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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE RAMBLER
CLUB'S GOLD MINE ***

The Rambler Club's Gold Mine

BY W. CRISPIN SHEPPARD

AUTHOR OF

"THE RAMBLER CLUB AFLOAT"

"THE RAMBLER CLUB'S WINTER CAMP"

"THE RAMBLER CLUB IN THE MOUNTAINS"

"THE RAMBLER CLUB ON CIRCLE T RANCH"

"THE RAMBLER CLUB AMONG THE LUMBERJACKS"

"THE RAMBLER CLUB'S AEROPLANE"

"THE RAMBLER CLUB'S HOUSEBOAT"

Illustrated by the Author

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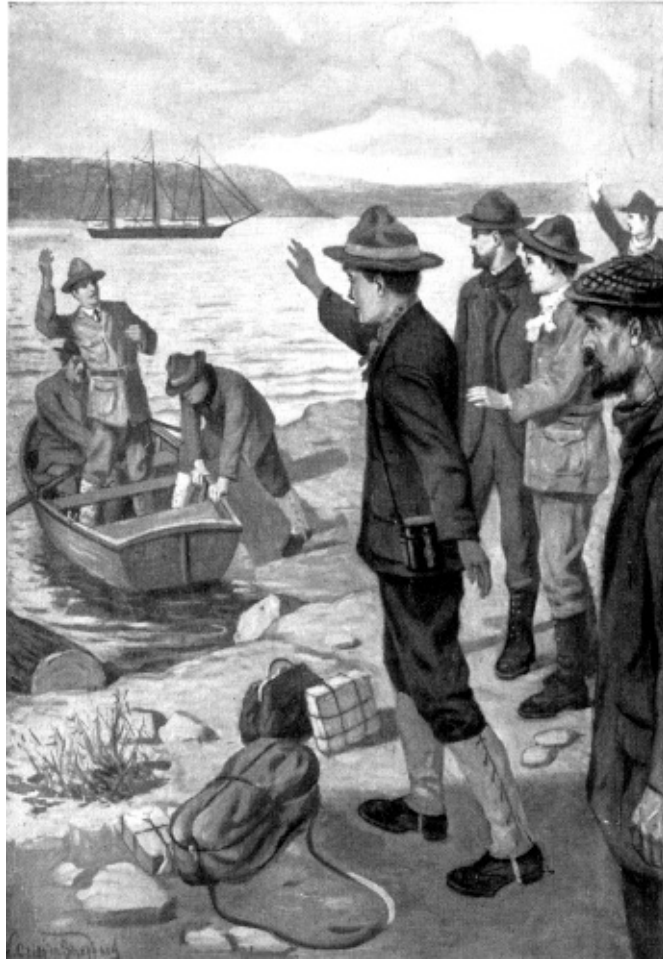
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PUBLISHING

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The Rambler Club's Gold Mine



THERE WAS MUCH WAVING OF HANDS

Introduction

The boys who appear in this story are those who had the adventures related in "The Rambler Club Afloat," "The Rambler Club's Winter Camp," and "The Rambler Club in the Mountains." They are now in the state of Washington, where we meet them just after the close of some lively weeks described in "The Rambler Club Among the Lumberjacks."

During a forest fire the boys have saved the life of Wanatoma, an aged Indian warrior, and he, out of gratitude, has imparted to them a secret long guarded—the location of a rich deposit of gold in the far-off mountains.

The boys determine to set out in search of "The Rambler Club's Gold Mine," as they call it, undaunted by the thought of possible dangers which the wilderness may have in store for them. Life amid the solitudes of nature, with only the sky as a canopy, has taught them the lesson that hardships and discomforts are sure to come, and must be met with a cheerful spirit.

During the journey both men and wild animals put their courage to a severe test. But each set-back arouses within them only a more determined spirit to conquer every difficulty.

In "The Rambler Club's Aeroplane," the next book, is related how the boys learned to use an airship and the many stirring adventures which befall them while navigating the air in Wyoming.

W. CRISPIN SHEPPARD.

Contents

<u>CHAPTER I</u>	THE MAP
<u>CHAPTER II</u>	PETE IS AMUSED
<u>CHAPTER III</u>	ALL ABOARD!
<u>CHAPTER IV</u>	THE "OSPREY"
<u>CHAPTER V</u>	THE OTHER BOAT
<u>CHAPTER VI</u>	CAPTAIN JERE
<u>CHAPTER VII</u>	THE INDIAN
<u>CHAPTER VIII</u>	MIDNIGHT
<u>CHAPTER IX</u>	THE BRONCHOS
<u>CHAPTER X</u>	ON THE TRAIL
<u>CHAPTER XI</u>	THE RUNAWAY
<u>CHAPTER XII</u>	THE LOST PACKHORSE
<u>CHAPTER XIII</u>	THE BIG CAT
<u>CHAPTER XIV</u>	"WHERE IS DICK?"
<u>CHAPTER XV</u>	RISKY BUSINESS
<u>CHAPTER XVI</u>	HIDE-AND-SEEK
<u>CHAPTER XVII</u>	SOME ONE TURNS UP
<u>CHAPTER XVIII</u>	THE WRESTLING MATCH
<u>CHAPTER XIX</u>	BOB LOSES
<u>CHAPTER XX</u>	GOLD CREEK
<u>CHAPTER XXI</u>	ALONG THE CREEK
<u>CHAPTER XXII</u>	CAP TAKES A HAND
<u>CHAPTER XXIII</u>	GOLD!

Illustrations

THERE WAS MUCH WAVING OF HANDS

"IT'S A GOLD MINE THEY'RE AFTER"

ITS LITTLE EYES WERE SNAPPING

HE NIMBLY DODGED

"YE CAN'T STAKE OUT ANY CLAIMS HERE"

The Rambler Club's Gold Mine

CHAPTER I

THE MAP

"Yes, fellows, I guess we're in for a lot more adventures; finding that mine isn't going to be so easy—mountains to climb, swift streams to ford, and—"

"Lots of wild animals between us and the gold, Bob Somers," finished Dick Travers, with a chuckle, as he shied a towel in the direction of stout Dave Brandon, who lay in his bunk, with one leg hanging over the side.

"And whoever imagined that good old Wanatoma, just because he thinks the Ramblers saved his life, would have given us his great secret, so that—"

"Listen to him," chirped little Tom Clifton. "Thinks!—thinks! Why, the Ramblers did save his life; isn't that so, Jacky Conroy?"

He turned toward a tall, athletic-looking boy sitting near the stove.

"No mistake about it, Tommy; that forest fire was almost the end of poor old Wanna. And the way he's acted about this gold mine shows he's made of the right stuff. Still—"

The big lad rose to his feet, began to whistle discordantly, and grinned as five pairs of scornful eyes were leveled toward him.

The boys were on a visit to Tim Lovell's uncle, a lumberman and mill owner whose logging camp was situated on the Columbia River in the state of Washington. At first Jack, who was a city boy, had found that roughing it was not altogether to his liking. There were many discomforts; bugs and other insects, both crawling and flying, seemed to have no manners whatever; and his nice white hands sometimes got sadly begrimed with dirt.

But, gradually, life in the deep forest among the lumberjacks had awakened another spirit within him—a determination to show his chums that he could, if he chose, be just as good a woodsman as they. With this dawning of a new feeling, his dislikes began to vanish—that is, when the weather wasn't rainy or cold and the boys didn't drag him too far away from camp.

The big lad's loud whistling was brought to an abrupt close by a pillow which thudded hard against him.

"Oh, you rude Tim!" he cried; and stout Dave Brandon smiled, as he watched his six friends sending the soft missile from one to another, and kept on smiling even when it collided violently with his head.

"For goodness' sake, Jack, don't have any more doubts," he drawled. "When you do, something nearly always hits me. What do I think? Don't think—I'm trying to sleep." He gave the pillow a mighty shove which sent it in a shapeless mass on the floor, and closed his eyes.

"As we were sayin'," grinned Jack Conroy, when a hearty chorus of groans had subsided, "it was mighty nice of the old Indian to do it; but, honest, I don't like to see you poor chaps goin' around thinkin' you'll be millionaires before the winter's over."

"You can't see us think," chirped Tim Lovell.

"Nor discover it, either—very often," said the big lad, witheringly. "Quit jokin', Timmy. Now, for savin' his life, old Wanna gives the crowd his mine; he's too old an' feeble to bother about it himself, he says. But—" He paused impressively.

"Well?" demanded Tim.

"Who knows whether it's really a gold mine or not? Maybe Wanna is mistaken —"

"Mistaken nothing!" snorted Tim. "Didn't we have the quartz in our hands? Didn't we see the yellow specks shinin' all through it like little stars in a cloudless sky?"

"Oh, my! What book have you been reading now?" asked Bob.

"Do you think that a real, live, bona fide Indian like Wanatoma could be mistaken?" persisted Tim. "You make me tired, Jacky Conroy."

The big lad came back to the attack with an exasperating grin.

"Supposin' there is a mine, are any o' you chaps really silly enough to imagine for eight seconds at a stretch that we can find it by that queer scrawl o' yours, Bob Somers? Looks to me like those Egyptian hiero—hiero—"

"Help him out, somebody—do," sniffed Tim.

"Hieroglyphics," came in sepulchral tones from the bunk.

"Score another for the literary boy," laughed Sam Randall. "Bet he even knows

how to spell it."

"Jack's limit is nine letters," said Tim.

"See here, fellows," broke in Bob Somers, warningly, "we're making too all-fired much racket about this thing. Your voice isn't any gentle whisper, Jack; and if it should ever get noised about the camp that we're going off on a search for a gold mine, why—"

"The noise would become a perfect din of hurrying feet," interrupted Dick Travers. "No joking, Conroy. I don't know how many times you've been howling out loud, just as though you wanted to advertise the whole business."

"I'll bet there wasn't anybody around," growled Jack.

"But a chap can't always tell. And the idea of Conroy being sure about anything! Doesn't that jar you?"

"Something else will, if you keep up that line o' talk much longer."

"Trot out your map, Bob," went on Dick, with an air of scorn. "You may laugh, Jack, but we're crackerjack woodsmen. I know it seems hard to a chap who doesn't understand—"

"Cut it out!" howled Jack. "An' see here, Tommy Clifton, don't giggle like that again—mind now. Bring out your great gold mine map, Bob Somers, an'—"

"For goodness' sake, Jack, put a muffler on that voice," cried Dick, aghast; "curb it! Suppose Pete Colliver should be hanging around—or Ben Vincent—or Booney—or some of the men! Remember what Mr. Lovell told us—keep mum, mum, and mummer."

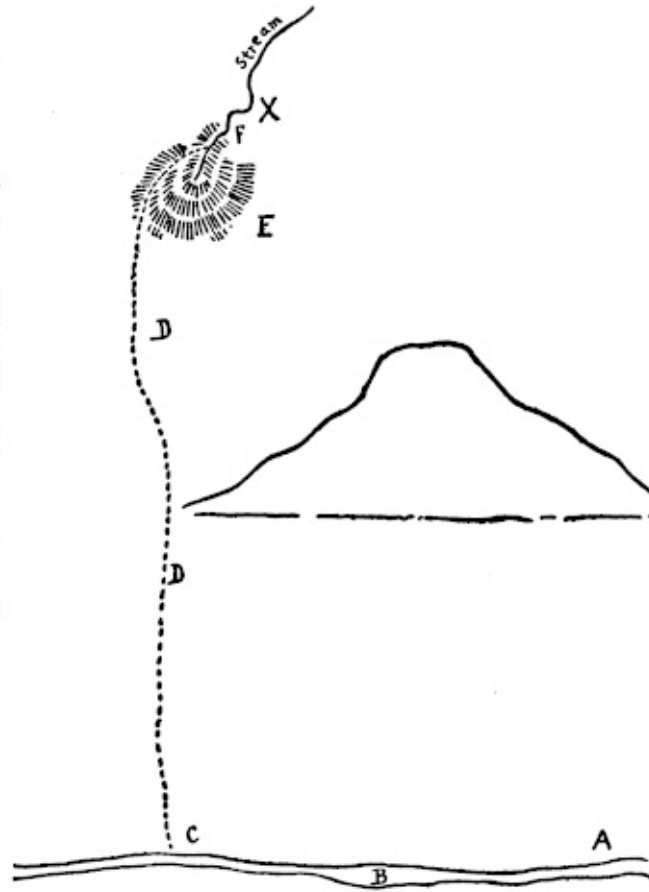
"Let's form the United Society o' Whisperers," scoffed Jack.

"Quit scrapping. Here's the map, fellows," interposed Bob.

He carefully spread out a sheet of brown paper upon a table in the center of the cabin, while Jack rudely elbowed the others aside.

"I'll let you see it one at a time," he announced, kindly.

Heavy lines traced the rude plan shown here.



THE MAP THAT BOB DREW

"Why, it doesn't look a bit like that Egyptian thing with a jaw-breakin' name Jack spoke about," remarked Tim, after a critical glance over Bob's shoulder. "I'd call it a picture of a tree in a hurricane."

"Or struck by lightning," suggested Tommy, squeezing in between the others.

"But it's plenty good enough for our purpose," said Bob, with a smile. "A represents our present position on the map; B the Columbia River; C our first stop;" he ran his finger along the lines; "D the direction we have to take; E one of the Cascade Mountains; and F, away around on the opposite side,"—he lowered his voice to a whisper—"a stream which flows down the slope—Wanna called it 'Gold Creek.' We have to follow its course until a big bend is reached, and there, marked on this map by an X, is located—"

"Whisper it," murmured Sam Randall.

"The Rambler Club's Gold Mine."

"Ah! That has a mighty fine sound, Bob."

"Now the problem is simple—"

"Corkin' simple," scoffed Jack. "Why on earth don't you make a problem in algebra out o' it? Let A, B, C, D, E, F represent the line o' most resistance, an' X—er—er—"

"Stuck again," laughed Bob. "We have to settle it on earth, Jack. Now, fellows, this sketch on the right gives an idea of the shape of the mountain."

"Draw it all yourself?" grinned Jack.

"Yes; Wanatoma supplied the description, and I furnished the motive power," laughed Bob. "He says we can't help recognizing it by the peculiar blunt top. How's this for a plan? Suppose we take a lumber schooner as far as C—that's a good-sized town—buy our outfit and horses and—"

"An' who's goin' to carry the grub?" broke in Jack, sarcastically. "Wee Tommy, here? Or is each fellow supposed to take along his own sandwiches an' canteen o' water, an' shoot at every bird or animal that pops into sight? Why, this gold mine is—"

"Sh-sh!" began Dick, warningly. "Don't, Jack; curb it."

"It's in the deep wilderness; an' if the bunch should ever get lost, sure as thunder it would be when there wasn't a speck o' grub within twenty-eight miles."

"Oh, float away, Jacky," put in Sam Randall, scornfully. "When you find the Ramblers lost just let me know. Since Bob Somers formed this club we've had all sorts of adventures in Wisconsin, Oregon and Wyoming, and aren't going to get lost in any Washington forest, eh, fellows? You and Tim don't know us yet. Go ahead, Bob; horses, you were saying? Then, of course, we'll need a couple of pack animals."

"Pack animals?" grinned Jack. "Maybe you mean pachyderms, Sammy?"

"Oh, you're really too funny for anything," broke in Clifton, whose forehead was still puckered into a fierce frown from Jack's allusion to "Wee Tommy."

"Well, boys, I move that we start day after to-morrow," went on Bob. "Hit the trail, and hit it hard, until we reach X."

A long-drawn-out groan, coming from the direction of the bunk, attracted general attention toward Dave Brandon.

"Well?" asked Bob.

The stout boy's eyes beamed quizzically.

"Only thinking, Bob," he answered.

"What about?"

"Well, don't you know, we really ought to be back in Kingswood now, deeply absorbed in the acquisition of knowledge?"

"Acqui-acqui-sition! You don't let any o' those big ones get by you, I notice," grunted Jack.

"Yes; we have already overstayed our time," went on Dave, "and this trip—"

"It'll only take a week or two," supplied Bob.

"And do you think for a moment, David Brandon, that we could do any studying without settling this thing first?" demanded Sam Randall. "Well, I rather guess not!"

