."

John and Jack thought this a good scheme, so, having settled their hotel bill, they were soon aboard a train again, and speeding westward. They made good time, in spite of a few delays by slight accidents, and arrived in Denver at night.

"It's too late to go to the Capital Bank," said Jack. "Wish we'd have gotten in earlier. But we'll make inquiries about Orion Tevis the first thing in the morning."

Long before the bank opened the boys had inquired their way to it from the hotel where they stopped. As soon as the doors were swung, to indicate that business might be transacted, Jack led the way into

the marble-tiled corridor of the institution.

"Who do you want to see?" asked a uniformed porter.

"The president," said Jack boldly, thinking it best to begin at the top, and work down if necessary.

"Want to deposit a million dollars I s'pose," the porter said with a sort of sneer. Evidently his breakfast had not agreed with him.

"I came here to inquire for the address of Mr. Orion Tevis," replied Jack sharply, and in a loud tone, for he did not like to be made fun of. "If the president is not the proper person to ask will you kindly tell me who is?"

"What's that?" asked a gray-haired man, peering out from a private office.

"I am seeking the address of Mr. Orion Tevis," repeated Jack.

"Step right in here," the elderly man said. "Johnson, you may go down into the basement and finish your work," he added to the porter who hurried away, probably feeling as though he had grown several inches shorter.

"Now what is this about Mr. Tevis?" asked the man. "I am Mr. Snell, cashier of the bank."

"I want to find Mr. Tevis, in order to ask him if he knows the whereabouts of a certain person in whom I am interested," said Jack.

"Are you a private detective?" asked Mr. Snell, with a smile.

"No sir, I'm Jack Ranger, from Denton, and these are friends of mine," and Jack mentioned their names.

"Well, suppose I say we haven't Mr. Tevis's address," spoke Mr. Snell.

"I was told it could be obtained here," Jack insisted.

"If it could be, under certain conditions, are you able to fulfill those conditions?" asked the cashier.

"If you mean this, yes," replied Jack, showing his queer ring.

"Where did you get that?" asked Mr. Snell

"It's a long story," Jack said. "The last time I got it was when I recovered it from a burglar. But we have another. Show him yours,

John.”

The Indian student exhibited the odd gold emblem with the pine tree tracing on the moss agate. Mr. Snell looked at both circlets critically without saying anything. He glanced at the lettering inside.

”I don’t believe I am in a position to give you Mr. Tevis’s address,” he said slowly.

”What?” cried Jack. ”After all our journey.”

”Show him the card,” said John, in a whisper.

Jack pulled from his pocket the curious bit of cardboard he had secured from Mr. Liggins. At the sight of it the cashier uttered an exclamation. He got up and closed the door leading to the bank corridor.

”That settles it!” he exclaimed. ”Your credentials are all right. Wait a minute.”

He pressed a button on his desk. A short, stockily built man entered the room.

”Perkins, you may feed the red cow,” the cashier said gravely.

”Yes sir,” replied Perkins, as calmly as though he had been told to hand over the city directory.

”And whisper to her that the goats have come,” the cashier went on, at which Perkins turned and left the room.

”Now boys I am ready for you,” said Mr. Snell, and Jack related as much of the matter as he thought might have a bearing on his search.

”I can give you Mr. Tevis’s address,” the cashier went on. ”You must excuse my caution, but, as you doubtless know, there have been strange doings in connection with that land deal. So you are Jack Ranger?”

”That’s me. But now where can I find Orion Tevis and learn where my father is?”

”I’m afraid you’re going to have trouble,” Mr. Snell went on. ”All we know is that Mr. Tevis lives somewhere on a wild tract of land among the mountains about one hundred miles from Fillmore.”

”Fillmore, that’s where we have to go to get to Denville,” said Nat

"So it is," Jack murmured.

"You see Mr. Tevis is a rather peculiar individual and surrounds himself with many safeguards," Mr. Snell went on. "We were only to give his address to those who brought the rings and the card. I was at first afraid you were impostors, as there have been several such. We are also required to send Mr. Tevis word as soon as any one comes here, bearing the proper emblems, and seeking him. You heard what I said to that man a while ago. It was a code message to be transmitted to Mr. Tevis."

"But if you know where to send him a message, why can't you tell us how to reach him?" asked Jack.

"I can tell you as much as we ourselves know. We send the messages to a certain man living in Fillmore. He, in turn, rides off into the mountains and, from what I have heard, leaves the letter in the cleft of an old tree, of which he alone knows the location. Then he comes away. In time Mr. Tevis, or some of his men, come and get the letter. If he wishes to send an answer he leaves it in the tree. If not that ends the matter. If he wishes to remain hidden he does so. He seldom comes to town, and has only been at this bank once in a number of years. Now, don't you think you have a pretty hard task ahead of you?"

"Will you tell me how to find this man in Fillmore, who knows how to take that letter?" asked Jack.

"Good!" exclaimed Mr. Snell. "That's the way to talk. I sized you up for a plucky lad as soon as I saw you. Now if you will take pencil and paper, I'll give you directions for reaching Enos Hardy, who may succeed in getting a message to Mr. Tevis for you."

Jack jotted down what Mr. Snell told him, and, at his suggestion, the other two boys made copies, in case of accident. Then, having cashed some letters of credit which they brought with them, the boys went back to their hotel.

"What are you going to do, Jack?" asked Nat.

"I'm going to find Orion Tevis," was the reply. "I think I had better do it before I go on to your uncle's ranch, Nat. What do you say?"

"Slippery snapping turtles!" exclaimed Nat. "If I was you I'd do the same thing. You ought to make that hundred miles and back in a week, and we can go to uncle's ranch then. We'll go with you; eh, John?"

"Sure," replied the Indian.

"Let's hurry on to Fillmore," Nat went on. "If my uncle is there

waiting for us, we can tell him all about it. If not we can send him a letter, telling him where we are going, and letting him know about what time we'll be back. It's only twenty miles from Fillmore to Denville, near where his ranch is."

This plan was voted a good one, and as soon as the boys could catch a train out of Denver they were speeding toward what was to be the last railroad station of their long western trip.

They were two days reaching it, owing to the poor connections, because they were now traveling on branch line railroads, but they got into the little mining town one evening at dusk. So explicit were the directions Mr. Snell had given them that they had no difficulty in reaching the Eagle Hotel, where the cashier had advised them to put up. They registered, and, in accordance with their directions, left a note with the hotel clerk for Enos Hardy.

"He'll be in some time to-night," the clerk said. "He comes here every evening."

It was about nine o'clock that night when a message came to the boys' room that Mr. Hardy would see them in the sitting room of the hotel. Jack went down alone, and found waiting for him a grizzly, heavily-bearded man, rather stoop-shouldered. He glanced from under his shaggy eyebrows at Jack.

"You left a message for Enos Hardy?" the man asked.

"I did, in reference to Orion Tevis," admitted Jack.

"Have you the emblems?"

Jack showed the rings and card.

"Um!" grunted the man. "What do you want?"

"I want to see Orion Tevis, and ask him about my father."

"It will take me three days to bring you an answer," Mr. Hardy went on. "Will you wait here until then?"

Jack bowed his assent.

"You must trust the rings and card to me," Mr. Hardy went on. "Oh, they will be safe," he added, as he saw Jack give a start of surprise. "You can ask any one in Fillmore about me."

Without a word Jack handed over the two rings and the bit of pasteboard.

"This is Tuesday," the strange messenger went on. "I will be back here with an answer Friday night."

"Then I can start for Mr. Tevis's place the next day," spoke Jack.

"If the answer is favorable," Mr. Hardy said, as he left the room.

CHAPTER XXII

JACK HEARS OF HIS FATHER

For a few moments Jack stood looking at the door that had closed on Mr. Hardy. The man seemed a link between the boy and his long-lost father, and Jack felt as if he would not like to allow Mr. Tevis's confidant to be out of his sight. But he reflected if he was to see the man who held his father's secret he must follow out the line laid down.

He went to where he had left Nat and John, and told them what had happened. Jack announced anticipation of a favorable reply from Mr. Tevis, who, he said, would, no doubt, keep his promise made years ago to those to whom he had presented the rings.

"Then we'll get ready to go with you," announced Nat. "Hopping halibut! I forgot to write to my uncle. I heard from the hotel clerk he had waited here for us two days, and then went back, leaving word we could come on to the ranch, or wait for him. He'll be back inside of a week."

"That fits into our plans," Jack said. "Write and tell him we arrived and will be ready to go with him a week from to-day, I think I can learn what I want in that time."

Accordingly Nat got a letter ready, and intrusted it to the hotel clerk, who promised to send it to Double B ranch at the first opportunity. Mr. Kent's ranch was known by the device of two capital B's, one placed backwards in front of the other, and this brand appeared on all his cattle. His uncle's place, Nat learned, was on a big plateau in the midst of a mountain range. Men from it frequently rode into Fillmore, and it was by one of them the hotel clerk proposed sending the boy's letter to Mr. Kent.

This done, the three chums sat in their rooms discussing the strange things that had come to pass since they had left Washington Hall.

"Seems as if it was several months, instead of a couple of weeks,"

said John. "I'll be glad when we get out where it's good and wild."

The boys found much to occupy their time in the hustling city of Denver. They went about viewing the sights, but all the while Jack was impatiently awaiting the return of Mr. Hardy.

"I wonder if the days are any longer here than back east," he remarked.

"It's you," replied Nat. "Stop thinking about it, and Friday night will come sooner."

"Can't help it," Jack went on, with a deep sigh.

Friday night came at last, though it was nearly ten o'clock before Jack, who was anxiously waiting in his room, received a message that some one wanted to see him. He went down and was met by Mr. Hardy. The man showed the dust and grime of travel.

"Well?" asked Jack.

"When do you want to start?" asked Mr. Hardy.

"To-morrow morning," was Jack's quick reply, and a load was lifted from his mind.

"Then I'll have a horse for you here at nine o'clock," Mr. Tevis's friend went on, as he handed back the rings and the card.

"Can't John and Nat go along?" inquired Jack, for he had mentioned his friends to Mr. Hardy.

"I suppose so," was the answer. "It will take longer if so many of us go, but I have no orders to keep your friends back if they want to accompany us. It's a wild trip, and has to be made on horseback."

"They'll want to go. None of us is a good rider, but we'll do our best"

"Very well, I'll have three horses."

"Do you think Mr. Tevis will have some news of my father?" asked Jack, a note of anxiety coming into his voice.

"I shouldn't be surprised," was the cautious answer. "Mr. Tevis can generally be depended on to produce the goods. Now I'll leave you, as I have lots of work to do before morning. I'm glad I succeeded in arranging it for you,"

"So am I," exclaimed Jack, as he held out his hand and met that of Mr. Hardy's in hearty clasp.

"Can you two stand a hundred mile ride on horseback?" asked Jack of his two chums, when he was back in his room.

"Two if necessary," replied John.

"And two it will have to be," Jack went on. "I forgot it's a hundred each way. Well, we're in for it," and he explained what Mr. Hardy had told him.

The horses which Mr. Tevis's messenger brought around the next morning proved to be steady-going animals. Their backs were broad and they carried easy-riding saddles. Under the direction of the guide the boys packed up some blankets and enough "grub," to last several days, since they could not expect to make as good time as had Mr. Hardy. Leaving their trunks and grips at the hotel the boys, with their new-found friend in the lead, started for Mr. Tevis's mountain home.

"He's a strange man," said Mr. Hardy, as he rode along by Jack's side a little later. "He had so much trouble with a band of bad men once that he made up his mind he would have no more. He knows the gang is still trying to get the best of him, and that's why he takes so many precautions. It is the same ugly crowd that made your father an exile, I understand."

"But his exile is almost up," said Jack earnestly. "The eleven years will pass this summer, and he can come back to us."

"If you can only find him to get word to him."

"Do you think I can't find him?"

"Well, the mountains are a wild place. It's hard enough to keep track of men who have no motive for hiding, let alone those who believe every effort to locate them is made with an idea of doing them some harm."

"If I can only get word to him I know my father will wander no longer. I need him and he needs me."

Half a day's riding brought them to a wild part of the country. The trail was a narrow one. Now it led along a high range of foothills, skirting some deep ravine. Again it was down in a valley, along the course of some mountain stream that was now almost dry.

The bracing atmosphere, though it was so rarefied that the boys, at first, found a little difficulty in breathing, made objects seem

strangely near. Several times Jack and his companions saw a distant landmark, and wondered why they were so long in reaching it. Mr. Hardy laughed at their astonishment as he explained the reason for the seeming nearness.

They had dinner on the side of a mountain which they had begun to ascend shortly before noon. Mr. Hardy proved himself an old campaigner. He had a fire made, and bacon frying before the boys had the stiffness from their legs, caused by their ride. Then, with bread and coffee, they made a better meal than they had partaken of in many a hotel.

That night they slept in a lonely mountain cabin, the owner of which Mr. Hardy knew. They pressed on the next morning, their pace being slow because Nat found he could not ride as well as he had hoped.

"Gallop! gallop!" he exclaimed. "I feel as if all my bones were loose. You didn't see any of 'em scattered back along the trail, did you, Jack?"

"You'll get over it," said Mr. Hardy. "Got to learn to ride if you're going on a ranch. No one walks there."

They had to sleep in the open the next night, but Mr. Hardy built a big fire, and, well wrapped in their blankets, the boys were not uncomfortable, even though it was cold on the mountain from the time the sun went down.

It was cold, too, the next morning, as they crawled from their warm coverings, but when their guide had thrown a lot of wood on the glowing embers, causing them to spring into a fine blaze, the boys got up and helped prepare breakfast.

"We're almost there," said Mr. Hardy, as they mounted their horses to resume their trip.

They rode until shortly before noon, when Mr. Hardy suddenly pulled his horse up and said:

"Here's as far as we can go, boys, until we get word from Mr. Tevis. There's the tree where I leave the messages." He pointed to a big oak that had been struck by lightning, and split partly down the immense trunk. One blackened branch stuck up. It had a cleft in it, in which a letter could be placed and seen from afar.

"Now I'll just leave a note there, and we'll have to be guided by what happens," Mr. Hardy went on.

He wrote something on a piece of paper, and asked Jack for the rings and the card symbol. These, with the message he had written, he

placed in an envelope. The letter was enclosed in a bit of oiled silk, and the whole deposited in the cleft of the limb.

"It might rain before it is taken away," he explained. "You can never tell when Mr. Tevis or his messengers come. He can see that letter from his house, by using a telescope, but he may not send for it. It all depends."

"How will you know if he does?" asked Jack.