"Then we must hurry it up, and get back to the high school as soon as possible. As it is, there's a lot of hard work before us in catching up with our studies."

"It won't be difficult, with nearly the whole term before us," said Dick, in positive tones.

"Education is the lever which uplifts the world," sighed Dave. "Now—"

"Switch off!" cried Jack.

"Such gems of thought are lost upon him," laughed Sam.

"Let's get back to business," said Bob. "We needn't expect to have any picnic on this trip." He glanced toward Conroy, whose face failed to indicate the slightest enthusiasm. "If you want to back out, Jack, now's the time."

"Who said anything about backin' out?" growled the big lad.

He walked off and threw himself at full length on a bench at the end of the cabin. His eyes began to rove over the cheerful interior. Somehow, it was just the sort of a den to fill any healthy boy's heart with delight. Seven bunks were built against the walls; two lamps suspended from the ceiling swung over the center table, while a number of tasteful prints were scattered about.

Jack felt that on a cold day, with the wind howling past the corners of the cabin, and the whirr and clank of the windmill blending in with the blasts, it would be a mighty pleasant place in which to stay. And yet here were these boys ready to leave its comforts and start off on a difficult and perhaps dangerous expedition with as much unconcern as though they were merely going on a visit to the sawmills at the base of the cliffs.

"I do wish to thunder old Wanna hadn't said a word 'bout that wonderful secret o' his," reflected Jack, his forehead knit into a frown. Perhaps, even if they did succeed in reaching their destination, it might be to have all their fond hopes dashed to the ground. "But still," the frown vanished and a quizzical smile played about the corners of his lips, "if stout, easy-going Dave Brandon is willing to take the risk—why—"

And just then his eyes caught sight of a youthful face flattened against the window-panes eagerly peering in at the group of boys who still surrounded the table, animatedly discussing their plans.

The pressing process had so weirdly distorted the already irregular features of the youth that Jack began to roar with laughter, whereupon the face suddenly vanished, and the next instant a terrific bang sounded on the door.

CHAPTER II

PETE IS AMUSED

"Pete Colliver!" gasped Bob Somers. Hastily he snatched up the map and stuffed it into a table drawer, while Tim Lovell sprang to the door, which was shaking under the repeated attacks of a heavy fist.

As it swung wide open, Pete's short, stocky figure was silhouetted sharply against the clear, cold light of the autumn day. A breath of fresh, invigorating air, just sharp enough to send the blood tingling through healthy veins, and laden with the pleasant scent of forest and field, swept in. Several brown and golden leaves, dancing merrily across the clearing, made straight for the sill and flitted inside the door, while through the crisp air came the chatter of a flock of swiftly-flying birds.

Pete Colliver's sun-tanned face wore an odd expression of injured innocence and indignation, and his eyes were blinking curiously.

"Wal, wal!" he exclaimed, in a deep, hoarse voice, "I was a-thinkin' mebbe ye wouldn't let me in. Never used to keep your door locked, did ye? Gettin' kind o' pertic'lar now, hey? What was the whole bunch doin' around that table?"

He stuffed his hands deep in his trousers pockets, and shot a swift glance at Jack's grinning face.

"Awful sorry to have kept you waitin', Mr. Colliver. Please accept our apologies, an' forget it," said the big lad, soothingly.

"Fine words, but they don't answer my question, feller."

"Great day, Pete, isn't it?" began Bob. "Suppose you just came in from the woods? How's work going on? Sit down. No—not tired? Well, I guess if any one of us had been swinging an axe as hard as you do, Pete, we'd be a bit weary, all right."

"Not to mention the hours—the awful long hours, I mean," put in Dick. "Why—honest—"

Pete regarded them calmly, and gave the back of his slouch hat, which always seemed on the point of falling off, a smart tap.

"I've been a-thinkin'," he remarked, slowly, "that I'll quit the camp for a while, an' mebbe," his blinking eyes swept the group, "you fellers wouldn't mind havin' me along with ye? Thar ain't nothin' what I don't know 'bout campin', an' as for shootin', when I p'int me gun at any warmint it's as good as cookin' over the fire."

"Goodness!" cried Tommy. "Look! Dave's actually fallen asleep. Hi, hi! Wake up, Dave! Hi, hi!"

"Well, did you ever?" roared Dick. "All the same, bet he's been having some dandy inspirations for that great book of his!"

"Inspershuns?" queried Pete, suspiciously.

"Oh, it's not a dangerous disease; you'll never catch it," grinned Jack; "none of these chaps ever did."

"Speak for yourself, Jack Conroy," retorted Tom, with a touch of indignation.

"Wal, this here holler don't answer no questions," said Pete, dryly. "Mind! I ain't beggin' to go; but if ye want a corkin' guide, say the word, an' I'll drop me axe any time like it was red hot."

"Well, the fact is," began Dick, "er—er—that is—"

"Yes, that's the idea exactly," supplemented Bob. "You see, if we needed a guide, Pete, we wouldn't want any one else but you. The crowd—"

"Don't be skeered; I won't hurt ye. Jist say what ye mean; an' I kin see what that is—ye don't want none o' Pete Colliver; an' Pete Colliver ain't a-gettin' down on his knees to beg ye, nuther; no, he ain't. Jist lock yer door arter I gits out, an' fix yer peepers on that 'ere table ag'in. An'"—he paused, his little eyes snapping curiously—"if ye say the word, I'll yank that snoozer out o' his roost in jist three seconds, eh?"

This kind offer was smilingly declined.

Pete turned on his heel.

"Not going, are you?" asked Bob.

"Not afore I tells ye somethin'," he answered, impressively. "I had a wrastlin' match this mornin' with big Jim Lawson, an'—"

"Who won?" asked Jack, mildly.

"Who won!" snorted Pete, with a fierce frown. "That's a fine question ter ask—"

now, ain't it? Ain't ye all felt me muscle? Did any o' ye ever see a stronger arm'n that, hey?" He held it out for inspection right under little Tom Clifton's nose, whereupon Tom stepped hastily back. "Ye ain't wery good on answerin' questions to-day; but there's an easy one fur ye."

"Not bad—not so bad," grinned Jack, "but a chap loses sometimes."

"Not with an arm like that he don't, young feller. In a couple o' minutes Jim was a-lyin' flatter'n that fat snoozer over there. An' d'ye know what Jim says?"

"We will in a second," murmured Jack.

"Pete, ye ain't got yer eq'al in ther hull camp!"—them was his words. Come on outside, big un; I'll jist show ye how it's done."

"That makes the twenty-seventh time you've asked me, Pete," laughed Jack; "I'm countin' 'em. Haven't finished readin' my book on wrestlin' rules yet."

"Maybe some o' you'll have to try it one day," said Pete, ominously. "I'm a-goin'."

The boys watched his stocky figure disappear out the door, and pass slowly across the window, while the breeze flung back his loud tuneless whistling.

Then Dick, with a gesture of impatience, slammed the door shut.

"There! What did I tell you, Jacky?" he growled. "But, oh, no; you wouldn't listen. And now your hollering's done the business—Pete knows something, as sure as you live; anybody can see that."

"An' blame it all on me!" cried Jack. "Keep the door locked! Stand around the table like a lot o' ninnies! Get as flustered as a Jabberwock! An' just because Pete sees it imagine he knows all about our gold mine!"

"There he goes again!" wailed Dick. "Let's muzzle him, fellows. We ought to call that—that place some other name. The Jabberwock, eh?"

"Oh, you make me tired," sneered Jack. "Never saw such silly duffers."

"Come—come, fellows!" laughed Bob. "Too bad, if any harm's done, Jack," he added, severely. "If you speak those two words out loud again—"

"There'll be a speedy trial for the offender," laughed Sam, "and summary vengeance of a terrible sort will be wreaked upon him—hello—dinner time already?" He raised his voice: "That you, Booney?"

"Deed it am, sar!" came an answering voice. "Shall I come in?"

"As far as you like!" yelled Dick.

The door swung open, and Daniel Boone King, a very dark spot in the landscape, stood on the threshold, grinning good-naturedly, and showing a row of dazzling teeth.

"I'se here, sar," he said.

"So our eyes have already told us, Daniel," chuckled Jack.

"An' de dinner am ready."

"A fact which our olfactory nerves have also perceived," remarked Bob, with a smile. "Dave—I say, Dave—dinner!"

"Wonderful thing what a few simple words like that will do," said Sam, as the stout boy sprang up with remarkable alacrity.

His round face beamed forth good nature; a whimsical light deepened in his eyes.

"That's a dandy! And just as I finished my beauty nap, too. Booney—"

"Yes, Mistah Dave."

"Is there plenty of those sweet potatoes and nice corn pone?"

"Yessir!"

"Good! But there won't be very long."

"Not when you're around, Mistah Dave," laughed Booney, as the door promptly slammed behind the group.

Over the air came a steady musical hum from busy sawmills far down on the beach, while columns of yellowish smoke rose lazily against a mass of pale white clouds.

The boys' wild dash across the clearing came to an end when Mr. Lovell, smiling genially, appeared in the doorway of his cabin.

Uncle Stanley was a tall, slight, active man, with a pointed beard. He wore glasses, which gave him quite the air of a college professor. His eyes beamed with a kindly light, while his voice had a cheery ring, which, from the first, had won him the hearts of the crowd.

"Well, boys," he said, "I suppose you are ready for dinner?"

"It won't have time to get cold," laughed Bob.

They hastily fell in behind him, and presently were seated around the table, in a pleasant little dining-room, surveying the good things to eat with great satisfaction. Nothing for which any healthy boy could wish seemed lacking, except pies, tarts and ice-cream. But Booney had made some kind of astonishing pudding, which, at any rate, tasted sweet, and a great quantity soon disappeared.

"I suppose your packing is all done, boys?"

There was a touch of sadness in Uncle Stanley's tone. He looked at the bright faces before him, and sighed at the thought of their parting so soon.

"Everything," answered Tim—"our guns, even, are oiled and polished."

Mr. Lovell pushed back his chair.

"I only wish I could go with you, lads," he said, slowly. "It pleases me to think, however, that in moments of danger you have already proven yourselves cool and resourceful."

Jack grinned complacently.

"Still, I wish to impress you with the fact that, while it is necessary to have the spirit and ability to conquer danger, it is far wiser to go forth with the determination to avoid it. Now, I suppose, none of you feels that it would be best to postpone your trip until the early spring, when—"

A chorus, in which Jack's voice was strangely feeble, assured him that they had not.

"Very well, then! But, boys, don't let your hopes run too high. Wanatoma's gold mine may prove a myth; or, perhaps, if it really does exist, the value may be small. You must, of course, be prepared for disappointment."

"Guess we'll be able to stand it all right," said Tim, with a grin.

"That is the proper spirit. And now, lads, I have a message for you."

"A message for us!" cried Tim.

"Yes; from our friend Captain Slater, the lumberman and former Columbia River skipper."

"Old Cap Slater!" gasped Jack.

"Yes, again. It seems that in spite of his rough exterior the captain has a warm spot in his heart for those he likes, and, much as it may surprise you, the crowd seems to have won his favor."

The boys looked at each other in astonishment, and Jack, quite forgetting his table manners, burst into a roar of laughter, while a chorus of exclamations ran around the table.

"Well, can you ever believe it!" cried Sam.

"An' he used to say such real rude things to us," chirped Tim.

"And was so sorry when we came here," laughed Bob. "I told him it was only because he didn't know us."

"That's exactly what the captain says." Uncle Stanley smiled genially, as his eyes ran from one to another. "He thinks you're a plucky lot."

"But he handed me out a few big knocks, though," grinned Jack.

"None this time, I assure you; he has quite reversed his opinion, and intends to come over and see you off."

"Bully for the Cap!" cried Tim. "He's not a bad old sort, after all!"

For some time they remained, talking over their plans with Tim's uncle, then trooped out, to roam idly about the clearing. The seven stopped for a moment in the long cabin used by the men and finally wandered over toward the edge of a high bluff, where they stopped to gaze at the always enchanting panorama of river and rugged shore. The broad Columbia stretched off, to finally become lost in a gray-purple haze.

Beyond the mills, and close in shore, a lumber schooner, piled high above the gunwales with short planks, lay at anchor, ready for her long trip down the river.

"Feast your eyes on the 'Osprey,' fellows," remarked Bob Somers; "Don Mason, Master."

"The staunch little craft which is to be entrusted with the precious cargo of Rambler boys," said Sam. "Say, it's pretty low in the water now; don't you think when Dave steps aboard it may be in danger of foundering?"

"Most likely there'll be nothing but groaning till she gets used to the additional strain," grinned Dave. "Mighty good of your uncle, Tim, to arrange it for us."

"You bet it was! Unk's a dandy."

"Doesn't look as if there was room for the crowd," sighed Jack, dismally.

"A thin affair like you doesn't need very much," quoth Tom, satirically. "Dave's the only one that counts. Hello—what's that?"

He pounced upon a roll of paper which had slipped from Dave Brandon's coat pocket, and, eluding the stout boy's outstretched hand, dashed away with a yell of triumph.

"Bet it's some of that great volume he's writing, fellows," he chuckled, gleefully. "Yes! Get away, Dave Brandon. Listen! Whew! What do you think? Pages 698 to—to—gee! 700! Did you get that—698 to 700?"

"Read it, slowpoke!" commanded Tim.

"Then keep him away."

"Go ahead," said Dave, good-naturedly. "My limit of resistance is four against one; you're six."

"Foxy lad," murmured Tom, keeping a good distance off. "Ah! First, is the heading, 'Life in a Lumber Camp'—sounds pretty fine, eh?"

"Read it!" yelled Tim.

"In the dense, somber forest surrounding the clearing lumberjacks, with axe and saw, were hard at work. Donkey engines, by means of wire cables of great length, were dragging redwood trunks from the place where they had been felled over skid-roads to flumes which sent them rumbling down to the sawmills below."

"Great!" cried Dick. "Bully!"

"The crack of ox-drivers' whips often echoed through the forest, as these slow-footed animals drew heavy vehicles, piled high with short logs, toward the timber slides."

"Wow!" quoth Sam. "Be-au-ti-ful!"

"Altogether, life in a lumber camp must not only appeal to the lover of nature, but to those artistically inclined. Toward the dusk of evening, when—"

A swift movement on Dave's part suddenly interrupted the reading. With a cheery laugh, the stout boy stepped back, stuffing his precious pages into an inside pocket.

"Oh, you rude thing!" sniffed the highly disgusted Tom.

"A thousand pities not to let us hear all of that perfectly lovely effusion," said Tim. "Come, Dave, that's a good chap, hand it out."

But no amount of withering comments, gentle persuasion, or direful threats had

the least effect. So Jack Conroy merely sat upon Tommy, figuratively and actually, for being so easy.

There was nothing for them to do but patiently await the time when the "Osprey," Don Mason, Master, should weigh anchor. Jack Conroy and Dave Brandon were the only lads who didn't bubble over with enthusiasm, and long for the great moment to arrive.

That night, after the lamps in their cabin were lighted, Pete Colliver again pressed his face against the window-pane.

He was promptly admitted.

Pete immediately plumped himself down on the most comfortable chair, crossed his legs, and proceeded, by winks and extraordinary grimaces, to attract more than usual attention.

"Hello! Got anythin' in your eye, Pete?" asked Jack.

"Naw, young feller; there ain't nothin' what can even make 'em blink."

"Well, what's the matter?"

Pete's answer to this was a series of chuckles and other weird sounds even more astonishing than his facial contortions.

"If you could tell us where you feel the worst," suggested Tim, kindly, "why—"

Pete guffawed loudly.

"If there's anything on your mind, then"—Tim beamed pleasantly—"out with it."

"Ha, ha!" laughed Pete. "An' ye don't want no guide, hey? Don't have to go to— to Africa to git big game, do ye? Expect to bag somethin' whoppin'! Ha, ha!"

"Africa—Africa! Why, the extent o' your knowledge is simply surprisin'," murmured Jack.

Pete's grimaces and chuckles began again. Suddenly he burst into a roar of laughter, slapped his knees, then rose to his feet, while the deeply interested crowd stared at him in amazement.

"For goodness' sake, Peter," cried Bob, "tell us!"

"I was jist a-thinkin' o' somethin' kinder funny," explained Pete, "an' I guess ye don't need ter know nuthin' 'bout it."

"And after all our suspense!" protested Bob.

"How can you be so cruel?" added Sam.

"Peter is only jokin'," said Jack, hopefully.

"Not much he ain't, feller!"

Thereupon the whole crowd, with the exception of Dave, did their best to draw from the stocky boy the secret of his mirth.

But Pete could not be in any way cajoled, so they finally gave it up.

Presently, with a huge grin, he started toward the door, bade them good-night, and was gone.

The boys looked at each other inquiringly.

"Well," remarked Tim, drawing a long breath, "that chap certainly knows something, eh, Jack? Do you deny it?"

"How can a fellow deny what he doesn't know, you silly duffer?" demanded Jack, frowning fiercely.

"Now it's certain you've given the whole thing away!"

"Like fun I have!"

"You'll see! Most likely everybody in camp'll be taggin' after us."

"Oh, get out, Timmy; you've said just as much about Wanna's gold mine as I have."

Tim gave a gesture of despair.

"Can you beat it, fellows?" he wailed. "There he goes again—actually—after all the mess he's made, too. Help—help—I mean help needed to make Jacky forget those two fateful words."

"Oh, dry up!" howled Jack, wrathfully. "Remember what happened to Tommy."

"My regular job seems to be stopping a row every few minutes," laughed Bob. "If Pete does know our secret, scrapping about it won't do a bit of good."

"And no one can prevent us from finding—from finding that—er—er—Jabberwock," added Dick.

CHAPTER III

ALL ABOARD!

The day of departure had actually come at last. It was a beautiful morning, with a brisk, cool breeze sending white clouds scudding through the blue above, while the Columbia's broad surface was broken into choppy waves.

The boys' luggage—there wasn't so very much of it—lay piled in a corner. Guns and hunting knives gleamed brightly wherever stray beams of sunlight found their polished surfaces.

Just a few hours more! Jack Conroy stared rather gloomily around. The cozy cabin had never looked more inviting; strange how it seemed to have improved since the moment they decided to leave it. Dave, resting easily, with his feet stretched upon a chair, was busy scribbling something in his note-book. All the others were too excited and eager to stay in one place very long. They walked up and down, talking in low tones, making a tremendous effort to appear unconcerned, but without great success.

"Let's go over by the bluff," remarked Bob, presently. "Coming, fellows?"

"Guess you expect to see the 'Osprey' take wing and fly away," said Jack.

Leaving the literary boy struggling heroically with the muse, the rest walked out, kicking up the yellow leaves which were thickly strewn about.

For a long time they sat on a convenient log, their eyes often turning toward the "Osprey," whose black hull and tapering masts glowed one moment in light, then became cold and gray in the swiftly-flying shadows that skimmed across the landscape.

"Hi, hi—hello!"

Pete Colliver's tremendous voice suddenly reached their ears, and, upon turning quickly, they saw the youth approaching, with another lad a bit shorter lazily bringing up in the rear.

"Well, by Jove, it's Jimmy—Jimmy of Sellade!" cried Bob, shading his eyes from the sun's bright glare.

"So it is," agreed Tim. "Oh, joy! Cheer up, Jacky; Jimmy's comin'. Guess he's heard all about the—er—er—Jabberwock, too."

"An' I don't care if he has," grunted Jack.

The crowd had made the acquaintance of Jimmy some time before. As he came from Sellade, a town where the Columbia River steamers made a landing, they often referred to him as "Jimmy of Sellade." He, like his friend Pete, was a stocky, heavily-built lad, immensely strong, but clumsy and slow.

Jimmy's features were remarkably plain, while his expression changed about as often as that of an Egyptian Sphinx—at least, Sam Randall voiced this opinion.

"I hearn tell as you was a-leavin', fellers," exclaimed Jimmy, as he came within speaking distance, "an' I says to meself, 'I'll git over an' give 'em the hand-shake all 'round.'"

"Good boy!" said Bob, approvingly.

Pete Colliver was grinning broadly. He gave a loud chuckle, and poked his chum in the ribs.

"Mebbe they'd like to have ye as a guide, Jimmy," he said.

"I guess not," returned Jimmy, dryly. "I couldn't work fur nothin' less'n fifty cents a day; an' it might be a corkin' hard job ter help 'em lug the stuff they gits."

Dick felt sure that Jimmy's expression changed for the fraction of a second; therefore he scowled fiercely at Jack, and winked significantly.

"Whar's the fat un?" asked Jimmy, abruptly.

"Guess he's havin' some more inspershuns," said Pete; "but the big feller here says as how nobody else ever ketches it."

"Eh!" Jimmy gave a start. "What's them?"

"It isn't 'them,' it's 'it,'" gurgled Jack, "eh, Tommy? Near grub time, you say? Good! Yes, Jimmy, my lad, this afternoon—see here, Timmy, if you try to make a haystack out o' me again, maybe only six boys will go!"

Jack brushed away the bunches of tall grass which rested on his shoulder, punched Sam because he happened to be nearest, and answered the hail which came at that moment from Booney.

Some of the lads found it rather difficult to eat breakfast, but Dave Brandon wasn't among the number. There was a feeling of suppressed excitement which

he didn't seem to share; even Bob was glad when the meal was over.

"I expect Captain Slater at any moment," said Uncle Stanley. "He told me he would surely be here."

"To think of the Cap actually takin' the trouble to see us off," murmured Tim; "ain't it odd?"

"And Jimmy of Sellade, too," laughed Dick. "Our cup of joy is brimming over."

In another half hour, Tommy, glancing out the window, espied the lumberman and former steamboat captain headed across the clearing, and the crowd, at a nod from Uncle Stanley, rushed out.

Captain Slater was stout, heavy-featured, gray-bearded, authoritative in manner, and quick to take offense.

"Rah, rah, rah for Cap Slater!" yelled Jack. "Now, boys—one, two, three!"

"Rah, rah, rah!" howled a chorus.

Their lusty yells brought Pete Colliver and Jimmy around the men's cabin on a run.

The lumberman came striding over, the effect of walking a considerable distance at a rapid rate causing him to mop his brow with a huge red handkerchief.

"Wal, my hearties!"—he greeted them in a gruff, heavy voice. "Actually ready to git—actually! Howdy, Lovell! Sorry to see 'em go, ain't ye?—declar' to thunder I am; an' that's somethin' Jere Slater never thought he'd be."

"Oh, we knew you would, all right," said Jack, with a grin.

"An' they tell me yer a-goin' with Don Mason! A good, likely young skipper, that!"

"Hello, old feller!"

Pete's voice rose above the captain's.

"Run along!" growled Slater, turning sharply at the sound, and eyeing the lad with a scowl. "Thought I know'd that voice. Both o' ye kin toddle."

"So we kin, when we gits ready, Cap'n," retorted Pete, calmly; "an' we ain't ready yit, eh, Jimmy?"

"I reckon not!" answered Jimmy, defiantly.

"If ye could only tote them perverse young lubbers far away, an' lose 'em, ye'd

be doin' the community a thunderin' big sarvice," growled the captain.

"'Tain't me an' Jim's fault if we ain't a-goin', old feller," chuckled Pete; "we asked 'em." Then, unmindful of Mr. Lovell's presence, he added, witheringly, "Sich a wonderful lot o' dubs they is, too! Think nobody ain't good nuff fur 'em, mebbe! Oh, yes, they is the goods, all right!"

"I don't think," sniffed Jimmy.

"Can't wrastle! Don't even know when they's sized up ter beat the band."

"Shows how much good sense they've got not to want to have yer along," remarked Slater. "I seen ye a-hangin' 'round me camp twice this week, an' that's twice too much. An' now, lads," he added, turning toward the others, "ye have Jere Slater's best wishes, an' I only hopes—"

"They bags a hull lot o' game," broke in Pete. A most astonishing grimace distorted his face. "Them mountains is full o'—o'—all kinds o' waluable warmints an' sich like. If you an' me, Cap'n, could only git a crack at sumphin, eh?"

"What's a-gittin' inter the feller's top-piece?" asked Slater, with a wondering stare. "Never yit seen anything human put on sich a face as that—it's nuff to hurt a man's eyes fur keeps; mine is a-blinkin' now."

The hour for leaving had arrived. Presently the party began walking toward the boys' cabin.

Even Jack felt his nerves tingling with excitement. He gave a sigh of relief when their stuff had been carried outside, then turned for a final look at the cozy interior.

"Makes me feel kind of blue," he confided to Tommy. "We've certainly had a dandy time here—did you speak, Mr. Lovell?"

"I was saying," remarked the lumberman, with a smile, "that our friend"—he nodded toward Dave—"will no doubt find a great deal of interest to write about."

"Dave Brandon's wonderful work will come out in forty volumes," chuckled Tim, who had overheard. "Why, Uncle Stanley, you don't know how fine life in a lumber camp really is until you've read what he has to say about it."

At the edge of the bluff Bob gave a loud yell, the others chiming in.

An answering hail came from the "Osprey." A sailor was soon seen jumping into

a boat which swung astern. He cast off the lines and began to row ashore.

A zigzag road led down by easy stages to the water. By the time they reached it, with Pete and Jimmy straggling along in the rear, the boat was bobbing up and down near the sawmills.

A number of the men came out to bid the boys good-bye, so, for several minutes, the seven were kept busy shaking hands and responding to their hearty good wishes.

A pleasant smell of water was in the air. The breeze had freshened, coming in strong puffs which sent wicked little waves hissing and breaking over the beach. Great logs near shore moved sluggishly, sometimes entirely submerged by the rollers.

Everything but the weapons was hurled carelessly into the bottom of the boat. Dave, Jack, Tom Clifton and Tim stumbled aboard the rocking craft, the tall boy, of course, tripping over almost every parcel.

"Ho for the 'Osprey'!" yelled Tim. "Bye, bye, Uncle Stanley and Cap'n Slater an' everybody!"

There was much waving of hands and handkerchiefs; a loud chorus of shouts—then the rowlocks rattled, while the measured dip of the blades sent the heavily laden craft slowly ahead.

"I say, old feller—Slater!"

The gruff captain frowned at Colliver's upturned face, but something in the lad's expression chased it immediately away, and, as he felt a strong tug at his sleeve, he obeyed the significant wink that Pete gave him, and stepped aside.

"Wal?" he asked, curtly.

Pete's eyes ran swiftly over the group. They were far too intent upon watching the departing boat to pay any attention to him.

"Wal?" repeated Slater, impatiently, shaking his arm loose.

"If ye know'd as much as I do, old feller," answered Pete, in a most impressive manner, "ye wouldn't be standin' here doin' nothin'." He laid a finger warningly on his lips. "No yer wouldn't."

"What d'ye mean?" growled the captain, in a husky whisper.

"Jist this!"

Pete drew himself up on tiptoe, spoke earnestly into the lumberman's ear, and watched, with a peculiar grin, the look of amazement which gradually overspread his ruddy face.

"'Tain't—'tain't possible!" murmured Captain Slater, bringing out his red handkerchief again. "D'ye expect me to believe anything like that, ye lubber? Don't ye do no jokin' with me."

"Joke nothin'! An' some o' yer men knows it, too. Jimmy, here—"

Pete suddenly stopped, as Sam Randall turned toward him, while the captain, mopping his forehead furiously, walked toward the group.

"There goes Dave!" cried Bob.

The stout boy was seen clambering upon the deck of the vessel. The others soon joined him. Then the boat began to cut the water again, and, within a few minutes, reached shore.

The three boys took their places.

The brawny oarsman had no sentiment in his composition; he only wanted to get through his task in the shortest possible time; so his passengers soon found themselves bobbing up and down, with the deep green waves foaming hard against the boat.

As it swung alongside the "Osprey," Sam Randall answered the yell which came from his chums, grabbed hold of a line and climbed aboard.

Presently all were together again. Their search for Wanatoma's gold mine was to begin.

CHAPTER IV

THE "OSPREY"

The "Osprey" was a staunch, trim-looking schooner of graceful proportions. Captain Mason, still quite young, and with enthusiasm corresponding to his years, kept his vessel always fresh and clean. Aft, a commodious cabin, with a new coat of paint, shone dazzlingly white; so did the rail and gunwale, which, around the stern, rose above the rest of the deck in an ornamental curve.

Leaving just a passageway between the cabin, and running the deck's entire length, were piles of smooth, finished boards bound in position by means of heavy ropes. Enough space was left in the center to reach the men's quarters forward; while on each side a narrow passageway between the gunwale and lumber led to the bow.

"Only hope I don't get stuck," murmured Dave, with some apprehension, as he viewed the confined space.

Two life-boats, bottom up, were fastened securely on top of the boards.

The mass of rigging impressed the boys immensely. Their eyes ran over innumerable blocks and tackle, shaky-looking ladders, and a bewildering maze of rope which stretched aloft to a dizzy height.

"What beats me," remarked Tim, solemnly, "is how they ever remember what to do with 'em all."

"Every mornin' the sailors learn the names all over again, I guess," chuckled Tim.

"In a ship like this—" began Tom.

"This isn't a ship, Tommy," corrected Tim; "it's a schooner. You have a whole lot to learn, son—listen: a schooner's—"

"Huh! Much you know about nautical vessels," chirped Tommy, with a wink.

"'Nautical vessels' is a good one," murmured Tim. "Something new; seagoing marine nautical vessels, you meant. Who was that howled—did you speak, Mr. Sam Randall?"

"Yes, Timothy! Say, Bob, did you see Pete Colliver talking to Cap'n Slater?"

"Didn't notice 'em, Sam."

"Well, I did—happened to turn quickly. Jiminy! Cap had about the queerest expression on his face I ever saw; honest, if Pete wasn't telling him something I'm much mistaken."

"Thunder—avast there! No more o' that, my hearty!" growled Jack. "How do you do, Cap'n!"

A well-built young man approached. There wasn't very much of the typical sailor about Captain Don Mason. He had dark hair, a close-cropped mustache and deep brown eyes. But for a bronzed complexion and the innumerable wrinkles which outdoor life had formed over his face, he might have been taken for a prosperous young business man.

"Glad to see you, lads," he said, in an off-hand manner. "Not much room, is there? Make yourselves as comfortable as you can; don't fall overboard any oftener than necessary." He glanced critically at the sky. "We'll be off in another moment. See you later, boys!"

"Seems to be a nice chap," said Bob.

"All sailors are," declared Tom Clifton.

"Especially those on nautical vessels," grinned Tim.

Presently they heard Captain Mason's commands ring out. Then came the clank and banging of heavy chains, as the anchor was slowly hauled up.

"Thunder! but don't they know how to handle those ropes, though!" cried Tommy, admiringly, a moment later.

The sailors were pulling away with a rhythmical swing. The creaking of pulleys and rattle of blocks sounded above Captain Mason's voice. Up, up rose the sails, reef-points tossing in the wind. Now the canvas bellied out; then flapped and shook. The boom seemed to shiver convulsively. A few strong pulls, and the mainsail caught the breeze, straining hard. Up went the jib.

With all sails set, the "Osprey" lurched; then her bow plunged deep into a green flood of heaving water—they were actually off.

Seven boys, squeezing along the narrow space between lumber and gunwales, tumbled hilariously toward the stern. But even pleasurable anticipations could not altogether still a pang of regret at leaving Uncle Stanley's lumber camp. They

waved their hands, shouting again and again.

How fine the sawmills looked, sending up columns of smoke and steam! And there, over the bluff's rugged heights, were the cabins. The crowd became silent—but only for a moment.

"Had some great times," sighed Tim. "Never thought we'd meet with a fate like this, eh?"

"What do you mean—what fate?" grunted Jack.

"Why, that we'd get blown away."

"Well, as long as we aren't blown into little bits, you needn't kick," grinned Jack.

A fresh breeze droned intermittently through the rigging, and choppy waves beating against the hull now and again sent up showers of sparkling drops.

The familiar, forest-crowned cliffs began to drop lower against the sky.

"Want to see the cabin, boys?"

Captain Mason, peering over a pile of boards, smiled pleasantly.

"You can bet we do," laughed Jack.

A creaking boom stood close over the cabin roof. The steersman, at the stern, grinning cheerfully, nodded toward them. The schooner was rolling slightly, while the wash and splash of beating waves seemed to be steadily growing louder. Over the greenish expanse of water were dotted a number of sailing craft.