"I will come back here to-morrow at noon," replied the guide. "If there is an answer, there will be a little white flag where the letter was, Then I will know what to do."

There was nothing to do but wait. Mr. Hardy explained that it was necessary that they move back down the mountain, a mile or more away from the signal tree. To Jack and his chums this seemed a lot of needless precaution, but they were in no position to do anything different.

Jack passed the night in uneasy slumber, for he could not help thinking of what the morrow might bring and what effect it might have on his search for his father. But all things have an end, and morning finally came. After breakfast Mr. Hardy looked well to the saddle girths, as he said, if they were to go further on their journey, they would have to proceed over a rougher road than any they had yet traversed.

They started for the blighted oak so as to reach there about noon. How anxiously did Jack peer ahead for a sight of the lightning-blasted tree, in order to catch the first glimpse of the white flag he hoped to see! He was so impatient that Mr. Hardy had to caution him not to ride too fast. But in spite of this the boy kept pressing his horse forward. As the little cavalcade turned around a bend in the trail Jack cried out:

"I see it! There's the white flag! Now we can go on and hear the news of my father!"

"Don't be too sure," muttered Mr. Hardy. "It may be a message saying there is no news," but he did not tell Jack this.

The sun was just crossing the zenith when Mr. Hardy took from the cleft of the branch a small packet wrapped in oiled silk, similar to the one he had left. Quickly tearing off the wrapping the guide disclosed a piece of white paper. On It was but one word:

"Come."

"Hurrah!" yelled Jack, throwing his hat into the air, and nearly

losing his balance recovering it.

"Walloping washtubs!" yelled Nat.

"Let's hurry on," spoke John Smith, more quietly. But he, too, felt the excitement of the moment, only he was used to repressing his feelings.

"Prepare for a hard ride," said Mr. Hardy. "We must make Mr. Tevis's place by night, as it is dangerous to camp in the open around here. Too many wild beasts."

From the blasted oak the trail led in winding paths up the mountain. It was indeed a hard one. Great boulders blocked the path, and there were places where rains had washed out big gullies. But the horses seemed used to such traveling, for they scrambled along like goats on a rocky cliff.

It was just getting dusk when, as they topped a considerable rise, Mr. Hardy pointed ahead to where a light glimmered on the side of the mountain, and said:

"There is Mr. Tevis's house."

Jack's heart gave a mighty thump. At last he was at one of the important stages of his long trip. As the riders advanced there came, from out of the fast gathering darkness a command:

"Halt! Who comes?"

"Friends!" exclaimed Mr. Hardy.

"What word have you?"

"Pine tree and moss agate," was the answer.

"You may enter," the unseen speaker added.

There was the sound of a heavy gate swinging open, and following their guide the boys urged their horses ahead. They found themselves on a well-made road, which led to a fairly large house.

"Dismount," said Mr. Hardy, as he brought his steed to a halt in front of a large piazza that surrounded the residence. "We are here at last."

As he spoke the door opened, sending out a stream of brilliant light. In the center of the radiance stood a tall man, looking out.

"Good evening, Mr. Tevis," spoke Mr. Hardy.

"Ah, Enos, so you have arrived. And did you bring the boys with you?"

"All three, sir."

"Very good. Come in. Supper is ready."

Jack sprang from his horse and, with a bound was on the porch beside the man he had come so far to see.

"Mr. Tevis!" he exclaimed, "Have you any news of my father? Is he alive? Can you tell me where to find him?"

"Yes, to all three questions, Jack Ranger," said Mr. Tevis, heartily, and Jack felt his heart thumping against his ribs as though it would leap out.

CHAPTER XXIII

ON THE RANCH

Some men came up and led the horses of the riders to a stable in the rear. Mr. Tevis showed the way into his house. It was a big log cabin, but was furnished with many comforts. On the floors were great bear rugs, while skulls and horns of other animals decorated the walls. The light came from two big kerosene hanging lamps.

"Welcome to Cabin Lodge," said Mr. Tevis.

"I hope you are all hungry, as we have a fine supper waiting for you."

"That's what I want," said Mr. Hardy. "We haven't stopped much for grub since we started."

"I'd like to hear more about my father, before I eat," said Jack.

"I realize your impatience," Mr. Tevis replied, with a smile, "and I'll endeavor to relieve your mind. I will tell you what I know while the others are getting ready for the meal."

Then Mr. Tevis told briefly the history of Robert Ranger, or Roberts, as he best knew him, with the main facts of which Jack was familiar. He told of his acquaintance with him and John Smith's father, and how the bad men had tried unsuccessfully to get control of the timber

claim. Jack found him a peculiar man indeed, but seemingly good hearted.

"But what you want to know," Mr. Tevis went on, "is how to find your father now."

Jack nodded eagerly.

"Of course you know I have not seen him in a long time, as he did not think it wise to come here, fearing the gang would capture him and get him into court. But I have heard from him, not later than three months ago."

"Where is he?" asked Jack, hardly able to sit still.

"While I can't say exactly," Mr. Tevis went on, "I know he is somewhere in a small range of mountains called Golden Glow. He has a small cabin there, and manages to make a living by doing some mining. He has one companion, whom he can trust, and who goes back to civilization once in a while to get food and supplies. Your father will not trust himself in sight of a town. In fact it is almost as hard to communicate with him as it is with me."

"Where are the Golden Glow mountains?" asked Jack.

"The nearest town is Denville," was the answer.

"Denville!" exclaimed Jack.

"Yes, what is there strange in that?"

"Why, we are going to Denville," Jack replied, "That's where Nat's uncle's ranch is."

"Yes, but the beginning of the Golden Glow mountain range is about a hundred miles from there," Mr. Tevis added.

"What's a hundred miles when I'm going to find my father and take him back home with me?" asked Jack. "I can travel that."

"You've got pluck," spoke Mr. Tevis. "I wish you luck, my boy."

Then he told all the particulars he knew of Mr. Roberts' whereabouts, how the exile had often written to him of his lonely life, and how much he would like to see his son and his sisters again.

"We have both been hounded by that gang of land sharps," concluded Mr. Tevis, with a deep sigh. "I have found means of evading them by living in this wild place, and adopting all sorts of precautions in admitting visitors. That is why I was so careful on your account. I

could not tell who might be trying to play a trick on me. But I devised that card for a few of my friends. Lucky you met Lem Liggins, or I doubt if even the sight of the two rings would have convinced me. But I felt reasonably certain no one could have both the card and the rings. Even at that you saw how cautious I am, by the details Mr. Hardy had to go through."

"How would you advise me to reach my father, and let him know it is safe to return?" asked Jack.

Mr. Tevis paused a moment. He remained in deep thought for some time. Then he spoke.

"In one of his letters," he said, "your father told me if I ever wanted to see him, to adopt this plan. There is in the Golden Glow range one peak, higher than all the others. From a certain place in it, a place marked by a big stone on which is carved a cross, a tall pine tree, bare of branches, can be seen. By keeping down the side of the slope, and in direct line with the pine you will come to a little valley. At the lower end of this is your father's cabin. Only be careful how you approach it. In this country men sometimes shoot first and inquire afterward."

"How will I know the high peak when I see it?" asked Jack.

"You can hardly mistake it," Mr. Tevis remarked. "But you can be sure of it, because, just at sunset, you will see it enveloped in a golden glow. That is what gives the name to the mountain range. It seems there is a mass of quartz on top of the peak, and the sun, reflecting from it just before it sets, shines as if from burnished gold. I think you will have no trouble in finding the peak, and, though it may be hard, I hope you will find your father. Here, let me give you this. It may help you."

He took from his watch chain, a curious little charm. It was in the shape of a golden lizard, with ruby eyes.

"Your father gave that to me many years ago," said the timber owner. "If worst comes to worst, and you can't get to him, but can send him a message, send that. He will know it comes from me, even if he doubts the rings. It has a secret mark. Now let's go to supper."

There were many thoughts in Jack's mind and many feelings in his heart as he ate at the table at which they all gathered. He did not join in the talk and laughter that went around. Mr. Hardy told Mr. Tevis of the trip he and the three boys had made, and Nat and John added their share to the general conversation.

"What makes you so quiet?" asked Nat of his chum.

"I'm thinking of what's ahead of me," Jack replied.

Mr. Tevis wanted his guests to remain several days with him, but the boys were anxious to get on to the ranch, and decided they would start back for Fillmore the next day. That night Mr. Tevis returned to John and Jack their rings, but he kept the peculiar card.

"I will send it back to Lem," he said. "He might want to come and see me some time. I still have to be on my guard. As for you boys, keep a constant watch. There is no telling when those men may resume their tricks. They know the time set by law is almost up, and they are likely to redouble their efforts. Be on your guard, Jack."

"I will," Jack answered, and then he and his chums bade their host good-bye. Mounting their horses, and led by Mr. Hardy, they again took up the trail, and the heavy log gate was shut after them, as they left the stockade inside of which Cabin Lodge was built.

When the boys and their guide went back to the hotel in Fillmore, the return trip having been made in better time than the outgoing, there was a letter from Mr. Kent to Nat. The boy's uncle said he was so busy he had no time to come for them, but, he added, he would send one of his men with three horses which the boys could ride out to the ranch. Their trunks and baggage had been called for by one of the Double B ranchmen while they were on their way to Mr. Tevis's, so the boys had nothing to worry about but themselves.

They had arrived at the hotel about noon, and having eaten dinner, sat down to await the arrival of the man who was to escort them. He had been in town for two days, the hotel clerk said, but, at that moment, had gone to see some friends.

"I'll send him up to your room when he comes in," said the clerk, and the boys went upstairs to pack a few little articles that had not gone on with their trunks and valises.

It was while they were in the midst of that that a knock sounded on their door.

"Come in," cried Jack, all three being then in his apartment.

A tall, slightly built man, with a little light moustache, blue eyes, dressed in regulation cowboy costume, entered, holding his broad-brimmed hat in his hand.

"I'm lookin' for Nat Anderson an' his chums, Jack Ranger an' John Smith," he announced.

"Right in here," called out Nat.

"I'm Rattlesnake Jim," announced the stranger, "and I come from Double B ranch to show you the way."

The boys were only too anxious to get started. They paid their hotel bill, and when they got outside found there were three fine ponies waiting for them.

"Mount!" called Rattlesnake Jim.

The lads were very glad of the practice they had in riding with Mr. Hardy, for they felt their new guide was watching them closely. If he had any fault to find he did not mention it.

It was a pleasant afternoon, and, once they were out in the open country, after ascending a slight rise, the boys let their animals out. They found them plenty speedy enough.

"Not so bad for tenderfeet," muttered Rattlesnake Jim, under his breath.

The road led along a long level stretch, the big plateau extending for miles ahead of them.

"About what time will we get to my uncle's place?" asked Nat

"Grub time, I reckon," said Rattlesnake Jim, who, as the boys afterward learned, had gained his name from the hatred he bore to the reptiles.

"Very busy now?" went on Nat.

"Passably so. Been rustlin' after horse thieves for th' last few nights," replied Jim coolly.

Before the boys could get over this rather startling remark, Jack's horse suddenly shied. The lad was nearly thrown off, and, as he recovered his balance, and looked to see what had scared the animal, he saw, in the shadow of a big stone at the side of the road, an old man crawling along.

"Hold on thar, stranger!" called Rattlesnake Jim, drawing his revolver and covering the man.

CHAPTER XXIV

THE OLD MAN

"Don't shoot!" the old man begged, trying to stand up, but toppling in a heap. "Don't shoot! I haven't done anything!"

"We'll see about that," went on Jim, as he dismounted. "What are you sneaking around like that for, hiding under a rock? If it had been a little darker we wouldn't have seen you. Who are you?"

"I don't know's it any of your affair," replied the stranger sullenly, as he sat down on the ground.

"Shot, eh," remarked Jim, as he noticed that the man's left foot was covered with blood. "Now you'd better tell me all about it, before I make trouble for you."

"It was an accident," replied the man. "I was cleaning my gun. I forgot I had a shell in it, and it went off and hit my foot. It was back there, and I thought I'd crawl along until I got to some place I could get help."

"Likely story," said Jim with a sneer. "That don't go with me, stranger. You stay here and I'll send some of the men to have a look at you."

"Are you going to leave him here?" asked Jack, who had dismounted, and was walking toward the old man.

"Sure. What else can I do?"

"Let me look at his foot," went on Jack, "I know a little bit about first aid to the injured. Maybe I can bandage it up,"

"Better let him alone," advised Jim, mounting his horse again.

But Jack was bending over the man, and had already taken off his shoe, which was filled with blood. As the boy was drawing off the sock, the man caught sight of Jack's hand.

"That ring! That ring! Where did you get it?" he asked excitedly, as he caught sight of the moss agate emblem on Jack's finger. "Tell me, who are you?"

Jack looked at the man in astonishment. His words and manner indicated that some unusual emotion stirred him. For a moment he gazed at the ring and then a film seemed to come over his eyes. His

head sank forward, and a second later he toppled over.

"He's dead!" exclaimed Nat.

"Only fainted, I guess," replied Rattlesnake Jim coolly. "Lost considerable blood I reckon. He's left quite a trail, anyhow," and he pointed to where a crimson streak in the grass showed that the wounded man had crawled along.

"What shall we do?" asked John. "We can't leave him here."

"Don't see what else there is to do," said Jim, as he turned his horse back into the path. "We can't carry him. Besides, he is probably only one of a horse-stealing gang, and has been shot in some foray. Better leave him alone."

"I'm not going to," declared Jack. "First I'm going to fix up his foot, and then we'll go for help."

"I guess my uncle will see that he is taken care of," spoke Nat, with all a boy's confidence in things he knows nothing about.

"Well, you can have your own way, of course," Jim said. "I'm only sent to show you the way, but if it was me I sure would leave him alone."

By this time Jack had torn several handkerchiefs into strips to make bandages. Jim, who began to take interest in what the boy was doing, even if he did not believe in it, showed him where there was a pool of water. With this Jack bathed the old man's foot. It had a bad bullet wound in it, but the bleeding had stopped. Carefully bandaging the wound, Jack made a pillow out of a blanket he found rolled behind the saddle and with another covered the senseless form.

"Now let's hurry on to the ranch, Nat," he said, "and ask your uncle to send out a wagon. If none of the men want to come we'll drive."

"Of course we will," spoke Nat, with rather an unfriendly look at Jim,

"Oh, I'm not so mean as that," the cowboy hastened to say. "You'll find out here we have to be mighty particular who we make friends with, son. But if you boys are so dead set on taking care of this—er—well, this gentleman, why I'll volunteer to drive a wagon back."