"Yes, we've encountered some pretty stormy weather," said the captain, in answer to a question from Dave. "Here we are, lads."

They quickly followed him down the companionway into a cozy apartment. A table, several chairs, a small stove and a sideboard were the most prominent objects; but the crowd soon discovered other things which interested them greatly—nautical instruments, government charts, besides a cabinet containing shells and curious fish which the captain had collected occupied appropriate places.

Dave Brandon showed a familiarity with the names quite astonishing to Skipper Don.

"Oh, but Dave knows everything," murmured Tommy. "Say"—he looked around with a grin—"doesn't it seem queer to be in a room that can't keep still?"

"Awful odd," laughed Jack. "If you stay very quiet, lad, why—"

"Oh, don't be so funny," retorted Tom, grumpily. "Bet I'm just as good a sailor as you are—and then a bit more. Got your field-glass, Bob? Good! Let's go on deck and see the mountains moving by."

"Fellows, I'd like to stay on this boat a solid month," remarked Dave, with a yawn. "Isn't the motion perfectly great? Imagine lying in a nice, comfortable bunk and—"

A howl of derision cut him short.

With hearty thanks to the captain for his courtesy, six boys presently dashed up the companionway to the deck, while Dave, his eyes twinkling, slowly followed. He wandered off by himself, and some time later they found him, stretched flat on his back between the life-boats, contemplating a blue and white sky with infinite contentment.

"Oh, can't you chaps let me alone?" he drawled, when Jack, with a yell of glee, disturbed his rest.

But, in spite of entreaties, they cruelly pounced upon their victim and dragged him protestingly away.

"It would serve Dave just right if we wedged him fast between the lumber and this what-you-may-call-'em at the side, and left him to his fate," pronounced Sam severely.

"Dreadful pirates!" sighed Dave.

Bob's field-glass was thrust into the stout boy's hand, as they hustled him to the bow.

"If you don't say that's one of the bulliest sights you ever saw, something will happen," said Bob. He waved his arm toward a range of the Cascade Mountains.

The highest, a snow-capped peak, pierced a veil of whitish cloud, shone against a patch of deep blue sky, and was lost in a mass of vapor above.

Dave gave a cry of admiration, as he swept the field-glass across their rugged slopes. Successively framed within that little circle of light were enchanting views of wild mountain scenery—dense forests, tinged yellow and brown, in many places interspersed with the rich green of hemlock and pine; deeply shadowed ravines; great piles of barren rock, crowned by tangled vegetation and trees whose branches sometimes hung far over dizzy depths. Then flashed into view a foaming cascade, tumbling from one level to another like a silver streak.

The field-glass was raised higher—beyond the point where all vegetation ceased; there was nothing there but a barren, desolate waste, topped by perpetual snow.

"By Jove, fellows, but that is perfectly immense!" exclaimed Dave. "Your cruelty is forgiven. Whew! If the mountain we're bound for is like those—why —"

"I say we'll need an aeroplane, an' not horses," suggested Jack, with a grimace. "I can see ourselves gettin' into all sorts o' nice mix-ups; an' perhaps we won't come closer'n ten miles from that—"

"Jabberwock—Jabberwock, Jacky!" sang out Dick, warningly. "Just reminds me —wasn't Pete the cheekiest thing you ever saw? And Jimmy, too? Wonder what Captain Slater—"

"Don't you mention Pete's name in my presence again; don't even think o' him while I'm around!" howled Jack. "My, but you do make me tired. Run off an' play!"

"Talk like that may lead to some one walking the plank," grinned Dick. "An ancient custom revived! It would be a very unpleasant duty, Jacky, but if necessary—"

Dick nimbly eluded the big boy's hand, and retreated with undignified haste to a place of safety.

At noon Captain Mason invited them to lunch. By the time the meal was over, a blanket of dark cloud had covered the blue, while lower, faster-moving masses scudded swiftly along. The "Osprey" rolled and shook, sheets of hissing foam tumbling back upon white-capped waves.

The boys looked at the spread of canvas, dark and grim, towering aloft, slowly swinging back and forth, with reef-points lashing furiously, then at the straining booms and tightened rigging, through which the wind was tearing with unpleasant force.

"It's developing into a regular storm," said Tom. "Whew—just gaze at that chap!"

A young sailor was climbing up a ladder. They watched his figure loom against the sky, as he mounted to a dizzy height on the insecure-looking rope ladder. At times, he seemed to be leaning backward.

"Gee; if he should slip!" murmured Dick, apprehensively.

"Oh, I guess he's too used to the business for that," assured Bob.

But all gave a sigh of relief when, after a few moments' work, the sailor descended.

"Hello—hello, fellows!" came a hail from the stern. It was Tim Lovell, who had wandered away. "Hello; a steamboat comin'—a real one!"

"Silly dub," said Jack. "Who ever heard of an unreal one? Wonder if it's life-size? Ask Tom if it's a nautical boat. Get out o' my way, Sam Randall."

The boys struggled aft as fast as the narrow passage would permit, receiving in their haste a number of unpleasant bumps and bangs.

They found Tim standing close to the steersman, gazing one moment at the foaming, bubbling wake, the next toward a distant boat over which hovered a wreath of brownish smoke.

"See!" Tim pointed. "Bet it's a whopper. Don't give Jacky your glass, Bob. Oh, ginger—that settles it!"

Jack had rudely snatched the instrument, and, planting his feet hard, steadied himself against the cabin roof.

"Looks great!" he cried. "I wonder, maybe—I wonder if—"

"What?" asked Sam.

"If it can be the 'Evergreen State'; looks just like her."

"The boat we came on!" cried Dick. "Wouldn't that be jolly?"

"If she only stopped at the lumber camp we might be standing on her deck now," remarked Sam.

"Oh, I guess not; the 'Osprey' for me," declared Tom Clifton. "Anybody can travel on a steamboat, but everybody can't get his bumps on a lumber schooner."

"Besides, its next stop is Rawdon, several miles below Wild Oak, where we get off," said Bob.

"You mean disembark; use nautical terms, Bob," laughed Sam. "Hurry up with that glass, Jack; the rest of us have eyes, too, and want to get a look."

But Jack didn't hurry; whereupon Sam, Dick and Tommy made a united attack, which resulted in the glass changing hands.

"I'll make you sorry for that," puffed Jack.

"Isn't she cutting through the water, though?" exclaimed Sam. "Won't be so very long before she's up with us."

Taking turns with the glass—Jack had promised to be good—the seven eagerly watched the steamer's approach. Now she was coming clearly into view, even the passengers on her deck being readily seen. Her huge black funnels were sending up columns of smoke.

Sam, sweeping the craft from stem to stern, gazed for several moments in silence; then:

"It's the 'Evergreen State,' fellows!" he exclaimed.

"Hooray!" yelled Dick.

"No better boat nor her runs to Portland," grunted the steersman, throwing a glance over his shoulder.

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Slowly the distance between the boats was lessened.

"She'll pass purty close to us, lads," volunteered the man at the wheel.

The boys lolled on the cabin roof. The glass ran from hand to hand and back again. A hearty cheer went up, and handkerchiefs fluttered when the "Evergreen State" finally crept abreast.

Then Dick, who was gazing intently, gave a short, shrill whistle, let his hands drop for an instant, and whistled again, with such a note of astonishment that the others sat bolt upright and stared.

"Well?" queried Bob.

"Why—say"—Dick's glass rose again—"say—yes, there's no mistake about it! Say—"

"Say what?" howled Tim. "Tell us, you silly duffer!"

"Why, Mr. Lovell—your Uncle Stanley—is aboard that boat!"

CHAPTER V

THE OTHER BOAT

A chorus of exclamations rang out.

"Mr. Lovell! Can't be possible—you don't mean it?" screeched Tommy.

"Yes, I do—sure as you're sixty-three inches high."

"I'm over sixty-four!" cried Tom, hotly. "How in the world could Mr.—it's a joke; and a mighty poor one, Dick Travers."

"Joke nothing!" thundered Dick, excitedly. "See him—see him—there he is, waving a handkerchief; shouting, too—saw his mouth open. He's right by that little boat—life-boat, I mean. Get away—"

Jack had the glass again.

A moment's breathless silence; every eye was upon him. They saw his eyebrows arch in surprise, his lips move.

"Well?" cried Tim, hoarsely.

The glass slipped into Bob's outstretched hand, while:

"It's Uncle Stanley, sure as shootin'," fell from Jack Conroy's lips.

Steadying himself, Bob leveled the instrument. The "Evergreen State" flashed into view with delightful clearness; she seemed to be but a stone's throw away.

Eagerly Bob scanned the passengers crowding to the rail. Yes! That man with the handkerchief was certainly Mr. Lovell. He saw him raise a megaphone to his lips; over the air came a string of words, but the steady splashing of water and the briskly rushing wind made them but a confused medley of sound.

They strained their ears, and again came the voice.

Too bad! Not a word could be understood.

Bob saw the megaphone lowered, then waved in the air. The people, cabins, rails, life-boats, ropes and tackle—every little object looked so exasperatingly near—and yet they could not hope to learn what Mr. Lovell had said. The "Evergreen State" was already forging ahead.

"What does it mean?" gasped Dick, with a wild fear that something was destined to prevent them from continuing their trip.

"Mean?" howled Tim, savagely. "Why, you can just bet your boots that Uncle Stanley has heard something—all Jacky's doin's—he never expected to go on that boat; I know he didn't—"

"And he'll try to meet us," interposed Sam, "and—and—"

They stared gloomily at each other, quite forgetting the presence of the steersman and the curious glances he turned toward them.

"Bring out that plank!" cried Dick. "I hate to use the 'Osprey' for such a purpose, but let the ancient custom be revived."

"Is it fur the tall un to walk?" The man grinned. "What has he went an' done, lad?"

Dick turned sharply around.

"Why, he—he—"

"Jabberwock! Jabberwock!" roared Jack. "An' he has the cheek to blame it all on me!"

Silence for a moment; then:

"There's something in the wind," came from Dick.

"We all are," drawled Dave; "I'm going for shelter."

As they gloomily struggled along the deck, the "Osprey" was rolling heavily; spray flew over the gunwale and splashed their faces; tiny pools trickled along the deck. The wind was steadily rising into a gale; dark, ominous clouds in the distance scudded along, flinging ragged edges off into areas of rain.

Bending over to escape the blasts, the crowd made their way to a more comfortable spot between the piles of lumber.

What was the meaning of Mr. Lovell's presence on the "Evergreen State"?

No one knew; but all had certain ideas. The discussion grew animated. Jack defended himself with spirit; he also tried the effect of vigorous thrusts with his fists—his usual way of ending an argument—and presently all but Bob and Dave had moved well out of reach.

"The 'Evergreen State' stops at Rawdon," remarked Bob, reflectively; "that's about five miles the other side of Wild Oak landing, where we get off. So, if Mr.

Lovell is really after us, he intends to come back from the steamboat wharf."

"Most likely," admitted Dave; "but it's no use to bother now."

"Bet he's found out that we're goin' to a whole lot o' trouble for nothin'," suggested Jack. "Better know it now'n later on."

"Old pullback! Scared?" jeered Tim, from a distance of ten feet.

"Well, don't let this great boat-ride be spoiled," said Dave, sniffing the air with keen relish. "Hello! Seems to me that Sam and Tom are looking rather pale."

The two lads, wearing strange, woebegone expressions, stood silent. Quite suddenly they had begun to lose all interest in the gold mine, in Mr. Lovell, and everything else. They only wanted to quietly slink away and be alone.

"Poor chap!" murmured Bob.

Several heavy showers finally chased the boys to cover; but each time it cleared away all were up on deck again, gathered in the most sheltered spot they could find.

The mountains had dropped low on the horizon, a somber mass of jagged peaks through the heavy gray atmosphere. The "Osprey" continued to stagger and roll amidst a flood of surging waves and creamy foam, her timbers seeming to jar and creak as she plunged her bow deep into the water.

Toward mid-afternoon, Wild Oak finally came into view as a mass of tiny white dashes against darker surroundings. The field-glass revealed a collection of buildings, behind which rose a series of rugged hills and frowning cliffs.

"Boys!" said Captain Mason, coming upon them suddenly, "I can't land you in this gale o' wind; no, sir! Wouldn't dare to risk it—I've been obliged to take in my topsails." He cast a glance of commiseration toward the two with the woebegone expressions.

"What—what in the dickens shall we do?" wailed Tommy.

"Keep aboard as far as Rawdon, or further."

"Goodness gracious!" groaned Sam. "Isn't it awful?"

"It might be a great deal more awful if you tried to land," said the captain, dryly. "However, don't lose heart, boys." He shot a glance at the sky. "This blow will probably soon simmer down."

But they didn't believe him; and, as Wild Oak became stronger and stronger in

the landscape, stared gloomily toward it. Perhaps never before had a town appeared quite so attractive to them.

"Only to think," murmured Bob.

"Don't think," said Jack.

They gazed at the buildings and long wharf for some moments in silence. A sawmill and lumber-yard stood near the water's edge, beyond rose a structure with a tower, while straggling up over the hill were a number of frame houses, some partly hidden by clumps of trees.

"This field-glass makes me tired," grumbled Jack. "Hold me back, fellows, or I may forget an' try to jump it. That wharf seems just a few feet away. An' what do you think? A goat just winked at me; honest he did. Why, Jehoshaphat, I can almost touch the sawmill with my hand."

"I always wanted to see Portland, anyway," observed Dick.

A howl followed his words.

"If necessary," said Jack, "I shall take charge o' this vessel myself, an' sail it around in circles till the weather changes."

But an hour later, in spite of gloomy predictions, it did seem as though the wind was lessening; hope quickly revived. Rawdon, a town of considerable size, was already in view.

"I'll lay to until you can make it."

The captain had hailed them.

"Isn't he a daisy!" cried Tim, delighted enough to dance a jig, if space had allowed. "Cheer up, Sam and Tommy; you'll be all right soon."

"Get out," mumbled Sam, ungratefully.

Fifteen minutes later came the sound of Captain Mason's commands. Eagerly the boys watched his crew, as they executed order after order with speed and precision. The mainsail, flapping furiously, was lowered; the jib hauled down; then, as the anchor shot out of sight with a splash, the "Osprey" was rolling under bare poles, with the town of Rawdon directly before them.

But it was an hour later when the good-natured and careful skipper decided at last that it would be safe for them to make a start.

"I can't afford to take any chances with future statesmen, lawyers, or doctors," he

chuckled, as he finally turned to his men and gave orders to get the boat ready.

It was quickly lowered, and piled up with luggage. The two indisposed boys tumbled in—another moment, and they were off.

On the next trip, Jack, Tim and Dick were taken ashore, and, at length, came the turn of Bob and Dave. With hearty thanks to Captain Don Mason, they took their places in the rocking boat, to land, after a rough passage, at a long, rickety-looking wharf.

"Hooray!" cried Tim, regardless of the stares bestowed upon them by several natives. "Hooray! Now the fun begins! First of all, let's hunt up Uncle Stanley."

CHAPTER VI

CAPTAIN JERE

Captain Jere Slater had never been more astonished in his life; there was something in Pete Colliver's manner which had almost assured him that the stocky boy spoke the truth. Standing with his hands behind his back, the captain glared after the departing boat, and uttered a peculiar grunt, as the crowd at length waved a salute from the "Osprey's" deck.

Then, nodding to Mr. Lovell, he unceremoniously inserted his hand under Pete Colliver's arm, and, with a gruff "Come along, young feller," fairly dragged him away.

A huge grin overspread Pete's face, while he winked expressively at Jimmy, who stood aghast at such familiarity on the captain's part.

"Now, Pete,"—Slater's tone spoke of a determination not to be trifled with—"I want ye to talk, an' talk purty fast; or you an' me will have the wust fallin' out we's ever had yit."

"If ye'll stop pinchin' me arm black an' blue, I'll tell yer everythin' I know."