"Thanks," said Jack, but from then on there was a better understanding between the cowboy and the three chums.

The boys mounted their horses, and, as Rattlesnake Jim put his to a gallop, they urged their steeds to greater speed. As Nat swung up

along side of Jack he asked:

"What makes you so anxious about that old man?"

"Because I think he may know something of my father. Did you notice how excited he was about the ring? Well, that gave me a clue. He may be able to lead me to where my father is hiding. I must have a talk with him."

There was considerable activity about the range when the boys and their guide arrived. A score of the cowboys were coming in from distant runs anxious for supper. Horses were being tethered for the night. Half a dozen dogs were barking as though their lives depended on it. Here and there men were running about, some carrying saddies, others laden down with blankets, and some hopping around and firing off their revolvers in sheer good feeling.

From a little cabin a Chinese in the regulation blouse, with his queue tightly coiled about his head, came to the door.

"Wood-e!-Wood-e?" he called. "Me no glet glub me no got wood-e!"

"Get Chinky the cook some wood!" yelled a man who seemed to be a sort of overseer. One or two of the cowboys got up from the ground where they had thrown themselves and brought armsful to the cook's shanty.

"Here we are," called Rattlesnake Jim, as he and the boys rode into the midst of this excitement.

"Hello, Nat!" called a hearty voice. "Land alive, but I'm glad to see you!"

The next instant a red-faced, short, stout, bald-headed man was nearly pulling Nat from his horse.

"Hello, Uncle Morris!" called Nat. "How are you?"

"Fine as silk. How about you?"

"Never better," replied Nat "Here fellows, this is Uncle Morris. That's Jack and that's John," he added, with a wave of his hand.

"Howdy!" exclaimed Mr. Kent heartily, shaking hands with his nephew's companions. "I'd been able to pick you out in the dark from the description Nat gave. Come on in, grub's almost ready."

"Will you speak to him about the old man?" asked Jack of Nat, in a low voice.

"Oh, yes, sure," and Nat told his uncle in a few words of the wounded one, and Jack's desire to have him brought in.

"I'll send some of the men in the wagon," Mr. Kent said.

"Let me go also," Jack begged, and, after some talk it was arranged he was to go with Jim and another cowboy.

"But you must have supper first," said Mr. Kent. "I insist on that. Besides it's going to be a warm night, and, according to your tale, you left the stranger pretty comfortable. What do you think about him, Jim?"

"Well, there's no telling," the boy's guide said. "He don't look as though he could do much damage. He's a stranger around here. Don't talk like any of the usual crowd. I was a bit leery of him at first, but the lads seemed to cotton to him right off, so I let 'em have their way."

"Well, we'll see what he amounts to," Mr. Kent commented. "No harm in doing him a good turn I reckon."

It was quite dark when Jack, accompanying Jim and Deacon Pratt, another cowboy, started on the wagon trip. But after a bit the moon arose, and the journey was not so unpleasant. Jack was much interested in listening to the talk of the two men. They discussed everything from the latest make of cartridges and revolvers to the best way to rope a steer and brand a maverick.

"Let's see, we ought to be pretty near the place now," Jim remarked, after more than an hour's drive. "I think I see the big stone. Hark! What's that?"

A low moan was heard.

"That's him, I reckon," put in Deacon, who was driving. He swung the horse to one side, and Jim leaped down.

"He's, here!" Jim called. "Pretty bad shape, I'm afraid. Come here, Deacon, and lend me a hand."

The two men lifted the aged man into the wagon, and placed him upon a pile of blankets, while Jack held the team.

"Do you think he's dead?" asked our hero.

"Not yet, but he don't look as if he could last long," Deacon replied. "I'll give him a bit of liquor. It may revive him," and he forced a few drops of the stimulant between the cold lips.

"Don't shoot!" the old man begged in a feeble tone. "I don't mean any harm."

"It's all right," said Rattlesnake Jim, more tenderly than he had yet spoken.

The trip back was made in quick time, and the old man was put in a bed Mr. Kent had ordered gotten ready for him. They were rude but effective doctors, those ranchmen, and, in a little while the stranger had revived considerably. He was suffering mostly from exposure, hunger and loss-of blood from his wound.

The three boys were in the sitting room of the ranch house, taking turns telling Mr. Kent of their experiences on their trip west. Before they knew it the clock had struck twelve.

"Now you must get off to bed," said Nat's uncle. "We'll have more time for swapping yarns to-morrow."

At that moment a man poked his head in at the door.

"What is it?" asked Mr. Kent

"That party we brought in a while ago, him as is shot in the foot, seems to want something."

"What is it?"

"He says as how he's got to speak to that lad with the strange ring, calls him Roberts."

"He means me!" exclaimed Jack.

CHAPTER XXV

THE COWBOY'S TRICK

"I thought you said your name was Ranger," said Morris Kent.

"It always has been," Jack replied. "But my father has been going by the name of Roberts. He was known as that to his associates, because of the necessity for keeping him in exile. So I'll have to consider myself as the son of Mr. Roberts and Mr. Ranger, until we get this cleared up. I am trying to find my father, and I think this old man can aid me. He seems to have a secret."

"Then you had better go and see what he has to say," Mr. Kent advised. Jack found the aged man propped up in bed. Though he was still pale, he was evidently a little better.

"Let me see that ring again," he said, and Jack, who had taken to wearing the emblem on his finger, held out his hand.

"Yes, yes; it is the same," he murmured. "I would know it among ten thousand, though I have never seen it before."

"Who are you, and what do you know about this ring?" asked Jack. He had been left all alone with the old man, the cowboy who had summoned him, and Mr. Kent, having left the room.

"I am Peter Lantry," the wounded man replied. "Until a month ago I lived with a man named Roberts, though his real name was Robert Ranger. He took his first name for his last one because of some scheming men. But that you know as well as I do. He told me all about his son, and how, if he or I ever saw him he could be identified by a peculiar ring, which he described. As soon as I saw the ring I knew you must be the boy, and I have a message for you."

"What is it? Tell me quickly," said Jack.

"If I was only sure," murmured the old man. "Roberts warned me to be careful about what I said. If I was only sure. I thought I was,—but now I remember—he told me to be careful."

"Careful about what?" asked Jack.

"How do I know you are Robert Ranger's son?" asked the sufferer. "I remember now, he said a stranger might get the ring. I wish I had kept still," and he seemed quite worried. A flush came into his pale cheeks, and it seemed as if he was in a fever.

"If you doubt me, I can easily prove that I am Robert Ranger's son," spoke Jack. "You probably know the story of Orion Tevis, and the Indian, Smith. His son is here now, and he has a ring just like this. Wait, I will call him."

"No! No! Don't!" exclaimed Mr. Lantry. "I must tell you alone. Come closer. I am weak, and I must whisper to you what I have to say. No one else must hear."

Jack sat down in a chair beside the bed, and the old man, looking carefully around the room, as though he feared some one would hear his secret, began:

"Your father and I have lived for the past three years in a little hut, hidden in the Golden Glow mountains. He never ventured far away,

and what few trips to town were necessary I made. Some time ago your father became sick. I am a rough sort of doctor, and I knew he needed some remedies for the heart. I managed to get them, and Roberts (I always call him by that name) grew better. But about a month ago the medicine got low, and I knew I must get more. You see, I only made two trips to civilization a year, one in the spring and one in the fall. In winter it is impossible to get out of the gorge where we live.

"I knew then I must start on my summer trip earlier than usual, for the medicine in the shack would only last about two months. So I made ready to go."

"But tell me how to get to where my father is," interrupted Jack. "That is important. I must hurry to him."

"Wait a minute," spoke the old man. His brain was feeble and Jack realized if he hurried or confused the sufferer he might get no information at all.

"I started away from the shack, as I said," Mr. Lantry resumed. "I rode my horse when I was able and led him when it was too rough. I had not traveled many miles before I realized that I was being followed. I caught several glimpses of two men, who kept close on my trail, and, try as I did, I could not shake them off."

"Were they members of the timber gang?" asked Jack eagerly.

"They were," replied Mr. Lantry. "I will be brief now, as I am getting weak. I hurried on, but the men kept after me. They closed in on me in a lonely place about fifteen miles from here, I judge."

"What did they want?" asked Jack.

"They demanded that I lead them to where your father was. They knew they could never find the place without a guide, for, doubtless, they had often attempted it. We had the shack well hidden, your father and I. Of course I refused to show them the way. And they threatened to torture me, but I only laughed. Then in sudden anger one of the men fired at me. The bullet went wild as his companion knocked his arm down in time, but it struck me in the foot. Then the men rode away.

"I managed to keep on my horse until I fell off from weakness. Then my animal wandered away and I had to crawl. I got as far as the rock and was waiting there, hoping some one would come along, when you found me."

"How long is it since you left my father?" asked Jack.

"It is a little over three weeks."

"And perhaps he is in want and suffering now," the boy cried. "I must hurry to him. Tell me which way to go," and Jack sprang up, as though to start at once in the dead of night.

"You must ride until—until you—until you see—you see—"

The old man's voice had been growing weaker and weaker. The last words came from him in a hoarse whisper, and, with a feeble moan he fell back on the pillow, with closed eyes.

"He's dead! Help! Help!" exclaimed Jack.

Mr. Kent and several cowboys came running into the room. Mr. Kent placed his hand over the sufferer's heart.

"He is alive, but that's all," he said. "Jim, ride for the doctor."

"He never told me how to find my father," said Jack in a low voice. "Oh, if he would only live until he can tell me that! I must go to him! He may be sick or dead, all alone in his cabin!"

"Now don't you go to fretting, son," said Mr. Kent kindly. "You just come away from here and go to bed. You're all tired out and worried. This thing will all come out right. The old man may not be so bad off as he seems. We'll get a doctor for him, and he'll fix him up so he can tell you where your father is. If he doesn't I'll send the boys out, and they'll go over all the mountain ranges hereabouts. They can find a maverick in the wildest country you ever saw, and it would be a pity if they couldn't locate a cabin, with all you know about where it is."

Jack felt encouraged at this, and said he would go to bed and try to sleep. His companions had retired, as he learned when he got back to the sitting room.

"I'll give you a room on the quiet side of the house," said Mr. Kent. "You can change after to-night if you like."

He rang a bell, summoning the Chinese cook, who it appeared "was housekeeper and general upstairs girl as well," and gave orders that a certain room should be made ready for Jack.

"That loom, him sleep by Cactus Ike," said the Chinese.

"Never mind whether Cactus Ike is going to sleep there or not," said Mr. Kent sharply. "You tell Ike he can bunk in with the rest of the boys. He's no better than they are."

"Me sabe," replied the Celestial.

Jack was too tired to pay much attention to this conversation. Nor did he attach any significance to a talk he heard under his windows a little later.

"What's the matter with Ike?" he dimly heard some one ask.

"Mad 'cause he got turned out of his room for one of them tenderfoot kids," was the answer. "I wouldn't want to get Ike down on me."

"Aw, he's a big bluff."

"He is, eh? Well, you wait."

But, in spite of his troubles and worryment over his father, Jack was soon asleep from sheer weariness, and when morning came he forgot there was such a person as Cactus Ike.

A doctor arrived from Fillmore about breakfast time and examined Mr. Lantry. He said the old man was very sick, and would be for some time. He was out of his head, from fever, and might be so for three weeks. With careful nursing he would recover, said the medical man, and he left some remedies.

"We'll see that he gets well," spoke Mr. Kent. "I'll have the cook look after him, for I guess it will be hard to get a nurse out here."

"If he only recovers his reason, so he can tell me what I want to know," Jack murmured.

"Oh, he will," said Nat's uncle, confidently. "In the meanwhile you will have to be patient. Your father is in no danger now, for his partner did not count on getting back in over a month, and there was medicine enough in the cabin to last until then. Otherwise there is nothing to fear. You tell me the land stealers can't find the shack, so what else is there to worry about?"

"Nothing, I suppose," replied Jack, but, somehow, he couldn't help worrying.

"Cheer up," said Mr. Kent. "We'll get your father for you. In the meantime while we are waiting for the old man to get well you must learn ranch life, and get good and strong, so that if you do have to take part in a hunt for him you will be able to stand roughing it."

Jack thought this was good advice, as did his chums. They raced out of the house after breakfast, determined to see all there was to see. But this, they found, would take a long time.

Mr. Kent's ranch took in about a thousand acres. Some of it was on the first plateau, and part among the hills, where the cattle grazed. Besides the house, there were stables for the horses, kennels for the dogs, a cook house, a dining shack, the sides of which could be thrown open in the summer, barns for hay and grain, and a big tall windmill that pumped water.

"Can we have regular horses while we're here?" asked Nat of his uncle, as he and his chums started for the stable yard.

"Sure," replied Mr. Kent "You just go over there and tell Rattlesnake Jim I said he was to fit you out with a horse and saddle each. He knows which will be the best for you, better than I do. I don't have time to keep track of the animals. I'm going to be busy all the morning, so you can do as you please, within reason. Don't stampede the cattle, that's all," and he turned away with a laugh.

The boys looked around the stable enclosure for their friend Jim, but he was not to be seen.

"Lookin' for any one?" inquired a tall cowboy, who appeared from under the shed. He had small, black shifty eyes, and when he spoke he looked anywhere but at one.

"Where's Mr.-er-Mr. Rattlesnake Jim?" asked Nat. He was not exactly sure how to address, or speak of the cowboys with their queer titles.

"Jim? Oh, he's gone over on the Spring range. Was you wantin' anything?"

"Only some horses," said Nat.

"Oh, you're the boys," spoke the man. "Did Mr. Kent say you are to have 'em?"

"Uncle Morris said Jim would give us horses to ride," Nat went on.

"Well, I guess I can pick 'em out for you," the man said. "One of you boys named Ranger?"

"I am," said Jack,

"Oh, yes, you're a friend of the old man who was shot," went on the cowboy as he entered the stable. "Well, I'll pick out horses I think'll suit."

He disappeared into the regions of the stalls, and soon came out, leading a fine black horse. He threw a saddle over its back. The animal seemed a bit restive.

"Here's your horse, Ranger," the cowboy called.

"Is he safe?" asked Jack. "I'm not a very good rider."

"A girl could manage him," was the answer. "See, he's as gentle as a lamb," and so it seemed for the man opened the animal's mouth and put his hand in.

Thus encouraged, Jack mounted, and the horse moved off at a slow pace.

"I guess he's all right," Jack thought

In a few more minutes two more horses were saddled, and Nat and John had mounted.

"Now for a good gallop over the plain," called Nat, as he led the way from the stable yard.

Jack was the last to ride forth. As he was passing the gate that closed the corral he heard some one call to the man who had just saddled the steeds:

"Who'd you give the black horse to, Ike?"

"None of your business," was the reply. "I'm running this game."

"Ike," thought Jack. "I wonder where I heard that name before." Then the memory of the conversation under his window came to him. "Oh, well, guess it's all right to have this horse," the boy thought. "I can't harm him."

As the cowboy turned back into the stable a grim smile passed over his face.

"Good gallop!" he muttered. "Lucky if you don't break your neck."

"Come on! I'll race you!" called Nat, and the three boys were soon speeding over the level plain.

CHAPTER XXVI

JACK'S WILD RIDE

The boys thought they had never been on such fine horses. The animals had an easy gallop that carried one over the ground at a rapid pace,

yet which was not hard for a beginner.

"Talk about your sport!" exclaimed Jack. "This is glorious; eh, John?"

"Best thing I ever struck," replied the Indian. "I feel like my wild ancestors, riding forth to battle. Whoop! la Whoopee! Whoop ah Whoope! Wow! Wow!! Wow!"

It was a regular Indian war-cry that issued from John's mouth, and, leaning forward on his horse's neck, he urged the beast to a terrific pace.

No sooner had the strange cry vibrated through the air than Jack's horse gave a bound that nearly unseated its rider. It leaped forward so suddenly that Jack was almost flung off backward. Then the steed, taking the bit in its teeth, bolted like the wind. Jack recovered himself with much difficulty. He tried to sit upright, but found he had not skill enough for the task. There was nothing for it but to lean forward and clasp the horse about the neck. In this way he was safe, for a time, from being tossed off.

The horse turned from its straight course and began to gallop around in a large circle. Then it made sudden dashes to the right and left, turning so quickly that several times Jack was nearly thrown off.

"The horse is mad!" cried Nat, urging his own steed forward, with an idea of trying to catch the one Jack rode.

The animal's next move seemed to bear this out. It reared on its hind legs and pawed the air with its powerful fore-feet. Jack would have been thrown off, but for the tight neck-hold he had. Next the beast kicked its hind feet into the air, and Jack came near sliding to the neck.

"Drop off!" cried Nat.

"Stay on!" shouted John, who, seeing his friend's plight, had turned and was riding back.

"He'll be killed if he stays on," shouted Nat.

"Yes, and he'll be trampled to death if he leaps off," called back John. "He's a balky horse, I guess."

"I think he's a mad one."

The next instant the animal, that had been rushing straight ahead, came to such an abrupt halt that Jack was actually flung from the saddle. He went right up into the air and slid along the horse's

side. Only the grip he had of the neck and the mane saved him from falling. Before the horse could make another start the boy had wiggled back to his seat.

Then came what was probably the hardest part of it all. The horse gathered its four feet under it and rose straight up in the air, coming down with legs stiff as sticks. Jack was not prepared for this and the resulting jar nearly knocked the breath from him.

"He's a bucking bronco!" cried John. "Rise in your stirrups when he lands next time."

This Jack did, with the result that the jar came on his legs, and was not so bad.

Finding it could not thus rid itself of its persistent rider, the horse began to run straight ahead again. It went so fast that the wind whistled in Jack's ears, and he was in fear lest he be thrown off at this terrific speed, and injured. He held on for dear life.

But the horse had still another trick. Stopping again with a suddenness that nearly unseated Jack, it dropped to the ground and started to roll over, hoping to crush the boy on its back.

"Get out of the way, quick!" called John, who was watching every move.

Jack did so, just in time to escape having his leg broken.

"The horse must be crazy," said Nat, who had never seen such antics in a steed before.

"There's some reason for it," commented John. "There he goes!"

The horse was up an instant later, and dashed off, but had not gone a hundred yards before the saddle fell to the ground, the holding straps having broken. At this the animal stopped, and seemed all over its excitement.

"That's funny," said John. He dismounted from his horse and ran toward Jack's animal. The horse allowed himself to be taken by the bridle and lead, showing no sign of fear. John bent over and was examining the saddle.

"I guess your yell must have scared him," spoke Jack. "It was the worst I ever heard."

"It wasn't that," replied John. "Western horses are used to all sorts of yells. Ah, I thought so," he went on, "this explains it."

He pulled something from the underside of the pad and held it up to view. It was a long cactus thorn.

"That was what bothered the horse," John said. "It must have been torture to have any one on the saddle. See there," and he pointed to several drops of blood on the animal's back.

"Why didn't it act so as soon as I got on?" asked Jack.

"Some one has played a trick," said John "See, the thorn was trapped in cloth, so the point would not work through until the horse had been ridden some distance. I wonder who did it, and what for?"

"I know," Jack exclaimed, as the memory of the talk under his window the night previous came to him. "It was Cactus Ike," and he told what he had heard. "He wanted to get even with me for having been the cause of his being turned out of his room. No wonder they call him Cactus Ike."

"I'll tell uncle Morris," cried Nat.

"No, say nothing about it," counseled John. "We'll get square in our own way. Pretend nothing happened. If Ike asks us how we liked the ride, we'll never let on we had any trouble. It will keep him guessing."

The broken straps were repaired and, by making a pad of his handkerchief Jack was able to adjust the saddle without causing the horse any pain. The animal seemed quite friendly, after all the excitement, which was only caused by its efforts to get rid of the terrible thorn that was driving it frantic. In its roll it had accomplished this, and had no further objection to carrying a boy on its back.

Cactus Ike cast several inquiring glances at the lads as they rode into the ranch yard about an hour later. But he did not ask any questions. As the chums were going toward the house Jack heard one of the cowboys remark to Ike:

"The black horse looks as if it had been ridden pretty hard."

"I'll make him ride harder next time," muttered Ike, but whether he referred to the horse or to himself, Jack was not sure. He watched and saw Ike looking at the sore on the animal, over which the boy's handkerchief was still spread. Jack's first inquiry was as to the condition of Old Peter Lantry.

"He's no better," replied Mr. Kent "You'll have to be patient, Jack. All things come to him who waits. Did you have a good ride?"

"I got lots of practice," replied Jack, not caring to go into details.

"Can't get too much of it," replied Nat's uncle. "You can see some good examples this afternoon."

"How's that?" asked Nat.

"Some of the boys are going to have a little sport among themselves," replied his uncle. "They do every once in a while when the work gets slack. They're coming in from some of the outlying ranches, about forty of 'em, I guess."

"What'll they do?" asked Jack.

"You'll see," replied Mr. Kent.

Before dinner time the cowboys began arriving. And in what a hurly-burly manner did they come! On their fleet horses or cow-ponies they rode along the trails as if it was in the early days and a tribe of wild Indians was after them. They came up on the gallop, shouting, yelling, and firing their big revolvers off into the air.

Up they would rush, almost to the porch that surrounded the house. Then they would suddenly pull their horses back on their haunches and leap off with a whoop, the well-trained beasts standing stock-still when the bridle was thrown over their heads.

Then began such play as the boys had never seen before,—such riding as is not even seen in the best of the Wild West shows. The men seemed part of the horses they bestrode, as the animals fairly flew over the ground.

"If we could only do that!" exclaimed Nat.

"Maybe we can, with practice," said Jack. "John has learned a lot already."

"But he knew some before he came here," replied Nat.

The men had impromptu contests to see who could pick up the most handkerchiefs from the ground, leaning from their saddles as their horses galloped past. They picked up potatoes in the same way. They roped wild steers, dropping the lariat over a designated horn or leg, and throwing the animal on whichever side the judge suddenly called on them to do.

Then such shooting at marks as there was! The men used their revolvers with almost the skill of rifles. They cut cards, punctured cans tossed high in the air, and clipped upright sticks at distances

from which the boys could scarcely make out the marks.

It was an afternoon of wild, exciting, blood-stirring and yet healthy, clean fun, and the boys were so worked up they hardly knew whether they were standing on their heads or their feet.

The last contest of the day had been called. It was a test between two of the most skillful cowboys, to see who could lasso the other. As they were circling around on their horses, each seeking an opening, there came dashing up the road a man, on a foam-flecked steed. He put the horse right at the fence, which it leaped, and rode to where Mr. Kent stood.

"The cattle on the upper range have stampeded!" he yelled. "They're headed for the canyon!"

"Here boys!" shouted Mr. Kent. "Sharp work now! Send my horse here! We must head 'em off!"

CHAPTER XXVII

THE CATTLE STAMPEDE

If there had been confusion and excitement before there was more of it now. Yet no one lost his head. There was a way of going about it, and though it seemed as if everyone was running here and there, without an object, there was a well-worked-out system evident.

The cowboys began looking to their saddle girths, for there was hard riding ahead of them. Some ran to the supply house for extra cartridges, and these were hurriedly thrust into belts or pockets. Coats and hats that had been discarded were donned, and several men began packing up some bacon and hardtack, while others strapped simple camp outfits back of their saddles, for there was no telling how long they would be obliged to be on the trail.

"Come on! Let's go!" cried Jack, and he and his two chums raced for the stables.

"Will they let us, do you think?" asked John, whose eyes sparkled at the thought of the chase.

"Of course," replied Nat. "Uncle said he wanted us to learn the ranch business. I'll ask him."

But Nat did not get a chance. Mr. Kent was too busy preparing to ride

after his stampeded cattle to pay any attention to the three boys. It is doubtful if he thought of them.

So the chums, without further permission than Nat's idea that it would be all right, saddled their horses, Jack taking the black which he had come to like very much. They rode from the corral and out on the road that led to the north where the upper range lay. The lads at once found themselves in the rear of a galloping throng of cowboys.

"Come on, let's get up ahead," shouted Nat, and they urged their horses forward, passing the others. When they were almost in the van a voice hailed them:

"Where you boys going?"

They turned, to see Mr. Kent riding toward them.

"Oh," said Nat, a little confused. "We thought you'd want us to go to learn how to manage a herd of cattle."

"Manage stampeding cattle," muttered Mr. Kent. "You boys must be crazy. But it's too late to send you back, I suppose. Only don't ride your horses to death the first thing. You've got lots of work ahead of you."

With this encouragement the chums dropped back, listening to the talk of the cowboys about what was ahead of them.

"Remember the last stampede," one tall lanky rider asked his neighbor, who was nearly the same build.

"The one where Loony Pete was trampled to death?"

"That's the one. The steers sure made mincemeat of him all right. Hope no one gets down under foot this trip."

The boys looked at each other. This was a more dangerous undertaking than they had anticipated.

The riders advanced at an even, if not rapid pace. The cowboys as their horses ambled on were loading revolvers, looking to their lariats, tightening the packs which they carried on the back of their saddles, and making ready for the hard task ahead of them.

From listening to the talk, the boys learned that the upper range was about five miles distant, and was where the choicest cattle were herded, preparatory to being shipped away. The range was a big one, but, about ten miles from it, was a deep and dangerous canyon, at the beginning of the hills, which as they grew larger became the range of Golden Glow mountains. It was toward this canyon that the steers were

headed, in a wild, unreasoning rush.

It seemed impossible for the cowboys to get ahead of them in time to head them off. But the cattle had a longer way to travel than did the men, and the latter could take a diagonal course and, if they had luck, reach the edge of the canyon first. It was planned to get between the oncoming herd and the edge of the gulch, and turn the steers back, if possible.

"Better hit up the pace!" exclaimed Mr. Kent, when they had ridden several miles. "We don't want to be too late."

The boys, realized, as did the men, that if the cattle, in their rush, reached the canyon, they would pile up in the bottom, and hundreds would be killed.

The horses were now galloped and the cavalcade raised quite a dust as it hastened over the prairie. The men began loosening the revolvers in their belts, and several unslung their lariats, ready for instant use. In about half an hour they began to ascend a slight rise that led to a plateau which extended into the range. Ahead of them, and about two miles to their right, lay the gulch.

"Well, we're here first!" exclaimed Mr. Kent, as he topped the rise and glanced to the left.

"Hark!" cried Rattlesnake Jim, who rode next to him. "I hear 'em!"

A noise like distant thunder sounded over the plain. Then, about three miles away, there arose something that looked like a dark cloud.

The sound of thunder came nearer. The dust cloud was plainly to be seen. Right ahead, so as to cross it on the slant, rode the group of men. The boys were in the rear. Mr. Kent gave a glance back and saw them. He shouted something but the chums could not hear him amid the pounding of hoofs. They saw the ranchman make signals, but did not understand them.

Then they saw several men from the front rank of the cowboys circle around and come up behind them.

"You young rascals!" exclaimed Rattlesnake Jim. "You ought to be spanked for coming along! Mr. Kent says to keep in the middle now. We're going to ride behind and keep your horses on the go. If they lag behind you're liable to be killed!"

Things began to look serious now. The lads found themselves in the midst of a throng of cowboys, and the horses of the chums, being surrounded by steeds ridden by experienced cattlemen, picked up their

pace and went forward on the rush.

Closer and closer approached the dark cloud. Nearer and nearer sounded the thunderous pounding of hoofs. Then, as the boys looked, they could see through the dust that was blown aside by a puff of wind, thousands of cattle, with heads on which flashed long, sharp, wide-spreading horns, rushing madly along.

"Wow! Wow! Wow!" yelled a score of cowboys.

Bang! Bang! Bang! spoke a score of big revolvers.

"Right across now!" yelled Mr. Kent. "Try and turn 'em! If we don't do it, then back again, once more!"

Then began such a ride as the boys had never dreamed of. Across the ragged front of the maddened animals the men urged their horses on a long slant. Lying low in their saddles, holding on with one hand, and firing revolvers with the other, the cowboys rode, there being no need to guide the trained horses.

Bang! Bang! Bang! It was like a skirmish line firing on the enemy. The boys, who had secured revolvers as they rushed to the stables, fired as the men did, right in the faces of the advancing steers. The cartridges were blank, but so close were some of the men that the burning wadding struck the cattle.

Could they stop the rush? Could the maddened and frightened steers be halted before they plunged over the cliffs?

The line of cattle was about a quarter of a mile wide. In less than two minutes the cowboys, with the three chums in their midst, had swept across it. But the steers had not stopped. They were several hundred feet nearer the canyon, which now was but a mile away. There would be time for but one, or possibly two more attempts, and then it would be too late.

But the cowboys never halted. Wheeling sharply, they dashed once more across the front of the steers. Their yells were wilder than ever, and the shooting was a continuous rattle.

"Rope some on the edges!" yelled Mr. Kent.