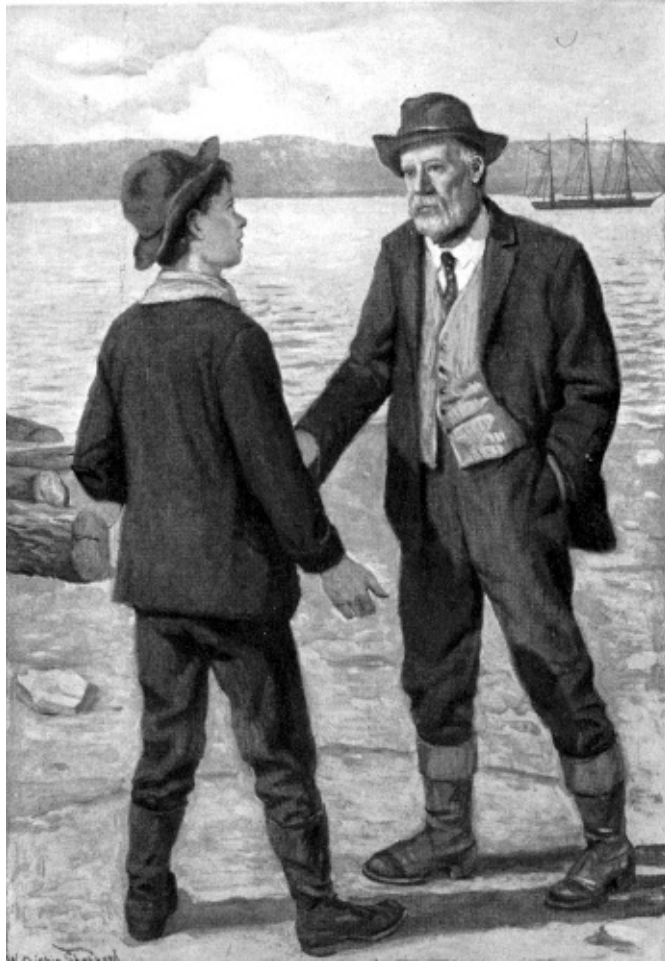
Pete chuckled gleefully, tapped his slouch hat, and executed a clumsy jig which made Cap Slater's temper rise to the boiling point.

"Out with it, ye little lubber; quick now!" With an effort, he kept his voice down.

"Oh, ye can't skeer me none," jeered Pete. "Ye'd best cool off. I ain't never looked inter a face what was redder."

This remark did not in the least appease Cap Slater's impatience. But before the fierce scowl which tied his forehead into little knots had subsided, Pete was speaking.

"I hearn it from the big un a-talkin'," he said. "Fust, I says ter meself, 'It ain't nuthin' but gab.' Then, of a suddent, I hears 'im ag'in. Oh, I'm a purty smart feller, I am." He poked Slater playfully in the ribs. "Says I: 'Mebbe 'tain't all guff, neither'—see? So I inwestigates; an' it weren't hard, with a voice like hisn—the big un, I mean. It's a gold mine they's after."



"IT'S A GOLD MINE THEY'RE AFTER"

"If this ain't 'bout the queerest thing I ever hear tell of, throw me in the crick!" said Captain Slater, hoarsely. "A parcel o' lads like them a-totin' theirselves off, to git chawed up by warmints—if they don't run up ag'in somethin' wuss! How d'ye know some o' my men knows about this?"

"'Cause I told 'em," answered Pete, calmly.

Jimmy, his eyes fixed upon the lumberman's face, stepped back a pace or two and prepared to run.

But Captain Slater was controlling his temper splendidly.

"An' what fur, ye little sardine?"

"Was there anythin' ter prewent me, old feller?" Pete squared his shoulders aggressively. "Would they let me in on it? No, sir! Would any o' 'em give me a wrastle? No, sir!"

"Wal, yer even a little wusser'n I thought." Captain Slater's words were jerked out with angry emphasis. "Ye kin git now; an' git fast; an' don't never let me see yer ag'in!"

Pete's mouth flew open with astonishment; he saw the lumberman turn and begin striding hurriedly after Mr. Lovell, who was already well on his way up the cliff.

"If that ain't gratitood fur ye!" Pete clenched his fists and made a series of wild motions. Jimmy felt like taking it on the run again. "Kin ye beat it? What's a-git-tin' inter the old codger's head, anyway? Kin git, kin I? So I kin; an' it's after 'im!"

"Ye ain't goin' to hurt him none, are ye?" asked Jimmy, anxiously.

But Pete, striking the back of his hat a violent blow, and muttering angrily to himself, made no reply.

On the top of the cliff, near Mr. Lovell's cabin, Captain Slater, panting from his exertions, hoarse and perspiring, stopped a moment to get his breath. He again mopped his face with the huge red handkerchief, then, with a grunt, strode toward the partly open door, almost colliding with Mr. Lovell, who was about to step outside.

"Captain Slater!" said the lumberman, in surprise.

"It's me, fast enough. I most tumbled over myself a-gittin' here. Lovell—"

"Yes, captain!"

"I wants a word with ye; an' if ye've got a chair as won't break down, I'll plump myself where I kin rest a bit."

"Come in, come in!" responded Mr. Lovell, with a smile; "I'm mighty glad to have you pay me a visit. As neighbors, we don't see each other often enough."

"I didn't come here to spill no fine-soundin' words," growled the captain, ungraciously. "What I'se got ter say is a-comin' straight from the shoulder." He dropped heavily on a chair in the office, and puffed a moment, finally exclaiming:

"Lovell, is them boys goin' after a gold mine?"

The two men looked each other squarely in the eye.

"They are," answered Mr. Lovell, calmly; "I suspected from Colliver's actions that he knew something about it, and now I know."

"Ye sartinly do! Lovell"—Cap Slater leaned over; his brawny fist banged down on a near-by desk—"Lovell, them two young lubbers ain't the only ones what knows it, either." He paused impressively. "Pete has went an' told some o' my men."

"I'm sorry to hear that, captain!"

"Ye know what the talk o' findin' gold will do, hey? It kin bust up a lumber camp, or anything else, quicker'n ye kin fire a lazy logger. An', wusser'n that, in this case, it kin put them lads in danger. They'll be follered."

Uncle Stanley, sorely disturbed, paced the room.

"You think so, Captain Slater?" he queried, anxiously.

"I sartinly do!"

"I only wish I had known this an hour ago. They never should have been allowed to go—never!"

A shadow fell across the doorway; Pete Colliver, his face wearing an impudent grin, was staring in.

"There's the little sardine what done it, now!" said Cap Slater, wrathfully. "If I was you, Lovell, I wouldn't stan' him an' his impudence around this camp three minutes longer; I'd chuck 'im out so hard he'd never stop rollin'."

"It ain't ye what could do it, old feller," snarled Pete, with a leer, "an' I gives ye a bit o' advice—don't start nothin'!"

Highly enraged, Captain Slater sprang to his feet, but Mr. Lovell's restraining hand stopped him.

"One moment, captain!" he said, firmly. "Pete!" he turned toward the stocky lad. "I am amazed at your conduct. Do you know that your reckless talk may put boys who have always treated you well to annoyance, and, perhaps, danger? What have you to say for yourself?"

"I has plenty to say; an' I ain't skeered to say it, nuther," answered Pete, defiantly folding his arms and stepping inside. "Nobody has anythin' on me. That there

crowd thought I wasn't good nuff fur 'em. An' if I couldn't t'row any one o' the lot in five seconds, my name ain't Pete. None o' 'em didn't want me along, hey? An' jist 'cause I work in the woods an' don't wear no swell suits with fancy fixin's! Ye needn't wobble yer head, old codger; it weren't fur nothin' else. An' I says," Pete's face grew redder with excitement and anger, "'I don't keer if I does spile their little game.' They ain't got nuthin' on me."

"Ye rewengeful young toad!" bellowed Captain Slater.

Mr. Lovell again interposed.

"Leave the room, Pete," he said, sternly, "and you needn't return to the woods at present—not until—"

"Fired, eh—fired!" howled Pete, misunderstanding. "Wal, did ye ever hear anythin' to beat that? An' all 'cause Old Slater ain't got the sense o' a grasshopper. Fired, hey? Wal, I'm glad o' it! Mebbe I wasn't sick of this place, anyway. Jimmy, I say, Jimmy—I'm t'row'd out! Wal, Pete ain't askin' ter stay, is he? If this isn't the meanest—"

"Colliver, leave the room instantly!" thundered Mr. Lovell.

Shaking with anger, Pete flourished his fist toward Captain Slater, turned on his heel and stamped outside, where Jimmy, who had been eagerly peering in at the window, joined him.

"Is it true, Pete?" he asked, breathlessly. "Fired?"

"Yes! An' old Cap Slater done it! Here, you Jimmy, come along with me." And in the same fashion that the captain had served him a short time before he dragged Jimmy to the edge of the clearing, where he tripped him up on the dry grass.

Pete's eyes were now shining with a peculiar light. He glanced around to see that no one was near, then, flopping himself beside Jimmy, he exclaimed in a hoarse voice:

"Say! What's to prewent me an' you from a-follerin' that fine crowd, hey?"

"Oh!" cried Jimmy, somewhat bewildered.

"I say, what's ter prewent our lookin' fur the gold mine ourselves? Ain't I been t'row'd right down afore the captin'g? Ain't that the limit? Think I'll stan' fur anythin' like that, Jimmy?"

Jimmy thought not.

"Wal, ye ain't wrong there. Mebbe we kin find out where it is. They ain't got no more right to it'n we have. 'Sides, can't we have the bulliest time a-huntin'? Are you with me in this?"

Jimmy was now sitting bolt upright.

"In with ye, Pete?" he gasped; "I reckon I be! Whoop! Won't we—"

"Close down!" Pete's hand fell sharply on Jimmy's shoulder. "Don't be like the big un. What are ye a-starin' at?"

"I ain't starin' at nothin'. I was a-wonderin' how in the dickens we could git to that 'ere gold mine fust."

A fierce scowl passed across Pete's face; his fists were clenched; he rose to his feet, and, after an instant, picked up a switch with which, to Jimmy's relief, he began to lash the tops of the grass.

"I knows a heap sight more'n anybody thinks I does," he growled. "One day, I—I—is any one a-comin'? No! Wal, one day, I seen 'em all lookin' at a drawin' clos't to the winder—heard the big un say as how Bob Somers done it."

Jimmy grunted rather dubiously.

"So up I crep'," went on Pete. "Jist fur fun, ye understan'—there ain't nothin' mean 'bout me. An'—say—if we could git a-holt o' that thing, eh?" He wagged his head knowingly.

"Ye—ye wouldn't swipe it?" cried Jimmy, aghast.

"Of course not; but—but, if Somers was ketched alone some day! See the p'int, Jimmy? He might git kind o' scared, eh?"

Pete felt his muscular arms.

"Wouldn't s'prise me," admitted Jimmy.

"An' he'd fork it out fur a spell. If I'd know'd I was a-goin', it wouldn't have been me who would have gived the thing away to Slater's men." He kicked the turf spitefully.

"An' them fellers ain't got sense nuff to git over the mountains fast, like you an' me," remarked Jimmy, presently. "Think we kin ketch up with 'em, Pete?"

"Bet yer life! Let's hit the trail fur Wild Oak to onct. Why, even if we only jist gits there as soon as them, Jimmy, they can't stake off the hull earth; a little piece'll be left fur me an' you. A gold mine is worth bil-bil-billions."

"Billions!" said Jimmy, staggered. "Why—why, that's an awful lot, ain't it?"

"Ye kin bet it is. We'll git our guns now; an' beat it afore old Cap Slater comes out; 'cause, if he gives me any more o' his gab, I'd be fur a-huntin' wengeance, sure. Fired, eh!—fired! Pete Colliver'll show 'em; by gum, he will! I can't hardly wait, Jimmy; come on!" And, shaking his fist toward Mr. Lovell's cabin, the stocky boy walked away, closely followed by his chum.

It didn't take them very long to gather together what belongings they could readily carry. The two had practically lived all their lives in the deep forest, and, as long as they had a few rounds of ammunition, felt perfectly safe.

When the two, a few minutes later, hurriedly left the men's cabin, fired with new and strange feelings, neither heard the call which Mr. Lovell sent through the air nor saw the lumberman trying to attract their attention.

"If them two loses theirselves off the face o' the earth, it 'ud be a mighty good thing fur the old planet, I'm a-thinkin'," growled Cap Slater. "Let 'em toddle. I'm a-goin', Lovell." And, without further ceremony, the former steamboat captain turned and began to walk toward a logging road which connected the two camps.

Old Cap Slater felt in no mood to enjoy the sights and sounds of the forest. His feet ploughed through the dry leaves and sent them flying. He had no eye for the swiftly changing effects of sunlight and shadow, which one moment made the woods extend off into fairylike traceries of brown and gold, and the next transformed their depths into gray, somber masses. His brow was still contracted, and sometimes he grunted in an angry fashion.

In a little more than half an hour the captain came in sight of a collection of log buildings, and heard the sound of his own sawmills mingling their hum with the soughing of the tree tops. Leaving the road, he made for the heart of the forest, soon reaching a snorting donkey engine, the cable of which, winding slowly around a drum, dragged a prostrate tree along a skid road.

"Daubert!" he yelled, hoarsely; "Daubert!" And, as no answer was returned, he drew from his pocket a whistle, and sent a piercing sound over the air.

Ted Daubert, foreman, soon located the lumberman, and came hurrying toward him, with a worried look on his bronzed, weather-beaten face.

"Daubert,"—Slater folded his arms—"how many o' the men has quit work this mornin'?"

"Eh?" The foreman seemed to start. "How did ye know, Cap'n? Why, ye left

camp afore—"

"I'm askin' questions, not answerin' 'em; quick now!"

"Five!"

"An', by gum, I s'picion I knows who some o' 'em is, too—big Jim Reynolds, eh? Wal, he ain't so bad! Who else?"

"Tom Smull, Alf Griffin, Bart Reeder, an' Dan Woodle."

"As sartain as ye ain't a speckled trout, Daubert, I know'd Smull an' Griffin had toted theirselves off; they's the wust o' the lot. Git my horse ready; an' tell that lazy cook o' oun to stuff every scrap o' grub he kin find inter the saddle-bags—d'ye hear? What's yer mouth open fur, hey?"

"Kin I ask where yer a-goin', Cap'n?"

"Ye kin ask, but you'll git no answer. Do what I tell yer. An', Daubert"—the captain raised a stubby forefinger and shook it warningly under the foreman's nose—"if everything ain't all right when I gits back ter camp there'll be an explosion that'll fire the hull shootin' match clean inter the next state—understan'? That's somethin' fur ye all to bear in mind."

Daubert knew from experience that further questions were useless. He walked, grimly silent, by the captain's side, as they made their way to the log buildings. The lumberman's instructions were immediately followed.

At length Captain Slater, mounted on a speckled horse and resting an old-fashioned gun across the saddle, uttered a gruff command and flapped his reins.

There was no backward glance from the cold gray eyes as he rode away, a stern, commanding figure, erect as a general on the field. His form scarcely seemed to sway, though the animal crashed through tall grass and bushes, on a steady gallop toward the road.

The captain's grizzled, weather-beaten face wore a look which plainly showed that, like a knight errant of old, he was ready and eager for battle; no danger—nothing—could daunt him.

A moment more, and the intervening trees shut from view the speckled horse and his determined rider.

CHAPTER VII

THE INDIAN

Wanatoma, aged warrior and friend of the boys, sat before his log cabin in the midst of the forest wilderness. He had retreated to this lonely spot when increasing years robbed him of his power as chieftain. Wanatoma could not bear to see himself supplanted by a younger man. The braves no longer circled before him in wild, fantastic dances; his voice in the council of the tribe carried with it but little weight; so, proudly, he had withdrawn to the solitude, where nature, kinder than man, makes no distinction between youth and age.

The Indian's black hair was streaked with gray; his once powerful shoulders were slightly bent; his eyes were dimmed, but the fiery spirit of the warrior still smouldered within him; he quailed before neither man nor beast.

For a companion he had a Great Dane, a dog of enormous size and strength, generally tractable, but which his master, if he chose, could transform into a savage animal almost as formidable as a panther.

Wanatoma's log cabin was situated upon a level stretch on the side of a high hill. Close by towered a wall of barren rock crowned by a thick growth of timber.

It was early on the evening preceding the departure of the boys. The Indian, wrapped in a blanket, had taken a position near a good-sized fire, for the gusts of wind sweeping by were chill and frosty. The Great Dane, stretched at full length, lay a few feet away.

As Wanatoma saw the dog's head suddenly raised and his ears twitch forward, he stopped his almost ceaseless rocking to peer intently toward the west. In another moment, the Dane, with a low, ominous growl, rose to his feet and started off; but a soft word from Wanatoma brought him to a halt.

"Ugh!" grunted the Indian.

Presently he walked to the brow of the hill, keeping his eyes stolidly fixed on the line of woods below. Although the sky was still bright and clear, the landscape was fast deepening in the twilight. Trees, bushes and tangled thickets seemed rapidly merging together in somber masses; the rocks alone maintained their sharpness.

Wanatoma's eyes and ears did not serve him well, so, with a sigh, he leaned against a sapling and waited, while the Dane began to growl and show an array of dangerous-looking teeth. Only a few sharply-spoken words prevented him from dashing down the slope, and when, several minutes later, a sudden crackling of twigs sounded he answered with a deep bay that echoed weirdly from the surrounding hills.

"I wonder what for the white man come now?" murmured the Indian. "Mebbe boys; mebbe not—we see."

The crackling which had ceased began again; voices, too, came over the intervening space; evidently a party was forcing its way through the brush, and an occasional angry exclamation showed it to be not an altogether pleasant task. Then shadowy shapes came into view, gradually detaching themselves from the background, until five separate forms stood upon a rocky ledge a short distance below the Indian.

"Hello—hello, Wanna!" came a salutation, in a rough voice. "Is your dog loose?"

"He no hurt white man. Who?"

There was no answer to this, but the crackling began once more; the men, panting from their exertions, disappeared behind a mass of bushes, then reappeared, and soon four struggled up the remaining stretch to where Wanatoma, with folded arms, stood waiting.

The fifth held back; in the dim light, he had caught a glimpse of a huge dusky form from which now and then came an angry growl.

"How!" exclaimed Wanatoma. He solemnly shook the hands extended toward him. "Cap Slater's men! What for you come—not to see Indian?"

"Jist to hev a few words with ye," laughed one. He was a big powerful man with a deep voice. "Hey, Tom Smull," he yelled, "don't be skeered. Some o' me fren's, Wanna; Alf Griffin, Bart Reeder an' Dan Woodle. Come up here, Tom Smull! 'Member me, Injun—Jim Reynolds?"

"Hey thar, make 'im tie up that critter; he's big nuff to chaw a man's leg off," came from Tom Smull.

"Dog no hurt." Wanatoma looked at his visitors searchingly. "You have something to say to Indian? What?"

"I kin tell ye mighty quick," began Griffin, but a sharp thrust in the ribs stopped

him.

"We jist wanted to ask ye a few questions, friendly like." Jim Reynolds grinned, shot a glance over his shoulder at the indistinct form of Tom Smull, and patted Wanatoma's shoulder. "Me an' you has allus been good friends, eh?" he asked.

The Indian nodded gravely and walked forward, speaking sharply to the Great Dane.

Tom Smull, seeing that nothing had happened to his friends, and not enjoying the rough sallies flung toward him, took courage, coming up as the others ranged themselves around the fire. He was a short man of powerful physique, with long, sandy hair and bushy eyebrows, and wore a thick, stubby beard. The ends of a red handkerchief tucked around his neck flapped in the breeze. Nature had been sparing of its favors to the lumberman. Perhaps this was one of the reasons why Tom Smull's disposition resembled that of a surly bear.

"Yes, Wanna, we jist wanted to ask a few friendly questions," repeated Jim Reynolds. "We've hearn tell that ye know somethin' 'bout a gold mine; an' that ye've told them boys what has been stayin' over to Lovell's camp whar it is."

"An' if that ain't a fine thing to do, when men as ye hev know'd fur years is a-slavin' in the woods; an' ye could jist as well hev—"

"Cut it out, Tom Smull!" roared Jim Reynolds. "Now, Wanna, bein' as you an' me hev been sich good fren's, we kinder thought as how ye might let us in on it. Ye kin count on big Jim Reynolds doin' the squar' thing by the boys—an' you, too, Injun. An' 'sides, it ain't a bit likely them youngsters kin find it. So we know'd we jist had to ask ye, an' out ye'd come with it, eh, Wanna?"

But little daylight now filtered between the trees; gloomy darkness was fast settling over the forest; a brisk fire threw a dancing glimmer upon Wanatoma's picturesquely garbed figure and bronzed face. For an instant his beady eyes flashed strongly, then the stolid expression returned. He looked calmly at Reynolds and his rough companions, all of whom were glaring eagerly toward him.

"How does white man know?" he asked.

"How?" echoed Griffin. "Don't make no difference, Injun; we know it, an' that's enough."

"We'll do the squar' thing by ye, Wanna," Reynolds again said, persuasively. "Whar is the mine?"

Wanatoma stood silent.

"Yes! Whar is it?" roared Tom Smull, paying no heed to Reynolds' warning glances. "We're bound to know, Injun. Ain't that right, boys?"

A loud chorus of gruff assents came from the lumbermen.

"Indian does not choose to tell," said Wanatoma, quietly.

Tom Smull and Alf Griffin's voices rose in angry protest.

"Ye'd better tell us peaceable-like," roared Tom, "or it'll be the wuss fur ye. We hain't walked our legs 'most off, besides fallin' over rocks, an' gittin' ketched in all sorts o' thickets, to hear no sich words as them."

"I should say we hain't!" cried Griffin; "an' it won't pay to go ag'in what we says, nuther, Injun."

"Go slow, boys," whispered Jim Reynolds; "yer spilin' the hull business."

"Git out! Smull an' me kin do the trick," growled Griffin. He cast an anxious look at the Great Dane, which sat on his haunches close beside his master. "Will ye answer, Wanna—yes or no?"

"Indian no tell."

"But see here, Injun—"

Reynolds, with an emphatic wave of his hand, cut short Griffin's angry voice, and said:

"Honest, Wanna, it ain't right to let a parcel o' boys have it all, when hard-workin' men, an' fren's o' yourn at that, need it so much wusser'n they."

"Ye couldn't expect none o' us to stan' fur it, nuther," said Bart Reeder, a tall, slender, freckle-faced man.

"We ain't a-wantin' to rob the boys, understan'," put in Dan Woodle. "Did ye ever hear anybody say a word ag'in big Jim Reynolds? He's a squar' man, all right; an' when he says the boys'll have their share he means it, eh, Jim?"

Jim nodded earnestly.

"Ye kin bet I do," he said. "It'll be share and share alike."

"Prowidin' me an' you agree to it," remarked Griffin, in a low tone, to his chum, Tom Smull.

There was an instant of silence. The lumbermen crowded eagerly around the

aged warrior, whose stolid face, turned full toward them, shone brightly in the firelight. From the mysterious, somber depths of the forest came a low, mournful roar, as the ever-increasing breeze swayed the tree tops.

"Indian has spoken," said Wanatoma, slowly. "He is a friend of the white man. But boys save Indian's life, and Wanatoma can no forget. I give promise, and always does the Indian keep his promise. Is the white man like that, or does he change as the wind?"

His voice was stern; he stood out among the rough lumbermen a dignified figure, unyielding to either flattery or threats.

"Wal, kin ye beat that?" cried Tom Smull, violently. "We didn't come this far to hear all them fine words, eh, Griffin? Are you fellers a-goin' to stan' fur this?"

"No—no!" yelled Griffin.

"If ye don't tell us to onct, ye'll be the sorriest-lookin' Injun what ever hit this part o' the state!" Tom Smull shook his fist. "I asks ye ag'in, will ye tell us whar that gold mine is?"

"No!"

Wanatoma's stern voice vibrated with decision.

"Ye won't, hey?" snarled Tom Smull. "Ye'll be changin' yer mind purty quick, I'm a-thinkin', Injun!"

"An' that's whar ye're right, Tom!" yelled Griffin. "We'll see! If soft chatter don't bring him, somethin' else will!"

Forgetting caution, in his rage and disappointment, and hoping to frighten the Indian by strenuous methods, the lumberman sprang forward. Wanatoma, calm and unflinching, faced him.

A great dusky form suddenly rose high from the ground, while a deep-toned bay sent the astonished men falling back in a panic. Alf Griffin had a glimpse of a pair of savage eyes and an open mouth, but his wild howl of terror was stifled, as a crushing weight thudded against his chest.

He went flying over backward, rolled into a mass of brush, and, next instant, the Great Dane, snarling savagely, was standing over his prostrate form. Griffin, too terrified to move, felt a hot breath fan his cheek, and gave a smothered yell for help. He was convinced that his last moment had come.

The lumbermen stood motionless, none daring to approach the infuriated dog.

Smull flashed a weapon.

But Wanatoma, with upraised hand, sprang forward. A few sharp commands, and the Dane backed slowly away, uttering another thrilling bay.

"He who has no respect for Indian's white hair must suffer," said Wanatoma, in a voice that trembled. "I want peace; but, listen, Big Jim, always is the Indian ready for battle, and has no fear."

He stood erect, facing the silent men, defiance in every line of his bronzed, aged face.

Still shaking with terror, Alf Griffin struggled to his feet, and, with his eyes fixed on the Great Dane, slunk quickly behind his companions.

There was something in the old warrior's manner which impressed the rough lumbermen with a feeling of awe. Jim Reynolds spoke up:

"Ye only got what ye desarved, Alf Griffin, an' I tell you right now that any man what tries to do Wanatoma harm has Big Jim Reynolds to reckon with. Me an' him is still fren's, even if he won't tell us 'bout the mine. But, Wanna," he paused an instant, "I'm a squar' man, an' gives ye fair warnin'; I s'picion we knows nigh 'bout whar that mine is located. Anyhow, it won't be hard to trail them boys; an' I reckon if a gold strike is ever staked out the ones that are goin' to do it are standin' right here. So-long, Wanna."

The Indian, with folded arms, nodded gravely, and watched the men file out into the darkness.

But a moment more, and the flaring light had detached them from the somber background for the last time; their forms suddenly melted into gloom, and only the sound of crackling twigs and stumbling feet told of the presence in the wilderness of other human beings beside the Indian.

Wanatoma, almost motionless as a statue, gazed at the gloom of the hillside, at the stars which were beginning to show faintly above; then, as the weird, shrill cry of some nocturnal bird jarred over the air, he sighed, and turned toward the fire.

The blanket was wrapped around his form again. With his hand on the Great Dane's head, he began to rock to and fro on his rude log seat, gazing into the depths of the fire, as though he could read in the glowing flames what the future held in store for the youthful searchers after the Rambler Club's Gold Mine.

CHAPTER VIII

MIDNIGHT

"Well, how are you goin' to find Mr. Lovell among about five thousand people?" asked Jack Conroy. "Say somethin', Timmy."

"Let's hunt up the steamboat landing," suggested Tim. "Don't believe many people got off the boat, and everybody 'ud notice a stranger. If Uncle Stanley intended going to a hotel, maybe he asked directions, an' one of the natives still lazying on the string-piece heard him."

"How do you know one's lazying there?" asked Tom.

"There always is, son; it's a universal custom. Where's the steamboat landing, boy?"

An urchin, holding a fishing pole in one hand, and staring open-mouthed at the crowd, pointed along the wharves.

"'Tain't more'n ten minutes' walk," he answered. "Want me to help carry yer stuff? Sure ye do."

Hearing his words, four other boys dashed over, and the owner of the fishing pole was unceremoniously pushed aside.

Bob laughingly settled the loud wrangle which began.

"Each one of you chaps grab something," he commanded. "Come on, fellows."

Armed with their guns, the seven walked briskly to the street, a wide thoroughfare running along the water-front, with low buildings and an occasional sleepy-looking warehouse.

There were but few people about. A goat, defiantly tossing its head, blocked the way, so the boys laughingly walked around it.

Soon the street rose steeply, winding close to the edge of a hill, where they stopped a moment to look at the waves breaking against its base. A hundred yards further along, a picturesque wooden bridge spanned a small stream which came into view from behind a mass of tumble-down shacks.

Then they reached a level stretch bordered on both sides by tall trees. A long pier with a glaring white sign indicating its use was soon after sighted.

"By Jove, if he isn't actually there, Tim!" cried Jack, with a chuckle.

"Who—who—Uncle Stanley?" exclaimed Tim.

"No; the lazy chap I spoke about. And there's another one, besides."

"Then let's interview the two who typify the universal custom," laughed Dave.

In a few moments the seven, with Jack Conroy in the lead, walked out on the wharf, and approached a small, grizzly-faced man who sat near the far end, dangling his feet over the edge.

His eyes ran over them curiously, but he did not change his position.

"Afternoon!" remarked Jack, pleasantly. "How do you do, sir? Takin' it easy, eh?"

"Middlin'; can't say no more," answered the old man, with a drawl. "I ain't got nuthin' to do, an' hev plenty o' time to do it in."

"Better'n bein' rushed about it," grinned Jack. "Say, were you here when the boat came in?"

"I reckon!"

"Did you see a gentleman with a brown beard and wearing spectacles get off?"

The old man appeared to meditate.

"Did I see a gentleman with a brown beard, an' wearin' specs git off?" he repeated, slowly.

"How about it?" asked Tim, eagerly. "Did you?"

"No; I calc'late as how I didn't. Why?"

"Oh, ginger! We just wanted to know."

"That's what most people asks questions fur; an' allus they wants sumphin fur nothin'. Whar d'ye come from, hey?"

"From the place we last stopped," laughed Jack. He fished out a dime from his pocket. "Would you mind accepting this?"

"Never declined nothin' in me life; an' I ain't young nuff ter begin now," grumbled the old chap, extending his hand. "Thank'ee. Ask Luke Jarrett over

thar. Everybody looks alike to me ten feet away."

Luke Jarrett admitted having watched a brown-bearded man wearing glasses until he disappeared down the road. "An' he was a-walkin' like all creation," he confided.

"In the direction o' Wild Oak?" asked Jack, eagerly.

"Ye hit it right. No, I didn't hear 'im ask no questions o' nobody; he jest lit out."

"Which means," said Bob, "that we'll have to light out, too. How far is it—about five miles, eh?"

Dave groaned, while Jack protested vigorously.

"Five miles! Great Scott! An' with all our stuff! Let's find a rig."

"Get out," sniffed Dick. "We can hire Luke and the biggest of these boys; how about it, Bob?"

Bob's eyes lighted up quizzically.

"If we can't stand five miles on a nice, smooth road, fellows—why—"

"It would look mighty bad for us ever reaching that Jabberwock," said Dave, very softly. He smiled. "Anyway, we've proved that universal customs are sometimes good things."

A bargain was quickly made with Luke and two of the boys; then, flinging a good-bye to the old chap on the string-piece, the crowd started off.

It was just the kind of weather for walking. The cool, brisk air sent the blood tingling through their veins. The road fell steadily behind, and within a quarter of an hour houses were passed only at intervals. Upon looking back from a height, they saw Rawdon spread out, a confused mass of grayish buildings climbing up and down gentle slopes, while beyond lay farmhouses and rugged hills. Range after range extended off, until the gloomy gray sky seemed to creep down and shut them from view.

The road soon left the Columbia River, keeping so far inland that it disappeared entirely.

"Wouldn't it be fine if we should meet Uncle Stanley on the way?" remarked Tim; "eh, Bob?"

"It might not be so fine for the Jabberwock," answered Bob, with a grim smile. "Unless," he added, a sudden thought having come to him, "your uncle's changed

his mind, Tim, and intends going with us."

"Ginger; I wonder if that can be!" murmured Tim. "Say, Bobby—I wonder!"

One by one the chipped and dingy milestones were passed, and by late afternoon Wild Oak came into view. All heaved a great sigh of relief.

"I couldn't have stood it for another twenty-four hours," grinned Dick. "Who'd want to live in a hilly place like this, eh, Sam?"

The way led down the side of a steep slope, and rose again, looming up grimly in shadow, on the opposite side. Between great oak trees which lined the road glimpses of houses and whitewashed fences were seen; and, presently, Tom exclaimed:

"Hello, there's that building with a tower; what is it, Luke?"