At that some of the cowboys rode back and, whirling their lariats above their heads, sent the coils about the horns of some on the left fringe. The animals went down in a heap, right in the midst and under the hoofs of the others. Of course they were trampled to death, but this was the means of causing a number to stumble and fall, and so halt those back of them.

This could only be done on the two outer edges. To have attempted this in the center of the stampeding herd would have meant death for the cowboy who tried it.

The second dash across the front had been made, and the frightened cattle had not been more than momentarily stopped. They were still rushing toward the cliff.

"Once more!" called Mr. Kent. "This is our last chance!"

The canyon was but a quarter of a mile away. If the rush was not stopped now, it meant the death of many valuable animals, and the possible scattering of the herd.

Again across the front, bristling with waving horns, rode the brave men. Their revolvers spat out fire and the smoke almost obscured the oncoming steers. The men yelled until their throats were parched.

"Make a stand! Make a stand!" yelled Mr. Kent.

The cowboys bunched together, riding their horses in a circle, the center of which was the boys. For a moment it seemed as if death was coming to meet them on the wings of the wind.

CHAPTER XXVIII

HUNTING MOUNTAIN LIONS

"Wow! Wow! Wow!" yelled the cowboys, in desperation.

To the noise John added his Indian warwhoop, and again the men began firing revolvers, which had been rapidly reloaded. It was a critical moment. It was the turning point of the stampede. Back, back, back the rushing cattle forced the men, who still kept circling. Now the canyon was but two hundred feet away.

And then, almost as suddenly as it had been started, the stampede was over. The foremost cattle slowed up. They raised their heads, and bellowed. For a few seconds the front line was pushed ahead by those behind. Then all through the herd seemed to go a message that the run was over.

Plowing the dirt up with their feet, as they vainly tried to stop, but could not because of the push that still was exerted behind them, the foremost cattle advanced nearly to the knot of horsemen. But the cowboys did not budge, knowing it was ended now. Then, with loud

shouts and waving hats they turned the herd so that it circled around and was started back toward the range.

So close were the rear men to the canyon, when this had been done that they could have tossed a stone down into the depths.

"Narrow squeak, that!" observed Rattlesnake Jim, as he wiped the sweat from his forehead with a big red handkerchief. "'Bout as close as I want 'em," observed Mr. Kent. "I wonder what started 'em off this way."

"Maybe it was mountain lions," said Jim. "I heard there was quite a few around lately, looking for nice juicy young calves."

"It wasn't lions that started 'em this time," said the man who had brought word of the stampede, and who had ridden with the others from the ranch.

"What was it then?" asked Mr. Kent.

"It was done by two men, so some of the boys told me, just before I started out," replied the messenger. "They said they saw a couple of strangers hanging about the range the other night, but didn't think anything of it. We were all in the range house this morning, getting breakfast, when, all of a sudden, the steers started off."

"But what made 'em do?" asked Mr. Kent.

"Some of the boys saw these strange men starting a fire close to some of the cows," explained the messenger. "The grass was dry, and, in one place it burned quite hard. Some of the steers got scorched before they knew what was happening, and they went off on the dead run. The two men trampled out the fire, and ran away. The boys started after the cattle, and sent me on to tell you."

"This will have to be looked into," murmured Mr. Kent. "But now let's get the cattle back on the range."

It was nearly dusk when this had been accomplished, and it was a tired and weary throng of men and boys that started for the ranch house in the gathering twilight. The horses could only amble along, for the strain had been hard on them as well as on the men.

The next few days the boys spent in going about the ranch, close to the house. They were much in company with Rattlesnake Jim, who took pleasure in telling them things all good cowboys should know. He showed them how to make a lariat, and even instructed them a bit in its use, though John needed but few lessons to become almost as expert as his teacher. Jim told them the best way to camp out on the plains at night, how to make their fires, and warned them to be

careful not to set the grass ablaze in dry weather. He also showed them how to tether their horses, the best way of adjusting a saddle, and instructed them in the art of finding their way at night by the stars.

In short the boys learned more in a few days from Jim than they could have picked up alone in a month. They were so enthusiastic that they would have sat up all night listening to their new teacher.

As for riding, the lads improved very much as Jim showed them how to mount, how to sit, how to guide the horse by the mere pressure of the knees, and other tricks of which a "tenderfoot" never dreams.

After supper, one evening, when the boys, Mr. Kent and Rattlesnake Jim were in the sitting room, a common resting place for all on the ranch, Jack asked:

"Are there really mountain lions around here?"

"There used to be," said Mr. Kent, "but I haven't seen any lately."

"I heard some of the boys from the upper range say they heard 'em, a few nights ago," spoke Jim.

"That ought to be looked into," said Mr. Kent. "They're nasty customers to get among a herd."

"Can't we go hunting 'em?" asked Nat.

"What do you know about hunting mountain lions?" asked his uncle. "They'd eat you up."

"Not if we took Jim along," put in Jack.

"I shot a lynx once," said John.

"That's nothing like a mountain lion," Mr. Kent remarked.

"Can't we go?" pleaded Nat.

"I'll see about it," his uncle answered.

He did see about it, with such good effect that, a few days later he called the boys in and showed them three fine rifles.

"Can you shoot?" he asked.

"A little," they replied, wondering what was coming.

"Then take these and see if you and Jim can bag a few lions," Mr. Kent went on. "I hear they got a couple of calves last night. Now—now—never mind thanking me," as the boys fairly stuttered their expressions of surprise and happiness. "Better see Jim and get ready."

The boys lost no time in doing this. They found Jim almost as pleased as they were. The cowboy at once began preparing a camping outfit, and that night he announced they would start in the morning.

"For how long?" asked Mr. Kent.

"We'll make it four days, if the boys can stand it," Jim replied.

The haunt of the lions was in a range of low foothills to the north of the range from which the herd had stampeded. It was planned to ride to the house where the cowboys in charge of that bunch of cattle lived, and there leave the horses. They would proceed on foot up into the hills, where the trails were so rough that horses were of little use.

They camped that night at the ranch house, and the boys hardly wanted to go to bed when Jim and some of his acquaintances began to swap stories around the fire.

"Better turn in," advised Jim, about ten o'clock. "Have to be up before sunrise, you know."

The next morning they tramped for several miles, the country getting wilder and wilder as they proceeded. The trail was up now, for they had entered the region of the foothills. Beyond them lay the beginning of the Golden Glow mountain range.

"That's where my father is," Jack thought "I hope I can soon find him."

It was almost noon when they reached a spot that Jim decided would be a good place to camp. It was under a sort of overhanging ledge, and well screened by trees.

"We'll leave our stuff here," he said, "and, after dinner, the real hunting will begin."

Little time was lost over the meal, and, having seen to their rifles and knives, the four hunters started along the trail, making their way through low brush and over big boulders. Jack who had forged ahead, with Jim close behind him, was suddenly pulled back by the cowboy's hand,

"Look there!" exclaimed Jim.

In a soft place in the ground, just where he was about to set his foot, Jack saw some peculiar marks.

"The tracks of a mountain lion!" Jim exclaimed in a whisper. "He's been here only a short time ago, for the marks are fresh. Look out, now, boys!"

The three lads needed no other caution. They got ready with their rifles, while Jim advanced a bit to see in which direction the beast had gone.

"Follow me," he said in a whisper as he came back. "He must be just ahead of us, and the wind is blowing from him to us. We ought to get him!"

Stepping as cautiously as possible, and taking care not to tread on loose stones, or sticks, that would break and betray their presence, the four began stalking the lion. That they were coming closer to the beast was evidenced by the increasing plainness of the tracks.

"He's heading for his den," whispered Jim. "We must get him before he reaches it or we'll lose him."

There was a sort of path along which the hunters were traveling, and which seemed to be one regularly used by the lion. It made a sudden turn, to get past a big boulder that jutted out from the side of the hill. As Jim and the boys rounded this, they came to an abrupt halt, and each one gazed with startled eyes at a ledge of rock, just beyond and ahead of them.

There, in full view, with the sun streaming down on him, was an immense mountain lion. He was facing away from the hunters, and this, with the fact that the wind was blowing from him to them, had enabled them to get within a hundred yards.

Slowly Jim leveled his rifle. Then he seemed to think of something, and stopped.

"You boys try, all together," he said in such a faint whisper that it sounded like the breeze. "If you miss I'll bowl him over."

CHAPTER XXIX

LOST ON THE MOUNTAIN

Up to that time the boys had been as cool, almost, as Jim himself. But, at the idea that they were to slay the big and fierce creature standing so majestically before them, they experienced a touch of what is called "buck fever." Their hands shook so they could not sight their rifles. Even John, half Indian as he was, showed the effects of it.

"Steady," whispered Jim. "You're only shooting at a mark!"

At once the nerves of the boys quieted. Their hands became firm, and, raising their rifles they all took careful aim at the lion. Jim was watching them.

"Fire!" he suddenly exclaimed in a whisper, and the three rifles sounded as one.

Following the report, and mingling with it, came a scream so shrill and full of terror that the boys could not help jumping. Through the smoke they could see a big, tawny, yellow body leap high into the air, and then, falling back, begin to claw the earth and stones, while the screams continued to ring out.

"You nailed her!" cried Jim.

Hardly had he spoken before there was a rattling sound behind them. All four turned, to see, crouching, not twenty feet away, a big, male mountain lion, ready to spring. It was the mate of the female the boys had just mortally wounded, and the big beast's eyes flashed fire as it saw the death struggles of its den-mate.

For a moment the hunters stood as if paralyzed. The sight of the lion in their rear had unnerved them. The male must have been stalking them, just as they had followed the other. As they watched, a sudden tremor seemed to run through the big brute's body.

"He's going to spring!" said Jim, in a low voice. At the same moment he brought his gun up, ready to fire.

An instant later the lion launched itself forward, propelled by muscles like steel springs, straight at the group, anger blazing in its eyes.

Bang! spoke Jim's rifle, and the big cat seemed to turn completely over in the air.

But the momentum of the spring was not checked by the bullet which had struck it in the throat. On it came, and Jim yelled:

"Duck boys!"

He had no time to do so himself, so, before he could throw himself to one side, the lion was upon him and the cowboy went down in a heap, the beast, snarling and growling, on top of him. There was a confusion of man and lion, a vision of flying legs, fast-working claws and the sight of a yellow body in convulsions.

"Fire at the lion!" yelled Jack.

"Don't! You might shoot Jim!" exclaimed Nat.

"Get your knives out!" cried John, drawing his own blade.

But they were not needed. A moment later the big cat rolled over off Jim, and, in a few seconds the cowboy rose from the ground, covered with dirt and blood, but, apparently unhurt.

"Did he bite you?" asked Jack,

"He was dead when he landed on me," said Jim. "It was only the dying struggle. Might have clawed me up a bit, but not much."

In fact the cowboy had several long and deep scratches on his hands and legs, where his heavy trousers had been cut through by the terrible claws. Aside from that he was not hurt.

"Good thing I had a load in my gun," he remarked, as he threw out the empty shell and fired a bullet through the head of the lion to make sure it was dead.

"I guess the other one's done for," said Jack, as he looked toward where the lioness had stood.

"I'd hope so, with three of you firin' at her," spoke Jim as he went over to a little spring and washed some of the dirt and blood from him.

"This isn't half bad," spoke Nat. "I wish some of the fellows at Washington Hall could see us now."

"Maybe they would think we were some pumpkins," put in Jack.

"Oh we'll do better than this," said John. "We want to get one apiece, instead of a third each."

"That's so," admitted Jack and Nat.

It was decided they had enjoyed sport enough for one day, so they went back to their little camp and prepared to spend the night. In the morning they journeyed to the small ranch house and some of the cowboys went for the dead lions and skinned them. The boys were a little anxious as to who would have the trophies, but there was no need of this, as, in the next two days three more of the lions were slain. Jack and John each bowled over one, not so very large, to be sure, but enough to make the lads feel several inches taller. Nat had poor luck, missing two fine chances. However, he was not discouraged.

The boys were congratulated on all sides when they got back to Mr. Kent's house, even the oldest plainsman admitting they had not done so bad for tenderfeet.

Aside from long rides, in which they learned to be more proficient on horses, the boys did little for the week following the hunt. Jack made anxious inquiries every day after the condition of Peter Lantry, hoping the aged man might have regained his senses enough to give directions for finding Mr. Ranger's cabin. But the fever still held the old miner (for such his delirious talk showed him to have been) a captive, and locked his brain in an impenetrable mantle.

"It's hard to sit around and do nothing, when you know your father may need you," Jack said, one day. "I'm going to ask Mr. Kent if I can't go myself, alone, and find the cabin. I believe I could, from Mr. Tevis's directions."

"What do you want to go alone for?" asked Nat. "Why can't John and I go along?"

"I didn't want to take you on a dangerous trip," Jack replied.

"Well, I guess you'd find it hard to leave us behind," John put in. "Come on, let's ask if we can't go."

At first Mr. Kent would not hear of it. But the boys pleaded so hard, and Jack seemed to feel so badly at the delay, that Mr. Kent gave in. He admitted there was no telling when Mr. Lantry would recover enough to give directions, and it would certainly be a very long time before he would be able to guide a party to the scene.

So it was arranged that the three boys were to make the hundred mile trip to Golden Glow. It was not as venturesome as it sounded. They had come west in safety, and gone through a number of perils with credit to themselves. Then, too, it was in summer, and camping in the open was fun, more than anything else. It was true the trail was a hard one, but, by going a roundabout way, horses could be used for the greater distance. Mr. Kent wanted to send Rattlesnake Jim with

the boys, but they would not hear of it.

"I guess we can look out for ourselves," said Jack. "If we can't, it's time we learned."

Three days later saw them on the trail. They had sturdy horses, used to mountain roads, a camping outfit and provisions that would last them two weeks, with plenty of ammunition, and each one carried a fine rifle.

They rode along for four days, camping at night in such sheltered places as they could find. The morning of the fifth day they awoke to find the mountain shrouded in fog.

"That shan't delay us," exclaimed Jack, though it was hard to see a rod ahead of the horse's nose. "We have a compass and we can follow the general direction Mr. Tevis gave us."

So they traveled on after breakfast, though it was dreary riding. They plodded on for mile after mile in silence. All at once Jack, who was ahead exclaimed:

"Doesn't that tree look familiar?"

He pointed to one that had been struck by lightning, and which had a peculiar spiral white mark running down the trunk. It was close to the edge of the trail.

"It sure does," admitted John.

"I remember passing that before," Nat said. "What of it?"

"It means that we have wandered around in a circle," Jack answered. "We are lost on the mountains!"