"Wild Oak Hotel," answered Jarrett.

"Is there any other?"

"Nope!"

"Let's steer for it," advised Bob; "most likely Mr. Lovell went straight there."

"'Twon't do ye a bit o' good," said Luke; "it ain't open now; only ketches visitors as is daffy enough to come hyar durin' the summer."

"Oh!" cried Tim, disappointedly.

"The feller as owns it is Phil Irwin, a ranchman; has a cattle ranch over to Marlin Springs, seven mile from 'ere; owns lots o' hosses, too. They calls 'im 'Cattle King Irwin.'"

"Good!" cried Bob, in a tone which instantly caused the other boys to stare toward him.

"Good?" murmured Dick. "Why? I can't quite catch the point."

"Oh, it isn't a sticker," laughed Bob. "A ranchman, ranch-house and horses! Catch on?"

"The idea has lodged within," exclaimed Tim, tapping his forehead. "Bully for you, Bob. Only hope the cattle king'll spare us about nine good mustangs."

Another fifteen minutes took them down by the shore, along the main street of Wild Oak. Several roads branched off from this, all lined with small houses and stores.

The crowd, with their retinue of baggage-carriers, immediately created an enormous sensation. Children, a scattering of men, besides numerous feminine members of the population, viewed them with absorbing interest.

Jack Conroy, cool as usual and grinning broadly, began to ask questions right and left. Had any one seen a brown-bearded gentleman wearing spectacles?

Several had.

"He was walkin' up an' down this here street fur a spell," volunteered a tall lad.

"No; didn't see where he got to. Hev ye tried the mill?"

"I'll go over and find out," said Tim.

"The rest of us had better divide up into parties, and do a bit of scouting," suggested Bob.

This idea was applauded.

"Go ahead, boys," urged Dave, laughingly. He sprawled down on a bit of turf. "If Mr. Lovell comes this way I won't let him get by."

"Goodness, what tremendous energy!" snickered Jack.

Luke Jarrett and the two boys agreed to lend their assistance, and within a few minutes the stout boy was left alone to guard their stuff and keep a lookout for the lumberman.

He had not been settled in a comfortable position very long before he saw Sam Randall and Dick Travers pushing toward him on a loping trot.

"I say, Dave," almost yelled the latter, in a state of great excitement, "Mr. Lovell hired a rig and went back to Rawdon; some man saw him. Gee! Wish those other chaps would come up. Just think of having to hoof it all the way back there to-night."

"That's all I'm going to do—think about it," said Dave, decidedly.

"But—but—"

"No force could possibly budge me."

The others finally came up, and listened gloomily.

"There isn't a particle o' use in the whole crowd going," argued Tim; "let's draw lots."

"All right," agreed Bob.

A few minutes later six were howling with merriment, while Tommy Clifton, highly indignant, held a paper which had written upon it the word "stung."

"Tommy's scared," grinned Jack.

"Scared nothing!" snapped Tom, hotly. "I'll show you if I'm scared."

Bob leaned over and whispered in the stout boy's ear:

"I'll go with him, Dave. Mind? Not a bit of it."

Tommy was scowling suspiciously.

"Quit your kidding, Bob," he said. "Come on, Luke, and you chaps. Humph—scared! Jacky might be, but I'm not; no siree! What! you're coming along? Gee!" A smile of keen satisfaction lighted his eyes, but Tommy's voice was still grumbling as he added: "Huh, but you fellows do sometimes make me tired."

After arranging where to meet, Bob Somers and Clifton began trudging off, with the others straggling in the rear. The crowd watched them until their figures had disappeared around a curve.

Sam Randall declared that there was nothing very pleasant in the prospect of loafing about Wild Oak for goodness knows how many hours, and all but Dave agreed.

Nothing could induce the latter to budge from a comfortable position; he treated threats, scorn and persuasion with equal indifference, smiling broadly all the time. And so they lingered until dusk began to settle down; then the five picked up their luggage, and, with many sighs and groans under its weight, sauntered down in the direction of the lumber-yard and sawmill.

It was a dingy, dark locality by the board fence, with piles of lumber towering high above. Pools had collected in the street; heaps of refuse lay about. So the crowd hurried along at a good clip. They walked out on the sawmill wharf to look at the Columbia, still tossing angrily, while dark, stormy clouds scudded before the wind.

"Seems that the universal custom is not in force here," remarked Dave, dryly.

"Oh, it's only because it's too near a place where people have to work," said Tim. "Let's skip."

The lamplighter was leaving a trail of feeble, glimmering spots to mark his progress; lights began to sparkle from cottage windows; starlike points, seemingly poised in space, suddenly started up on the hills. It was all very dark

and dreary; and voices which they occasionally heard had a strange, uncanny sound.

Jack Conroy began to have uncomfortable thoughts of moonless nights in the mountain wilderness, with, perhaps, wild animals prowling about, or high precipices, unseen in the blackness, close to their camp.

"If finding that Jabberwock is as hard as finding supper in Wild Oak, we're going to have a tough time," grumbled Dick, softly. "Don't people have to eat out here, I wonder?"

"An' some o' these natives may hear a few wild croaks if we don't get it mighty soon," laughed Tim. "Hadn't we better yell for help?"

But the difficulty was at length solved by a passer-by, who directed them to a very hilly street where they found the Wild Oak Restaurant, a little frame building surrounded by a group of stately trees.

With sighs of thankfulness, they entered; each threw his load in a corner, while the astonished and agitated proprietor, who would have bravely faced a band of outlaws, stood nervously wondering whether their guns were loaded and might be accidentally discharged.

Of course they ordered the best in the house, and managed to spend a wonderful amount of time over each dish that was set before them. It was the only known occasion when a piece of pie remained on Dave Brandon's plate for more than one minute and thirty seconds.

An anxious expression settled over the proprietor's face, and finally he approached, smiling discreetly.

"I—er—er—I generally close up 'bout nine o'clock," he began, hesitatingly, "an'—"

"There isn't much chance o' your doin' it to-night, old chap," grinned Jack Conroy, calmly.

"Eh?" said the man, looking bewildered.

The big boy quickly explained, and then Dave, with eyes blinking, spoke up:

"If you have any extra mattresses and a lot of straw you might be able to put us up for the night."

"Ha, ha! Nice way o' puttin' it! Ye kin hev a room, sure," answered the man, promptly, "an' some o' them blankets you've toted with yer ought to take the

hardness out o' the floor. I'll keep open as late as ye like; but day prices don't go at night—understan'? I can't afford to lose nothing."

"You won't," assured Jack.

A bargain was finally struck, and the boys, with minds at ease, settled back contentedly. The hours slipped by with provoking slowness; conversation lagged; Dave fell asleep, while the others yawned and stretched.

Finally a dingy old clock on the dingiest of old mantelpieces rang out in quavering strokes the hour of eleven.

"Can't stand this any more, fellows," exclaimed Dick, drowsily. "Who wants to take a spin—you, Jack? Well, come ahead. I say, Dave—Dave!"

"Lemme be," mumbled the stout boy. And Dick, who had leaned over to tickle him with a straw, found his wrists seized in a vise-like grip. "Don't bother," laughed Dave; "I'm coming."

The proprietor opened the door to let them out.

A shaft of light fell across the street, and lighted up in ghostlike patches the old rugged oak whose branches almost swept against the corner of the house. In the silence of the night, their footsteps clattered noisily, as they began to trudge down a steep slope.

From one street into another the boys turned, each seeming more dismal than the last. Here and there oil lamps threw weird-shaped lights over gray stuccoed walls, and fantastic shadows trailed across, to lose all outlines in shapeless patches of dark.

At the base of a hill, a lonely lamp shot its rays upon a wooden bridge, and disclosed high banks upon its borders, while a fresh rippling gurgle told of a stream rushing swiftly over a rocky bed. The strong odor of weeds and moisture-laden air came up from the dark depths into which they peered.

"Ugh!" shivered Jack. "Spookish, eh? Worse'n bein' right out in the woods."

"It's something to stir the imagination, fellows," yawned Dave, sleepily.

"And send cold chills down one's spine, too," said Sam. "Listen—was that anything? Bob's going to signal, you know."

"Nothin' but a dog barkin'," answered Jack, presently.

"And Bob's voice never sounded anything like that," chuckled Dick. "Feels like

the edge of the world here; Hobgoblinville. Are those buildings or trees back there?"

"Suit yourself," said Dave. He drew from his pocket a huge note-book, and, leaning against the rail, began to write.

"Another inspiration," chirped Sam.

"Those illusive words!" sighed the stout boy. "I can feel the whole thing—but how to grasp it!" He hastily dashed off several lines. "Anyway, the idea is there. Going?"

"Smell's already pushed me a yard," responded Jack.

They climbed another hill, walking slowly and sleepily, and, as time wore on, wandered through narrow lanes where the trees met overhead, trod the wooden sidewalks of broad, open streets, or stopped on some eminence to gaze off into the expanse of darkness.

"Midnight!"

Dave spoke the word as he stood, watch in hand, beneath a lamp which flickered in the breeze and sent forth through a broken pane a strong odor of coal-oil.

"If those chaps would only come!" sighed Sam.

Another half hour passed, then:

"Hello—there's the signal!" cried Dick Travers, excitedly.

Tired, sleepy feelings were as instantly swept away as though they had been treated to a cold shower-bath. All came to a halt, listening eagerly.

Another moment, and a peculiar call suggesting the hoot of an owl was borne to their ears.

"Hooray," burst out Tim, "it's Bob and Tommy sure!"

Regardless of the sensation which might be caused in sleepy Wild Oak, the five responded with tremendous effect.

An answer almost instantly followed the echoes of their lusty yells, and joyously the crowd walked toward Cattle King Irwin's hotel, the rendezvous agreed upon.

It was not long before a couple of shadowy figures appeared in view, passing before the dim light thrown by a far-off lamp.

With a whoop, Tim darted forward, the others following close at his heels.

They arrived panting, to find the envoys seated calmly on a door-step, with a head gazing wonderingly down upon them from a second story window.

"Well, well," cried Tim, breathlessly, "did you see Uncle Stanley?"

"We did not," answered Tom, wearily, "and for a very good reason, too; eh, Bob?"

"Why—why—"

The chorus of questions was stilled by Bob Somers.

"It's this way," he said; "one of the steamers bound east stopped at Rawdon this afternoon. We hunted up the agent, and he was sure, from our description, that Mr. Lovell got aboard. So the whole—"

"Thing is still a mystery," finished Tom.

A gruff voice floated down from above.

"Go on now—get away from here with all that gab, or 'twon't be no mystery what happens next."

A head thrust out of a window nodded vigorously.

"Oh!" cried Bob, looking up, somewhat startled.

"Where'd ye come from?"

"That's what they all ask. Beg your pardon, sir!"

"Beg your pardon, sir, also!" added Jack, with a grin.

Several other similarly polite remarks did not appease the wrath of the man above, so they started off, quite oblivious to the words hurled after them.

"Grouchy old gent!" murmured Jack.

"Never had such a walk before," Bob was saying. "Black as pitch; couldn't even see the road. Tired? Well, just a bit. Found a place for us to sleep, eh? That's great."

Tim's thoughts were running in another channel.

"See here, Bob," he asked, "what—what are we goin' to do about this thing?"

"Do!" Bob squared his broad shoulders aggressively. "Why, there's only one thing for us to do, Tim; and that is—" He waved his arm toward the north.

And the others understood, and cheered.

CHAPTER IX

THE BRONCHOS

It was late in the afternoon of the next day when the boys, following a well-defined cattle trail which led over range after range of hills and through broad valleys, came in sight of a collection of white buildings—the ranch-house and barns of Cattle King Irwin.

Eagerly they pushed ahead, watching with a satisfaction born of fatigue and hunger the outlines of the grim old structure slowly expanding before their eyes. It was a picturesque, time-stained building, L-shaped, two-storied, with a little tower rising from the center, rows of windows on all sides, and surrounded by a broad veranda.

The ranch-house wore a sleepy, deserted look, although a thin column of brownish smoke issuing from a chimney at the rear told of life within.

"Only hope he's home," murmured Jack, wearily. "Don't believe my back'll ever feel right again."

"It's been a mighty hard tug with all this stuff," admitted Bob, "but if everything goes right, Jack, we'll soon have a few sturdy broncs to take us the rest of the way. Hello! There's some one coming now."

The big square door of the ranch-house had suddenly swung open, and an enormous man stepped onto the piazza. He stood gazing earnestly in their direction, as if not quite certain of his eyes, then walked slowly down the steps to meet them.

"Gracious, isn't he a whopper?" whispered Dick.

"Talk about your giants," murmured Tom; "he's one."

But the big man's full-bearded face was lighted up with such a pleasant expression that any feeling of constraint which his size might have inspired was instantly dispelled.

"How do you do, sir?" Jack greeted him politely. "You are Mr. Cattle King Irwin, I suppose?"

"Bless me," exclaimed the ranchman, in a deep, rumbling voice, "where in the world did you boys come from?"

Dick chuckled at the familiar question, while the others repressed a smile with difficulty.

"Oh, we heard 'bout your havin' horses for sale, an' thought we'd drop over the hills an' take a look at a few."

"Horses! You're not dealers, are you?" Mr. Irwin's eyes twinkled. "Bless me, but this is the biggest surprise I've had for some time. Easy to see the lot of you have been living pretty much out in the open, too; brown as berries. Well, leave your stuff on the veranda and come in."

They followed his towering form into a great square apartment. The ceiling was raftered, and the walls paneled in oak. Near one corner stood a small table, while out in the room was another of greater length, with long benches on either side.

The big ranchman waved his hand.

"Plenty of chairs; a settee by the window—make yourselves at home, and tell me what all this means. How does it happen that youngsters like you are tramping around this lonely region?"

"I'll tell you," began Jack, easily; "my young friends here are out lookin' for a bit o' adventure, an' of course need some one to see after 'em; so I consented to come along an'—"

"Huh!" said Tom, in a voice so loud that general attention was attracted, whereupon Tommy, somewhat confused, jerked his finger toward Bob Somers. "He's the one, sir," he said. "Go ahead, Bob."

Jack grinned indulgently, and flopped down beside Dave, who was already comfortably installed on the settee.

The ranchman listened intently while Bob explained their errand. Sitting back in a chair which seemed to have been made expressly for him, his eyes ran over the group, an occasional "h'm" falling from his lips.

"Ever had any experience out in the wilderness?" he queried, presently.

"Well, I should rather say so," cried Dick. "Tell Mr. Irwin about the club, Bob, and some of our adventures."

With his hands clasped across his knees, the cattleman again assumed an easy attitude. His smile grew broader, and, as Bob finished, he broke into a deep,

rumbling laugh.

"So this is the Rambler Club," he said. "Well, well! I hope your feelings won't be hurt, boys, when I say that I've never heard of you."

"Never even heard o' Jack Conroy?" snickered Tim—"that big chap sittin' over there? The gentleman never heard o' you, Jacky; did you hear?"

"Nobody outside the range of his voice ever did," laughed Tom.

"Perhaps the high hills in this part of the country stopped our fame from getting past," said Bob, with a smile. "How about those horses, Mr. Irwin?"

The ranchman stroked his beard thoughtfully, then his glance swept them again.

"The only horses I have for sale at present," he said, slowly, "are skittish animals not very well broken, and if anything happened to you boys I should feel myself responsible."

"Just the kind of horses we want," cried Bob, enthusiastically; "eh, fellows? You needn't have a bit of fear on our account, Mr. Irwin; the whole crowd are jolly good riders. We'll prove it, too, if you like."

"You bet we will," came from Tim.

"And then another question," said Mr. Irwin, easing his huge form into a more comfortable position and smiling genially; "just let us suppose, for instance, that I have—er—er—well, a suspicious nature: then I might be justified in thinking, perhaps, that your parents wouldn't approve—er—er"—his deep laugh boomed forth again—"have you anything to show me?"

"Oh, yes," laughed Dick, "lots of letters."

"And that stout chap over there," put in Sam, "is our historian, poet and artist. Speak for yourself, Dave. He's writing a great volume about our travels—subscriptions taken now."