CHAPTER XXX

A VIEW OF GOLDEN GLOW

For a moment Jack's words struck a chill to the hearts of his companions. The fog seemed to wrap around them like an impenetrable blanket, from which they sought in vain to escape. A little breeze stirred the wreaths of vapor, but did not disperse them.

"Lost!" repeated Nat, as if he could not believe it.

"I guess you're right," admitted John. "Now wait a minute. Where's the compass?"

"Here," spoke Jack, feeling in his pocket for it. A blank look came over his face. He hurriedly looked through several pockets. "I've lost it!" he exclaimed.

"Well, never mind," John went on calmly. He seemed to rise to the emergency, and become collected in the face of the danger that confronted them. "I guess I haven't got Indian blood in me for nothing. I can tell which way is north, anyhow."

"You can?" asked Nat. "How, in all this fog?"

"There's more moss on the north side of a tree than on any other," John replied. "We were going in a northerly direction so, all we have to do is to keep on, stopping once in a while to see how the moss is."

It sounded like good advice, and Nat and Jack felt better after hearing it. They started off again, more hopeful, and went slowly for a while, stopping now and then, to see about the moss, or "nature's compass," as Jack called it.

They must have traveled a number of miles, when they decided it was time to camp and eat something. They looked around for some dry wood for a fire, seeking for it under overhanging rocks as Jim had showed them how to do. They managed to start a blaze, and John was frying some bacon, incidentally trying to keep the smoke from his eyes, when Nat, who had gone a short distance off the trail, exclaimed:

"Say fellows; look here!"

"See a bear?" asked Jack.

"No, but here's our old friend, the queer tree!" he called. "We're back in the same place."

Jack and John ran to where Nat stood. There was the lightning-scarred trunk. Once more they had traveled in a circle. They had not read the moss signs aright.

It was such a shock that, for a few moments, the boys did not know what to say. They had been so sure they were journeying in the right direction, that, to find they had merely gone back on their own trail, was more than discouraging.

"Thought you said you knew how to read signs, and where north was," spoke Jack, looking at John.

"Well, I thought I did," the Indian replied. "I'm sure I am right, only I think we must have made a mistake in our directions."

"Well, we're here, and what are we going to do?" asked Nat.

About them the fog swirled, lazily moving this way and that, in response to gentle puffs of wind, but never lifting enough to enable them to get a glimpse of the sun, to determine where they were, or in which direction to travel.

"Let's eat, anyhow," suggested Jack. "We'll feel better after that."

It was no very cheerful meal, and they were three very much worried boys. They said little while partaking of the bacon, bread and coffee, the horses cropping the sparse grass near by. But, in a little while, Jack laughed.

"What's the use of feeling blue?" he asked. "We're lost, that's sure enough, but we're in a civilized country, and we'll get home, or somewhere, sooner or later. Come on, let's have another try."

"Then you can lead the way, I'll not," spoke John a little sharply. "I'm not going to be blamed again."

"Oh, come now!" exclaimed Jack. "Don't mind what we said. Of course it wasn't your fault. It would happen to any one!"

All that afternoon they traveled, until it was hard work to urge the horses on, as they were becoming tired. The boys spoke but seldom, and John seemed more glum than ever. Once or twice Jack tried to joke with him, but it was a failure. The half Indian lad was exhibiting some of the traits of his ancestors.

Gradually it grew darker, until, with the thick fog, and the overhanging trees, it was almost like twilight.

"How much further?" asked Nat.

"I guess we can camp any time you want to," Jack said.

"Do you think we are any further along the trail, or have we just traveled in a bigger circle?" Nat inquired.

"Hard to say," replied Jack. "At any rate I don't see our old friend the queer tree. We must have ascended some for it's been up hill the last two hours."

They found a well sheltered place, underneath a big clump of trees, that would serve as a canopy for themselves and the horses. The animals were tethered, after being allowed to feed on a patch of

grass, and then they had supper. After the meal John seemed to be in better spirits, and took a more cheerful view of things.

"I guess the fog will lift by morning," he said.

But it did not, and, when the boys arose to prepare breakfast, after an uncomfortable night, the white curtain was thicker than ever.

They traveled all that day, but, whether they made any real progress, or whether they went back or around in a circle, they could only surmise. They tried to keep ascending the mountain, and this was the only means they had of telling which way to go.

"If we could only see something," said Nat, "it wouldn't be so lonesome. A fox, or a rabbit, or even a mountain lion. I don't believe I'd shoot one, I'd want his company."

"I'm sorry I got you fellows into this scrape," Jack put in. "I'd go back with you, and begin over again, all alone, only I guess it would be just as bad to go back as it is to go ahead, so we might as well keep on."

"Well, I reckon you'll not go on alone," said Nat, decidedly, and John, who had recovered his former good-natured, nodded in assent.

As their horses stumbled on, once more the curtain of night began to descend, hastened by the thick fog. Would it never rise? How long were they to be hidden under the white veil?

Suddenly, as they urged on their tired animals, a spear of light seemed to pierce the gathering gloom ahead of them. At the sight of it the horses threw up their heads and put forward their ears. The spear grew brighter. Then it pierced the mist. All at once a puff of wind brushed aside the white clinging wreaths of vapor that had so long enshrouded them. The fog rolled away, and there, in front of them was the setting sun, in a halo of glory. As it shone the beams were caught and reflected from a distant peak.

"Golden Glow! Golden Glow!" cried Jack. "There is the mountain we have been searching for! Now to find my father!"

CHAPTER XXXI

JACK AND NAT PRISONERS

The three travelers came to a halt on the shelf of a high cliff that

towered above their heads. It was a wide and safe road they had emerged upon, and it could be seen winding on and up, until it was lost in the mist which was rapidly being driven forward by the wind.

"There is the road to Golden Glow!" exclaimed Jack. "Come on. We are on the right trail now."

"Better go easy," cautioned John. "It's getting night, and we can't travel far. Here's a good place to camp, and we can start early in the morning. I guess the fog has lifted to stay."

Though Jack was impatient to press forward, he realized that what John said was sensible. He stood for awhile looking at the shifting light as it was reflected from the sun on the top of the lofty peak. He felt that at last he had reached the beginning of the end of his long search. Would it be successful? Would he find his father? Would he be in time to see him alive? All this Jack thought, and much more.

Then the light faded as Old Sol sunk behind a mass of clouds, the stern mountains hiding his welcome face,

"Now for supper!" cried Nat, in a more cheerful tone than any of the boys had used in the last two days. "I'm as hungry as a bear. I wish I had a nice fresh chicken--"

Bang! It was John's gun that had been fired, and, before Nat could ask what the matter was he saw a plump bird fall to the ground, as the result of the Indian lad's quick aim.

"I don't know whether it's a chicken or not," John said, "but it looks good to eat."

And so the boys found it, though they did not know what kind of fowl it was. They fried it with crisp bacon, and with big tin cups of tea, as a change from coffee, they made a meal that caused them all to feel better.

Jack could hardly start early enough the next morning, but the others insisted that he take time to eat a good breakfast. They were on the move again, almost before the sun had begun to tinge the mountain with the morning glow, and they found the trail an easy one for several miles.

It dipped down a bit, after one high shoulder of the range was passed, and then began a straight ascent up to where they could see the peak they knew must be the Golden Glow, though it did not shine then. They camped at noon, and hurried on after a brief rest.

Up and up they went until the shadows began to lengthen and they knew evening was approaching. Above their heads towered the high peak,

and, as they rounded a turn they saw the top of the mountain suddenly seem to burst into flame above their head. The sun had again caught the mass of quartz and was reflecting from it.

Now the trail turned. They had reached the highest point in the range where it was almost impossible to go further with horses. Jack, who was in the lead, pulled up his animal. Then, as he looked down he gave a cry.

"There!" he exclaimed. "There is the stone Mr. Tevis told us about!"

"Yes, and there is the cross carved upon it!" cried Nat.

"Where is the tall pine tree?" asked John.

"There!" came from Jack, and he pointed down the slope ahead of them. "It is just in line with that other peak!"

The two boys looked to where he pointed. Sure enough, they saw the landmark Orion Tevis had mentioned.

"To-morrow I may see my father!" said Jack in a low tone.

Hardly had he spoken the words when there was a noise behind them, and the boys turned to see two horsemen riding up.

At first the chums did not attach much significance to the appearance of the two riders. The men were coming on as fast as their horses could travel, but the boys thought they were ranchmen or herdsmen.

"The two first ones! They're the ones we want!" exclaimed the foremost of the men, and at that Nat and Jack, who were in front of John, started. "Grab one Nate, and I'll tackle the other!"

Before Nat and Jack could make a move to defend themselves they found a rope circling their arms just above their elbows. The men had cast their lariats and pinioned the boys. The resulting jerk nearly pulled them from their horses, but when the men saw this, they urged their steeds close to their captives, and held them in their saddle, while they deftly bound their hands.

There was a clatter of hoofs at which Jack and Nat turned their heads. If they expected to see some one coming to rescue them they were disappointed, for all they beheld was John, swinging his horse around on the trail and making off at top speed.

"Come back!" yelled one of the men, making a move as if to reach for his gun, but at this Jack wiggled so he had to give all his attention to the captive youth.

"I'll come back—" yelled John, and the rest of what he said was lost in the clatter his horse made as it sprang over stones. Then John disappeared around a big ledge of rock.

"Never mind," said one of the men, whom his companion had addressed as Nate. "We don't need him."

"Guess not, Sid," was the reply. "We've got the main ones. He don't count."

"What do you mean by this?" burst out Nat, who, as was Jack, had been so surprised by the sudden turn of events that he did not know what to say. "Who are you, anyhow?"

"Now, don't get excited, sonny," spoke Nate. "This is a high altitude, remember, and you might bust a blood vessel. That would be too bad."

"Yes, the fewer questions you ask the better off you'll be," put in Sid.

"If my uncle hears of this you'll suffer for it," Nat went on. He thought the men might be cowboys out for a lark.

"Don't worry, your uncle will never hear of it," Nate replied. "Now I guess we'll travel."

There was nothing to do but to obey. The boys were fairly tied on their horses, so quickly and so deftly had the men used their ropes.

"Did you get the rings?" asked Nate of his companion.

"Almost forgot it," replied Sid. "I'll do it now."

Before Jack was aware what the man was up to he had grabbed from his finger the curious moss agate emblem.

"Here's one," exclaimed Sid. "Now for the other."

He looked at both of Nat's hands.

"Where's your ring?" he demanded.

"Never had one," said Nat defiantly.

"No fooling now, give it up or you'll be sorry."

"I tell you I haven't got any," Nat replied impatiently. "You're up the wrong tree."

"Give me that ring or I'll—" began Sid, when his companion broke in with:

"Never mind now. It's getting late and we don't want to be caught out here at night. Bring him along. I guess we'll find a way to make him talk."

Then, having seen that their captives were securely bound, the men attached long ropes to the bridles of the boys' horses, and led the animals back down the trail.

The two men were some distance in advance, and, as the boys rode side by side, they had a chance to converse in low tones without being overheard by their captors.

"Are they brigands, like you read about?" asked Nat.

"Not much," replied Jack. "I think they are the same men who chased poor old Mr. Lantry, and shot him. I'm sure they are some of the bad men who tried to get my father, or else how would they know about the rings?"

"They didn't get one from me," spoke Nat. "They must have made a mistake and got me instead of John. I say, Jack, you don't s'pose he's in with the gang, do you?"

"What do you mean?"

"He didn't lead us into a trap, did he? Bought off by the enemy, you know. He's part Indian, and you never can trust an Indian. Maybe these men hired him to fetch us this way. You know he acted sort of queer, lately."

"Never!" said Jack, in as loud a whisper as he dared use without being overheard. "I'd trust John Smith with my life, Indian or no Indian. He's not in this game."

"Then what made him run away and leave us?" asked Nat. "I don't call that sticking by your friends."

"Maybe he went for help," suggested Nat.

"I'll believe that when we see the help," Nat responded, in no gentle tones. "It looks queer."

In fact the whole proceeding was a mystery to both boys. They could not imagine what the men would want to hold them captives for. Only Jack had an inkling. He believed the men were members of the band that had tried so long to get his father so they might play a trick on Mr. Tevis and gain the land. He believed they had been on his

trail and that of his companions for some time, and had seized the first opportunity of capturing them. The seizure of his ring showed that, though he could not understand how they had mistaken Nat for John. However, that was natural, seeing the three boys were alike in general appearance, and Nat was almost as brown as John, from exposure to the sun.

Down the trail for some miles the men led their captives and then they turned and ascended another way. The boys' hands and legs were beginning to get numb from the pressure of the thongs, and they were very tired. It was getting quite dark, but still they were led on. Suddenly, from the gathering darkness, there sounded a challenge:

"Who's there?"

CHAPTER XXXII

THE ESCAPE

"Two kings," was the answer from one of the men.

"What kings?" was the query.

"King Nate and King Sid," replied the first named, "and they have two loyal subjects with them."

"Let the kings and their subjects proceed," the unseen voice went on, and a moment later the boys found themselves in front of a sort of cave in the mountain side, from the depths of which a fire glowed, disclosing the figures and shadows of several men.

"Had luck, eh?" asked some one, and Nate replied with a grunt, at the same time asking if "grub" was ready.

"Of course it is," one of those grouped about the fire replied. "But you might tell us how you made out."

"Couldn't be better," replied Sid. "We got the two boys and one of the rings. We don't need two. I guess I can fix up a duplicate that will fool Tevis."

"What you going to do with the kids?" another man inquired. "They're going to be a nuisance."

"No, they won't," Sid answered. "We'll keep 'em here until we get what we want, and then we'll turn 'em loose. I'm not going to harm

'em."

By this time several men had surrounded the captives. Jack and Nat could see that the cave was a large one, extending back some distance under the mountain. Far back was another fire, about which were one or two men. It looked like the mountain cavern of a band of brigands.

"Take 'em inside," Sid ordered one of those in the group about Nat and Jack. "Take care of their horses and whatever they have about them. Then give 'em a bit of grub. I reckon they're hungry."

The boys were grateful for the relief they experienced as their bonds were loosened and they were allowed to dismount from their horses. They were so stiff they could hardly walk and the men helped them, roughly, along over the rock-strewn entrance to the cavern. The boys were led inside the cave, and then, their guide turning sharply, conducted them into a sort of gallery branching off from the main one. There the lads found some animal skins on the floor, and were glad enough to lie down.

Hung about the cave were several lanterns, and by the light of them the two lads could see they were in the power of a gang of rough men. There were a half dozen of the fellows and when the boys had stretched out on the skins in a corner, they gathered near the entrance to the inner cave for a conference. The boys could not hear what their captors were talking about, but that it concerned them seemed certain, as the men glanced frequently in the direction of the prisoners.

"They must be planning something desperate," said Jack in a low tone. "Probably they're going to hurry to Orion Tevis and make trouble for him."

"Do you think they'll hurt us?" asked Nat.

"I don't believe so," Jack replied. "I think they want to keep us here until they can get at Mr. Tevis. Guess they'll have their own troubles though, finding him."

Further conversation was interrupted by the approach of a man with some cold meat and chunks of bread. He also had a tin pail of water and two cups, and, though the meal was anything but a good one, Nat and Jack made the best of it, for they were hungry, and, though they were worried, they did not let it interfere with their appetites.

If they had any hope of escaping that night they must have been disappointed as one of the gang was constantly on the watch, and the boys knew it would be useless to try to leave the cave.

"I wonder where John is," said Nat, just before he fell asleep. "Why

did he desert us?"

"He hasn't deserted us," said Jack, speaking with conviction. "I'll bet he's gone for help."

"Looked as if he was running away," remarked Nat, who had not lost the sudden distrust he felt on the Indian's part.

In spite of their plight the boys slept well, and when morning came they were given some boiled eggs, bread and coffee, a meal, which, as Jack remarked, would have been a credit to a city hotel, to say nothing of a cave in the mountains. It made little difference, the boys thought, that the eggs were of some wild bird, and not of the domestic hen.

After breakfast the man who had been addressed as Sid came to where the captives were, in the smaller cave.

"If you boys will promise not to try to escape," he said, "I'll let you out for a breath of fresh air."

"You mean not try to escape at all?" asked Jack.

"That's what," Sid replied.

"Then we'll stay here," announced Jack.

"We're going to get away just as soon as possible, and the longer you keep us here the worse it will be for you."

"My, but you have a quick temper," remarked Sid, not unkindly. "Well, I think I'll take a chance. You'll get sick if we keep you cooped up, and that isn't what we want. You can go out, but I warn you the first time you try to make a break for liberty you may get shot. Some of the men are pretty quick with a gun."

"We'll go out, but we don't promise," Jack replied, as following Sid, he and Nat left the cave.

Once outside the boys found there was little chance of getting away. There were half a dozen men about, all armed, and the camp was surrounded by a natural wall of high rock, which to any one crawling over presented difficulties that would delay him long enough to permit of capture. The entrance to the camp was guarded by a man with a rifle.

But, what astonished the boys more than the appearance of the stronghold, was the work at which the men were engaged. This seemed to be mining, but of a kind the boys had heard very little about,

though it is more or less common in the west.

A man was directing a stream of water, from a big pipe against the side of a gravelly bank, and the dirt and fluid that washed down ran into a big sluiceway. This was formed of boards, there being a bottom and two sides. The top was open, but was braced with numerous cross pieces. The sluiceway was about four feet wide and three feet deep, and there was a great quantity of water flowing through it.

Part of the sluiceway was wider and more shallow, and this part had,

nailed across the bottom, narrow strips of wood, in the shape of cleats. They were placed to catch the heavier dirt, containing the gold, as it flowed down in the water.

As the boys watched the stream was turned off, and men took from the cleats quantities of mingled muck and gravel, which they proceeded to "wash" to extract the gold.

The boys were so interested in this that they forgot the plight they were in, and, almost, their desire to escape. They looked at the miners with their pans, as the men swirled them around to cause the water and dirt to flow over the edge and the gold to remain. "Is it goin' to pay?" Jack heard one miner ask of another of the gang.

"Don't look so," was the reply. "Yet they say there's a fortune locked up in that hill. An old hermit showed Sid the place, but it's been most a year since we repaired this old sluiceway which was here before we came and begun washing, and not more than enough to pay expenses have we had out of it. I'm gettin' tired."

"Maybe there's better luck ahead."

"How do you mean?"

"Why in the capture of these kids. Didn't you hear Sid tell? He expects to get a hold on a fellow named Tevis now and maybe some rich timber lands that he's been after for ten years or more. There's a fellow named Ranger or Roberts mixed up in it, but Sid has never been able to land him, though he tried hard enough. Some of the boys nearly got Roberts' partner here not long ago, but he got away, though he was shot. Then Sid and Nate got on the trail of the boys, and here—"

"Shut up!" exclaimed the other miner, as he noticed Jack and Nat taking in what his companion was saying. "They're too close now."

At that the miners went on with their "washing" operations, and the two boys, pondering over what they had heard, walked away.

"What do you think of that?" asked Nat, in a low voice.

"Just as I expected," Jack rejoined. "I hope John brings us help in time to warn Mr. Tevis and help rescue my father. Maybe we could have a whack at this gold mine then."

The boys were allowed to wander about the camp at will, but they noticed the men kept close watch over them. They were much interested in the sluiceway, and went to where they could see it stretching for a long distance down the mountain side.

"Quite a piece of work," observed one of the men, a short, stocky, rather jolly looking individual, who seemed out of place in a gang of ruffians. "It runs for five miles," he went on, "all the way down to a big gulch they say, though I've never been to the end of it. It was built a long while ago, but we changed it a bit, and only use the upper end. We get our water from a little lake on the top of the mountain, and only the overflow goes down the sluiceway. Still that's enough," and he looked at the solid stream, flowing swiftly but silently between the heavy planks.

"It would make a good shoot-the-chutes," observed Nat.

"Rather risky," observed the miner. "You couldn't stop until you got to the end of it and it's a long ride. Have to look out for the cross pieces, too."

A sudden light seemed to come into Jack's eyes as he turned away. He motioned to Nat to follow him, and, when they were out of earshot he whispered:

"That's how we can escape."

"How?" asked Nat in an excited whisper.

"Wait," answered Jack, "Here comes Sid."

"Haven't got away yet, eh?" the man asked with a sneer.

"Not yet," was all Jack answered.

That night, as he tossed restlessly on the pile of skins in the cave, Jack thought over a plan of getting away. It seemed practical enough, if he could only elude the vigilance of the men. But there was the

hard part. He got up softly about midnight to see if he could sneak from the cave. No one was in sight. He called Nat and both crawled out into the open.

"Now we're free!" whispered Jack. "Come on, Nat."

"Where?"

"Down the sluiceway. I know where there are two big planks."

Leading the way, and keeping in the shadows as much as possible, Jack went to where two planks, each about seven feet long, lay near the boarded race.

"We'll float down the sluiceway to freedom!" he cried, as he placed the plank on the edge of the flume. Nat did likewise, and, when Jack climbed over into the big oblong box, his companion followed. They had entered the sluiceway at a place where there was scarcely any current. Then they moved forward, crouching to avoid the cross pieces.

"Here we go!" whispered Jack, throwing himself on the plank, an example which Nat followed. The next instant the two boys were being whirled down the sluiceway on top of the water at a swift pace. And, as they shot ahead they, heard a voice calling:

"The kids have got away!"

CHAPTER XXXIII

DOWN THE SLUICEWAY

Almost with the speed of an arrow from the bow the two boys flew forward on the swiftly-moving water in the sluiceway. The planks were submerged only a few inches, so great was the force of the current, and Jack and Nat, crouching on them as a boy goes sliding down hill on his sled, with his head between the points of the runners, felt themselves propelled forward with an irresistible power.

At first it was so dark in the big box they could see nothing. Then, as their eyes grew accustomed to the gloom, they could note the sides of the flume slipping past them. A glance over their heads showed them the stars, and there was a confused blurr of the many cross-pieces.

"Are you all right, Nat?" called Jack.

"Sure," was the reply. "Say, it took my breath away at first, but it's all right now. This is going some!"

Faster and faster the boys were whirled along. The water was beginning to chill them now, and they were wet through. Once or twice a sudden change in the direction of the sluiceway nearly brought them to grief, and on one occasion Nat slipped off his plank. It was floating away from him, but his cry warned Jack, who managed to stop it, while Nat struggled forward, stooping to avoid the braces, and secured it again.

This occurred in a comparatively level place, where the current, after a quick descent, was not so rapid, otherwise there might have been a different ending to this story. For a mile farther the two boys floated along at an easy pace.

"I guess we've left 'em behind," Nat observed. He was riding his plank alongside of Jack now, as the flume was broad enough to permit this.

"Yes, but they're not going to give up so easily," Jack rejoined. "There's too much at stake. They'll chase us, but it's another thing to catch us. Hark! What's that?"

From down below in the moonlit valley, into which the flume dipped there came a roaring sound. It was like a mighty wind blowing, and, as the boys were carried on and on, it increased in intensity.

"Sounds like a waterfall," observed Nat.

"So it does. I hope this flume doesn't do any stunts like that. We'll be dashed to pieces."

"Maybe we'd better stop now, and get out," said Nat. "I wonder where we are?"

"Haven't the least idea. We must have come about three miles though. Let's see if we can stop ourselves,"

Owing to the fact that the cross-pieces were above and close to their heads, the boys could not peer over the edge of the flume. The water filled it to within a foot and a half of the edge, and they had to keep their heads well down.

"Try and grab a cross-piece," said Jack. The sticks were about six feet apart.

Nat cautiously raised his hand. His fingers brushed under the sides of several braces, but he had to move his arm up very slowly as a sudden contact with them would have broken his wrist. Jack was doing the same thing.

The roar was growing louder now, and the water could be heard tumbling and crashing down.

"The flume must be broken just below here!" cried Jack. "We must stop or we'll be killed!"

He made a desperate effort to grasp a brace. He got his fingers on one. Then came a sudden rush of water, caused by a sharp decline in the level of the sluiceway, and Jack was torn from the cross-piece. At the same time his plank was swept from under him, and he was buried in an overwhelming rush of water. Over and over he was rolled along the bottom of the flume. Then he was tossed to the surface. For an instant he had a glimpse of Nat also struggling in the murky flood, on which the moon shone brilliantly.

[Illustration: JACK WAS SHOT FORWARD AS THOUGH FROM A CATAPULT.]

The next instant Jack was shot forward as though from a catapult, feet foremost, and, as he fought and struggled to get his breath, he saw that he was in the midst of a giant waterspout, as it leaped from the end of the broken flume and plunged, like a stream from an immense hose, into a swirling pool which the freed sluice water had dug in the soft soil.

Forward and down went Jack, and, though it seemed like an hour while he was being shot out with the water as it spurted from where the flume was raised on a high trestle, it was only a second or two before he was plunged into the pool.

As he sank down and down the lad was aware of a splash close beside him, and he dimly thought it must be Nat. And so it proved. Nat, also, had been spouted from the flume into the pool, and, when Jack, after a fierce fight with the bubbling water came to the surface and began swimming, he saw Nat bob up a moment later. Both boys worked to get away from the plunging stream.

"Are-you-hurt?" asked Jack, pantingly.

"No-are-you?" inquired Nat.

"Nope! Wonder-what-sort of-a place-this-is."

"Kind-of-wet," remarked Nat, and, in spite of his peril Jack could not help smiling.

When the water had cleared from their eyes the boys saw they were in the midst of a miniature lake. It was formed of the water that escaped from the broken pool, and had filled a big hole, a sort of basin on a ledge of the mountain. They struck out for the nearest shore, reaching it after some little difficulty, for their wet clothing hampered them.

Reaching the bank they crawled out, for the little lake shoaled rapidly, and shook themselves like big dogs to get rid of what water they could. Then they turned to gaze at the curious scene.

Before them was quite a large sheet of water. Right to the edge of it came the flume trestle, and it could be seen, in the moonlight, where it had broken off. Beyond the lake, on the other side, the sluiceway continued on, but there was a gap of several hundred feet.

"Looks as though there was less water coming down," said Nat, as he began taking off his outer clothing to wring it out.

"That's so," agreed Jack.

As they stood looking at the spurting water it was perceptibly diminishing. The volume was greatly decreased from that which had shot them into the lake. Rapidly it grew less until it stopped altogether.

"What made that, I wonder," came from Nat.

"They probably shut it off at the mine," Jack replied. "They think they can strand us in the flume. Lucky they didn't try it sooner."

This, as the boys learned later, was what had been done. When the news of their escape was known several of the gang started in pursuit. They kept it up for awhile, until some one suggested shutting off the flow of the stream by means of a gate in the sluiceway.

"Well, now we're here, what's to be done?" asked Nat.

"Get rid of some of this water," suggested Jack, "and then see if we can't find a place to stay until morning."

The boys wrung as much of the fluid as possible from their clothes, and then, donning the damp garments, looked to see in which direction it would be best to travel. As Jack was looking about for some sign of a trail, he gave a cry of astonishment.

"See!" he exclaimed. "There is Golden Glow!"

There, back in the direction of the flume, towered a high peak. As the moonbeams rested on it they were reflected back from the shining top, just as the sun rays had been, only in a less degree.

"This must be the valley where my father has his cabin," he said. "It is in line with the mountain, and, I remember it was in this direction we were looking when the men captured us. Oh Nat! Perhaps I shall soon find him. Come on. Mr. Tevis said it was at the end of the valley. I am going to find him! Hurry, Nat!"

But Nat needed no urging. He followed close after Jack, who was moving around the edge of the lake, to reach the other part of the broken flume. There was no path, but the way was comparatively smooth.

As the boys passed under the sluiceway trestle Jack exclaimed:

"See, here is a sort of path, and it leads right up the valley. We are on the right road."

"Be careful," cautioned Nat. "Remember what Mr. Tevis said about men shooting first and inquiring afterward in this country."

"I am going to find my father," was Jack's answer, as he hurried on.

The boys forgot their wet clothes. They forgot their recent peril, and their escape from the bad men. They thought of nothing but what might be before them. They had traveled about two hours. The valley was growing darker as the moon was sinking lower and lower behind the cliffs. All at once Jack, who was in the lead, stopped. He pointed ahead to a dark shadow.

"See; there is a cabin," he whispered.

CHAPTER XXXIV

JACK'S GREAT FIND

For a moment the boys stood still, contemplating the small log building, which was now but dimly visible. All was silent about it. There was no sign of life. Was it occupied? Was Jack's father there?

These were questions that flashed through the mind of the two lads as they stood there in the darkness. Then Jack, with a long-drawn breath, that showed how great was the strain on him, whispered:

"Let's see if any one is there."

Cautiously they moved forward, stopping every now and then to listen. But no sound came to them. The cabin remained as dark and as silent as when they first saw it. Foot by foot they moved nearer, until Jack was so close he could put out his hand and touch the door. He knocked loudly, and the echo sounded almost like thunder in the quiet night-enshrouded valley.

But no answer came, though the boys waited several minutes. Then Jack pushed on the door. It opened, with a squeaking of hinges that must have alarmed any occupant, unless deaf. No challenge came, and the two lads stepped inside.

"Look out where you're going," said Nat. "Hold your hands in front of you, and feel with your feet. You may tumble down a hole."

Jack did as directed, and, a moment later, his outstretched hand knocked over something that fell with a crash to the floor.

"What's that?" exclaimed Nat, in a startled whisper.

"Candlestick and candle," replied Jack, as he stooped down and picked up what he had knocked down. "Matches too," he added, as he found them scattered over the floor.

An instant later he had struck a light, and in the gleam of the tallow dip the boys saw they were inside a comfortably furnished cabin. It consisted of two rooms, one a sort of kitchen and general sitting apartment, and the other a bedroom, with two bunks against the wall. There was a rough table, a few chairs and a fireplace. Cooking utensils scattered about, and the appearance of the bunk room, showed it had been lately occupied.

"I wonder if my father could have lived here," Jack remarked. "Where can he have gone to? Perhaps he is dead."

"Must have been some one here recently," said Nat. "That food looks fresh."

He pointed to some roast beef on the table, and to some slices of bread.

"It looks good enough to eat," Jack said, "and I'm going to tackle it, for I'm as hungry as a bear, and cold, too," for the ducking was beginning to tell on him.

The boys made a rude but satisfactory meal, and, building a fire on the hearth, with some dry wood in the cabin, they made their clothing more comfortable. They had just donned their dry garments, when Jack,

looking from the door of the shack, said:

"Hello, it's almost morning. The sun is beginning to rise." There was a faint light in the east, over the tops of the mountains.

"Yes, and some one is coming up the valley," remarked Nat, as he peered over Jack's shoulder.

The two boys saw, walking slowly along the trail that led to the cabin, the dim figure of a man. Over his shoulder he carried a gun, and, as he approached, he stopped every few feet to listen, the while regarding the cabin intently. It was growing lighter every minute, and the boys could see him quite well.

Suddenly, when the man was within a hundred yards of the shack, he dropped to one knee, and leveled the gun straight at the opened cabin door:

"Who's there?" he cried. "Speak or I'll fire!"

Jack, who was in the center of the portal, uttered an exclamation. He caught his breath sharply. Then, as the sun, mounting nearer the mountain tops, threw more light into the valley, showing clearly the figure of the crouching man, Jack cried:

"Father! Father! It's me! It's your son Jack!"

He was about to rush toward the figure, which he recognized from his aunts' description as that of his parent, when the voice of the man halted him:

"If you come a step nearer I'll fire!" the kneeling one exclaimed. "I've been fooled too often to have any tricks played on me now. I know you. You are members of the gang that has been hounding me so many years. But my time is almost up. Stand back or I'll fire!"

"Father! Father!" cried Jack. "Your time is up now. I have come to take you back with me!"

"Who is this, who says he is my son?" the man asked, his rifle trembling. "My son is thousands of miles away from here. You can't deceive me again."

"But I am your son! Your Jack!" the boy cried, hardly knowing what to do. "See I have the ring—"

Then he stopped, for he remembered that his ring had been stolen from him.

"What is that about a ring?" asked the kneeling man.

With a quick motion Jack pulled from his pocket the golden lizard with the ruby eyes which Mr. Tevis had given him. He threw it toward his father, and it fell near the man.

"What is that?" the latter asked.

"Look at it," exclaimed Jack. "It will prove who I am. It is from Mr. Tevis. See, don't you recognize me?"

The old man, still keeping his eyes fixed on the cabin, and his gun in readiness, rose to his feet and, going forward, picked up the golden charm. As he caught sight of it he uttered a cry.

At the same time Jack, who had been standing in the shadow of the door, stepped into the morning light. The man, with a sudden motion, threw aside his gun. He ran toward Jack, who sprang forward to meet him. The next moment father and son were locked in each other's arms.

"Jack! Jack!" exclaimed Mr. Ranger. "I was afraid I would never see you again."

"I'm so glad I've found you at last, father," murmured the boy, while his eyes filled with tears. Nat suddenly developed a bad cold, and had to blow his nose so violently that Mr. Ranger's attention was attracted to him.

"Who's there?" he asked, in startled tones.

"It's only Nat," Jack said. "Come Nat, and see my father. He's the best prize exhibit I ever had."

There was such an interchange of talk among the three a moment later that the best stenographer would have found himself at a disadvantage in taking it down. Jack and Nat told as much as possible of their trip from the time they started until they escaped by the sluiceway, and Mr. Ranger told how he had been watching in vain all night at the end of the trail for the return of old Mr. Lantry. He had done so for the last few nights, he said, as he was afraid to go far away in the daytime.

He was much surprised to learn of his partner being pursued by the bad men, and startled to hear that the scoundrels were so near his hiding place. He said he had been much startled, on his return from his night vigil, to see lights inside his cabin.

"But now you must come home with me," said Jack, when there came a lull in the talk. "The time limit has nearly expired and you will be

safe back in civilization.”

”Yes, I guess my long exile has ended,” said Mr. Ranger. ”At any rate I must leave here. The rascals may find me at any moment, when they come down after you.”

Jack agreed with his father it would be best to leave the locality. Mr. Ranger said he could depart from the valley by a little-used trail, and come out on the one that led to the ranch of Nat’s uncle. It would be slow going, without horses, he said, but they decided to try it.

Accordingly they began to pack up what few belongings Mr. Ranger wanted to take away with him. There was a simple camping outfit in the cabin, and plenty of food, so they would not suffer hunger on their way.

”I have but a little of the heart-medicine left,” said Mr. Ranger. ”I got two or three bad spells the last few days, and had to take considerable of it. But perhaps I will be all right until we get to a town, if we go slowly.”

At last all was in readiness for the start. Each one bore a small pack, and Mr. Ranger had his rifle. Jack insisted that his father take the lightest of the camp stuff, while he and Nat shouldered the most of it and the food.

With a last look at the cabin, that had sheltered him for the last few years, Mr. Ranger turned to go. Then he exclaimed:

”I almost forgot my bag of gold.”

”Your bag of gold?” asked Jack.

”Yes, it is all I have to show for my stay here. I have managed to live, and that is all. My partner and I got a little gold from the washings that came down the flume, but we had to spend most of it to live. I have only a few ounces left.”

He was about to go back into the cabin when a cry from Nat warned him:

”Some one is coming!” the boy explained.

The next instant a group of horsemen swept forward around a turn in the trail, straight for the cabin!

”Here come the bad men!” yelled Jack. ”Come on father!”

CHAPTER XXXV

THE ROUND-UP-CONCLUSION

Mr. Ranger ran back to join his son. At the same time Nat and Jack sprang forward, and together the three raced down the valley. With loud shouts the horsemen pursued them.

"Here they are!" some of the riders exclaimed. "We'll get the boys and the old man, too! Come on!"

For a little while the three fugitives, from the start they had, and from the rough nature of the ground, which precluded speed on the part of the horses, kept in the lead. They had just made a turn in the trail, which, for a moment hid the horsemen from sight, when Mr. Ranger exclaimed:

"I can go no farther, Jack. My heart! Oh, my heart!"

He sank down, staggering under the weight of his rifle.

"Quick!" cried Nat. "Get behind this big rock! Maybe we can hold 'em off!"

The two boys half carried Mr. Ranger around to the rear of an immense boulder that bordered the trail. Then Jack ran hack and caught up the rifle. He had just time enough to spring hack of the rock when the riders swept fully into view. Jack leveled the rifle over the top of the big stone and cried:

"Don't come any nearer or I'll shoot!"

The riders pulled up in confusion.

"Go ahead!" cried those in the rear,

"He's got the drop on us!" exclaimed those in front.

Jack held the rifle steady. For several seconds there was an intense strain. Mr. Ranger was resting his head on Nat's knee, panting for breath.

"You'll find some medicine in my pocket," he gasped, and Nat, searching where the sick man indicated, found a small bottle of white pills. He gave Mr. Ranger one, and, in a few seconds the color came back to the sufferer's pale face.

Now there was a movement among the horsemen. Some of them rode back

on the trail, while others dismounted and went to the left and right.

"They're going to surround us," Jack thought. "I guess it's all up with us!"

He kept close watch of the men he could see. Those directly in front of him remained on their horses.

Suddenly there sounded a confused shouting from back on the trail. Dimly Jack tried to recall where he had heard those voices before. He glanced along the rifle barrel which was trembling like a leaf in the wind.

Then there came a fusillade of shots, mingling with the shouts. The approaching horsemen seemed thrown into confusion. One or two of the steeds went down in heaps, throwing their riders. The shooting and yelling continued.

All at once there galloped into view a band of cowboys. At their head rode John Smith and Nat's uncle. Both were firing their revolvers as fast as they could.

"Hurrah!" cried Nat. "We're saved!"

"Just in time!" muttered Jack, as, weak and shaking, he dropped the rifle and sprang to his father's side.

There was a short, sharp struggle between the armed force from the ranch and the bad men. Some of the scoundrels got away, but the majority were rounded up. In the melee some were hurt.

"Are you all right?" asked John, as dust-covered and powder-begrimed he sprang to clasp his chums by the hands.

"Thanks to you, yes," said Nat heartily, and he was ashamed of the brief suspicion with which he had regarded the Indian. "How did you do it?"

"As soon as I saw you captured, I knew I could do more good free than a prisoner with you," John said. "I made the best time I could to the ranch, and I guess all the cowboys who could be spared came back as fast as their horses could carry them. We easily traced the gang to here, and,—well you saw the rest."

The cowboys, even Cactus Ike, who had played the horse trick on Jack, were busy binding their prisoners on their horses. Mr. Kent was so excited he did not know what to do. He insisted on shaking hands with Jack, Nat, John and Mr. Ranger every other minute. As for Jack's father, he soon felt better because of the medicine, and when the securing of the prisoners was completed, he found he was able to

mount a spare horse and proceed.

It was decided to take an easy trail, some of the cowboys knew of, back to a place near where the boys had been held captive, and about noon the cavalcade reached the cave near the mine, from which the lads had escaped.

But a great change had taken place. The breaking of the flume, and the shutting off of the water had backed up the stream, which had been allowed to run all night, and in consequence, the whole surface of the hill, against which the hydraulic operations had been directed, was washed away.

It was difficult to get the horses past it, for there was a big hole. As Mr. Ranger was passing the spot where the band had so lately been at work, he looked at the ground, and uttered a sudden exclamation. Then he jumped from his horse and began digging in the dirt.

"What is it?" asked Jack in some alarm.

"Gold! Gold! Gold!" cried Mr. Ranger. "See it sparkle! Here is a mine of wonderful wealth! The water uncovered it, or they might have worked for years without discovering it. See the gold!"

In another instant the cowboys were off their horses examining the find. Mr. Kent looked at it critically.

"Well, this is luck!" he said. "It's an ill wind that blows nobody good!"

There was a hurried consultation, which resulted in some of the men being left on guard, while the others proceeded to the ranch with the prisoners, the boys and Mr. Ranger.

There were three days making the trip, owing to the fact that Mr. Ranger had to ride slowly. As he descended from the higher altitudes, however, he got stronger. When the ranch was reached, the physicians who had been attending old Mr. Lantry, prescribed for the former exile, and took charge of him.

The members of the band from one of whom Jack's ring was taken, were sent to jail, under a strong escort, and, eventually were given long terms. As soon as Mr. Kent and his men, including the boys and Mr. Ranger, had proved their claim to the mine, arrangements for working it were made. It turned out even better than it had appeared at the first glance, so that every one interested received a large sum.

As for Jack he could not bear to let his father out of his sight. Mr. Ranger, too, wanted to be with his son all the while. The return of the exile had such a good effect on Mr. Lantry that he recovered much

sooner than the doctor had expected, having regained his senses from the delirium, the day after Mr. Ranger reached the ranch. The old man was given some shares in the mine, enough to keep him comfortably.

Then it was that the boys really began to enjoy life. The long sunny days on the plains, riding here and there, soon restored Mr. Ranger to ruddy health, and the physician pronounced him almost cured of his heart ailment.

The boys spent happy hours on the ranch, entering into friendly contests in everything from roping a steer to saddling a frisky horse. The cowboys could not show them enough attention, and Cactus Ike even apologized to Jack for the trick he played on him. Jack forgave him, and said it had probably learned him more about a horse in ten minutes than he could otherwise have picked up in a week.

It was some time after this, when, as they were all seated on the porch, one warm evening, that Jack remarked:

"Well, we'll have to be getting back east, soon."

"How good that sounds," said Mr. Ranger. "I was afraid I might never see the east again. Yes, we must go back soon. I am anxious to see my sisters."

"Sorry to have you go," said Mr. Kent. "There's no place like the west."

"Perhaps not, for a young man," Mr. Ranger admitted, "but I'm getting old."

"I wonder if we'll ever again have adventures like those we experienced out here," said Nat "Lannigan's lassoes! But we certainly had some sport!"

"Maybe not the same kind, but I s'pose they'll be just as exciting," Jack remarked. "We seem to run into 'em."

The boys did have more adventures, and, what they were will be related in the next volume of this series, to be called, "Jack Ranger's School Victories; Or, Track, Gridiron and Diamond."

A week later Jack, his father, Nat and John started east. They stopped on the way to see Mr. Tevis, who expressed his delight that Mr. Ranger's period of exile was over, that the bad men had been put where they could do no more harm, and that the unexpectedly discovered mine had panned out so well.

"You are to be congratulated on having such a son as Jack," said Mr. Tevis to Mr. Ranger.

"If it hadn't been for John and Nat I guess I wouldn't have had much success," Jack remarked.

"Now that I look at it, I cannot understand how those men had such an influence on me," said Mr. Ranger, thoughtfully.

"I'll tell you what I believe," answered Jack. "One of them was something of a hypnotist. He tried his game on me when I was at the cave."

"It may be that you are right, my son. It is true that I was afraid of them—and just why I cannot tell," returned Mr. Ranger. "But that is a thing of the past now," he added, with satisfaction.

"And now for home!" cried Nat, the next day. "Won't we have lots to tell when we get there!"

"I'll be glad to see Washington Hall again," said John.

"Yes, indeed!" answered Jack. "But I'm going home to Denton first, and you must come along, John."

"Very well, I will," said the semi-Indian youth.

Twelve hours later the happy party was on its way to the nearest railroad station. And here, bound for home, we will leave them.