"You can put my name down if you'll agree to send the book out here by mail," laughed the ranchman. "Letters from your father, eh? Your name is Bob, I believe?" He glanced over them quickly. "Oh, it's all right; I thought it would be. Well, come out to the corral, boys."

From a rear door of the ranch-house he led the way toward a long line of barns, and, passing these, they saw ahead a rambling collection of sheds and solidly-built corrals.

To their left, an undulating farm meadow was covered with thousands of towering yellow haystacks extending off until they formed an apparently solid line against the gray hills beyond.

"An important part of the cattleman's business," explained Mr. Irwin, noticing the boys' interest. "This is for the winter feeding."

"Don't you ever graze your herds on government land?" asked Tim.

"Formerly I did, by paying so much per head; but now I prefer to have the stock behind my own wire fences. It required the services of many men to keep them within the proper limits. The sheepmen, of course, have the advantage there, for even large flocks are easy to manage."

"And the sheep-raisers and cattlemen used to have fierce scraps for the range, didn't they?" said Sam Randall.

"Yes, there was much trouble; it sometimes breaks out, even now," answered Mr. Irwin. "But the building of railroads, the coming of homesteaders and farmers, have blazed a trail of civilization which has forced the stockmen further and further back in the interior. The open range is fast becoming ancient history."

"And towns are springing up, too," put in Dave.

"Yes, it was bound to come." The cattle king sighed, as if recalling old times, adding: "You can see that under these changed conditions land is far too valuable to be used merely as a feeding ground for herds of roving cattle. But here we are, boys."

He opened an iron gate leading into one of the smaller corrals, and they entered.

The boys had before them a collection of as wicked-looking little bronchos as they had ever seen. At the intrusion, there immediately followed a tremendous commotion among the animals. Those close to the gate galloped away, swung around, pawed the ground, danced and capered about. Tails were lashing; neighs and snorts filled the air; a dull thud of pounding hoofs sounded.

"Gee!" murmured Jack Conroy.

"A lively lot," said the ranchman. "Some of the boys will be along pretty soon; they'll lasso 'em for you." He turned toward the entrance. "Hello, Buckley!" he yelled.

In a few moments, a tall, slim man came hurrying into the corral, to stare in

open-mouthed astonishment at the seven.

"When the boys get in, send them over," said the cattle king, tersely. "That's all, Buckley. See anything you like, Ramblers?—they're all good stock. Don't venture out too far—danger of getting bowled over, you know."

The ponies were all in motion again, now huddled together in a compact mass, then scattering over the turf, their swiftly-moving bodies intermingling, to form currents of changing color. As the din of hoofs grew louder, the yellow streamers of dust rose in thicker clouds.

Jack Conroy watched the interesting spectacle without bubbling over; his enthusiasm had never been at a lower ebb; indeed, he began to heartily wish they had never heard of Wanatoma or his gold mine.

Before very long several cowboys cantered up to the gate, entering in single file. They were garbed in the usual fashion—colored shirts, leather chaps, and broad-brimmed sombreros. From the pommels of their saddles flapped rawhide lariats.

A touch of their quirts, or whips, sent their ponies bounding past; but, in an instant, they pulled sharply up, huge grins overspreading their deeply-bronzed faces.

"Wal, wal, strangers!" exclaimed one. "If this hyar ain't the biggest collection o' tenderfeet I've ever seen to onct!"

"Tenderfeet!" echoed Tom, indignantly.

"We may look like 'em, pard," laughed Bob, "but it ends there."

"Let's see if you can toss those rawhides; we're going to thin out the corral," grinned Dick. "Broncs come cheaper by the dozen, don't they, Mr. Irwin?"

The cattleman laughed.

"Get busy, boys," he said. "We have a big deal on hand; the Rambler Club of Wisconsin is to be supplied with horses."

A tremendous guffaw came from the riders. They listened to the ranchman's instructions, unslung their lariats, and then rode further into the corral.

As the rawhide coils whipped and flashed through the air, the snorting bronchos fell back with lightning speed, crowding each other hard against the rough walls. Then, plunging and kicking, they spread out into a half-circle.

Zip! The noose settled down—one was caught; then another.

"Look out, fellows!" cried Jack, in sudden alarm.

The whole herd was stampeding in their direction.

Yelling like Indians, two of the cowboys galloped in front of the line of rapidly advancing horses, checked the mad rush, and when the seven, who had fallen back in undignified haste to the gate, looked around again the men were leading their unwilling captives toward them.

Fifteen minutes later, seven bronchos were tied to posts outside the corral.

Looking out for flying heels, the boys went eagerly from one to another studying their good points with critical eyes—that is, all but Conroy did. Jack had been hoping to find one broncho with nice, gentle, winning ways; but they all looked discouragingly alike, and he felt an almost irresistible desire to fall upon Cousin Tim, who, in an unnecessarily loud voice, was calling attention to their fiery dispositions.

The cowboys cantered back to the barns. They entered fully into the spirit of the occasion, glad to see new faces and have a crowd of boys to liven up the lonely ranch even for a short time.

In a few moments they returned on foot, loaded down with saddles and bridles. Then came another fight with the stubborn little animals which seemed to bring out all the wickedness in their make-ups.

Jack Conroy, leaning against the corral wall, felt his knees begin to tremble strangely. His eyes ran swiftly over the ponies, some curiously spotted, others evenly colored, and each vicious plunge they made sent an unpleasant thrill to his heart.

It wouldn't have mattered so much, he reflected grimly, if they were alone on the open prairie; but with all these grinning cowboys to see!

Jack gulped hard, trying to steady his unruly nerves; a fierce scowl puckered his forehead, for a curious grin had settled upon Tim Lovell's face, and Conroy felt pretty sure that he knew the reason why.

"Ready, boys?" the ranchman's deep voice boomed out.

Without an instant's hesitation, Bob Somers swung himself into the saddle. There was a loud snort, a flash of flying hoofs; a rearing pony pawed the air; but its rider coolly met every move. Down came his quirt on the pony's flank.

The animal gave a tremendous bound, and broke into a heart-breaking gallop. A

murmur of admiration came from the cowboys as Bob was whirled off in the direction of the haystacks.

"Kin ride ter beat all creation," commented one.

"Bravo!" cried Mr. Irwin.

The rider was soon hidden behind the yellow piles, a moment later reappearing far down the valley. They watched him turn and canter lazily back, and gave him a hearty cheer when he slipped from the saddle.

One by one the boys proved their horsemanship, and Conroy's turn came last. Jack felt that all eyes were upon him. Making a desperate effort to appear as if he had never enjoyed anything more in his life, he approached a tawny sorrel whose ears were held threateningly back.

A pair of wicked-looking eyes glared into his own. Jack devoutly wished himself a thousand miles away.

"If this isn't the worst o' the bunch, I'm a scarecrow," he groaned inwardly. "Why in thunder did I let those chaps have first choice?" He vaguely wondered if there were any nice soft spots around for him to fall upon. Then:

"Whoa, boy, whoa!" he whispered softly.

The broncho, his sides quivering ominously, stood still.

"Whoa, boy, whoa!"

Desperately, Jack put his foot in the stirrup, and, with a do-or-die look, vaulted quickly on the animal's back.

Then the hearts of the onlookers were thrilled by a startling exhibition.

With a maddened snort, the sorrel bounded high in the air. Down came its four legs in a bunch, sharp hoofs sending a shower of flying turf. Jack found himself on the animal's neck, struggling frantically to keep his hold, then tossed violently against the high-backed cowboy saddle.

For a moment it was a question of which way he would be sent flying. But Jack fought with all the courage and determination that was in him. Each movement of the vicious little animal jarred and jolted him with terrific force. Spectators, buildings and grounds all flashed before his eyes in confused streaks of light and dark.

"Good for you, Jack!"

Bob Somers' loud yell carried encouragement to the big boy's heart. He dug his knees hard against the heaving form, and just as it seemed beyond human endurance to stand that nerve-racking bucking another instant the sorrel quieted down and stood stock still, his dilated nostrils sending up clouds of steam.

Before the yells of "Bravo!" and "Bully boy!" had subsided, Jack Conroy slipped to the ground, handed the reins to one of the cowboys, and walked unsteadily to the corral wall, his head in a whirl.

"You've done splendidly, Conroy," exclaimed Mr. Irwin.

The big boy's brain was clearing; he began to swell up with pride.

"I knew I could manage him," he remarked, modestly. "A chap only has to make up his mind to tame 'em. A bronc can tell who's his master every time—remember that, fellows. It's keepin' up your nerve that counts. You see—"

"Oh, you can cut it out, Jacky," roared Tom. "Don't lean against that wall so hard. You might push it over."

"Well, there's one thing I can't allow you to cut out, and that is having supper with us," interposed the ranchman, with a smile; "eh, boys?"

The cow-punchers stood around grinning cheerfully as Bob spoke up:

"We're certainly obliged, Mr. Irwin. You can just bet we'll stay."

"Those seven broncs pulling all together couldn't drag us away," declared Dave, solemnly. "I feel dreadfully in need of rest."

It was growing late when they again entered the big, inviting room at the ranch-house. Two huge hanging lamps were lighted before the glow from a flaming sunset sky had entirely left the walls.

While the table was being arranged for supper, the cattle king concluded with Bob a bargain for nine bronchos, two to be used as pack horses.

"How about your provisions?" asked Mr. Irwin, finally.

"I suppose we'll have to get them in Rawdon," answered Bob.

"You'll do nothing of the sort." Mr. Irwin's tone was emphatic. "You know, with such a number of men to feed, we have to keep a well-stocked storehouse. I can let you boys have what is necessary." His laugh rumbled again. "Why—I might even make a profit out of the deal."

Bob smiled with satisfaction. Heartily thanking Mr. Irwin, he accepted the offer.

"Say, fellows!" he cried, raising his head.

"I tell you there's nothin' hard 'bout this broncho bustin'," came in Jack Conroy's voice. "It's easy—why, I remember the first time I got on a pony, Dick, I was nervous to beat the band. But now it's a hop, skip an' a jump. Eh—what's that, Bob—won't have to go to Rawdon for the grub?"

Bob's explanation brought forth a cheer, which made drowsy Dave Brandon sit up with a start.

They spent a jolly time at supper, and afterward there was more noise and fun in the big dining-room of the old ranch-house than its walls had echoed to in many years.

Cowboys related tales of the range; several of them who couldn't sing tried to, just the same; Bob gave a recitation, and Jack Conroy whistled what he declared to be an operatic air, causing most of his hearers to feel glad that it was his only selection. Mr. Irwin politely refrained from telling him that he was better at riding bronchos.

The cattleman insisted upon their spending the night at the ranch; so they finally bade the men good-night, gathered up their blankets and were conducted upstairs to a room in the wing.

"It's the only place I can offer you, boys," he said, regretfully. "Hope you'll be able to make yourselves comfortable."

The flashing rays of his lantern disclosed an apartment partly filled with odds and ends. Near one side a ladder led to the roof.

"Oh, we'll make out all right," laughed Bob.

A few minutes later the seven were alone. Two lanterns suspended from staples in the wall threw grotesque shadows over the rude board flooring.

"Isn't this the cheerful-looking place, though?" murmured Tom, shivering slightly. "Gee! Pretty near as bad as that bridge at Wild Oak."

"A heap worse, Tom," grinned Dick. "Inside spookiness beats outside ghostliness every time. But it won't bother me a little bit."

Their voices and footsteps echoed with a strange, hollow sound as they walked over the creaking boards.

"An' talkin' 'bout broncho bustin'," began Jack, suddenly, "why—"

"Who's talking about it?" chirped Tom, rudely. "Forget it, and let's turn in."

It wasn't very long before this advice was followed. They rolled themselves in blankets and selected the most comfortable places they could find. Conversation began to lag and soon stopped altogether.

Several hours must have passed, when Dave Brandon, turning over in an instant of wakefulness, caught through his half-closed eyes the vision of a dark form blurred against an open window.

With a startled exclamation, he hastily threw aside his blanket and sat up.

"That you, Dave?" Bob Somers' low whisper reached him. "Come on over."

The stout boy rubbed his eyes, grinned cheerfully at the recollection of his scare, and quietly arose.

None of the sleepers budged as he carefully stepped around them. One of the lamps had gone out, and the dim yellow rays of the other failed to penetrate into the far corners of the room.

"Well, Bob?" queried Dave.

"The biggest rat in Washington awakened me," grinned Bob; "heard a loud scampering, and raised up just in time to get a good look at him—a whopper! See anything, Dave?"

Brandon poked his head out in the fresh, crisp air, and gave an exclamation.

Rising in the east, over a range of rugged hills, the moon hung in a deep, somber sky. A tree top rose against its dull, golden surface, but everything else in the vast expanse of nature seemed dim and formless. Barns, sheds and corrals made mysterious, irregular patches, even the white walls but faintly seen against the darkened turf. A screaming hawk passed swiftly across the star-studded sky.

"Isn't it great?" began Dave, in cautious tones. "Wouldn't have missed this for a whole lot, Bob. Why—what's the matter?"

The other had pushed his shoulder gently around so that he faced the northwest.

"That isn't what I wanted you to look at. See anything else?" questioned Bob.

"See anything else! What—"

"A light!"

"A light! Where, for goodness' sake?"

"Over the top of that hill."

Dave peered eagerly through the gloom. Sure enough, a tiny glow was flaring against the blackness, sometimes disappearing, then coming into view again and shining as a faint reddish glimmer.

Some one was out there, and Bob Somers' lips framed the word, "Who?"

Dave shook his head.

There was something fascinating in the sight of that faint illumination which linked the wilderness with civilization; so the two watched it in silence for several moments. Finally Bob spoke up:

"Let's get out on the roof, Dave," he whispered, "and take a squint at it through the field-glass."

The literary boy, yawning, nodded assent.

Shutting the window, they tiptoed softly across the room, casting a look at the sleepers. Jack Conroy, partially aroused, began to mumble:

"No, I tell you; he couldn't have thrown me; no, sir; not in a hundred years!" Then his regular breathing told that he was fast asleep again.

The trap-door was mighty hard to budge, but Bob Somers, after some time, worked it loose, and they cautiously climbed out upon a gently-sloping roof.

The moon had now risen high enough to send a faint silvery sheen across the quiet landscape and light up in ghostly patches the ranch-house and its tower.

Bob raised the field-glass to his eyes and looked earnestly at the little spot of flaring color. Instantly it seemed to be flashed startlingly near.

A tracery of underbrush could just be distinguished rising in front, but the flames were still hidden by the hilltop.

"Wish to thunder it was on this side," murmured Bob. "Wonder who it can be—not cowboys, that's sure!"

"Hunters, perhaps," suggested the other.

"Don't you think it's a little odd, Dave? Hello! Gee!"

An indistinct form—unmistakably a man—had suddenly come into the field of view, a tiny speck between him and the light. Eagerly he kept his eyes fixed upon it, and gave a sigh when it dropped from sight.

The field-glass passed from hand to hand, while the boys speculated and watched the moonlight slowly changing the face of nature with its radiance. The silence of the night was oppressive. Occasionally a sound came from the corral, but that was all; even the breeze seemed stilled.

"Well, I guess it's no use to stay up here any longer." Dave's voice, almost stifled by yawns, came in a low tone. "Had enough, Bob?"

"Sure thing, Dave. I'd give a lot to know who those chaps are and what they're doing out here."

"So would I," grinned Dave, "but not the rest of our night's sleep. Hope that prize rat of yours doesn't get too familiar."

In another moment the two had descended the ladder and were steering a careful course through the dimly-lighted room toward their blankets.

CHAPTER X

ON THE TRAIL

The Ramblers were so pleased with the ranch-house and their new-found acquaintances that next morning they accepted the cattle king's invitation to remain another twenty-four hours.

Two days later they were lolling on the shore of a lake surrounded by magnificent hills. In places they saw almost perpendicular walls of glistening rock, wild-looking slopes covered with timber, and jutting crags. And all this appeared again, with wonderful clearness, in the still water of the lake.

The bronchos, tethered to trees close by, cropped the long tangled grass or drank from a shallow inlet which extended some distance back.

A noonday repast had just been finished, and the glowing coals were still sending out a grateful warmth, for the air was cold and penetrating.

"Where are we, I wonder?" murmured Jack for the tenth time.

"Somebody had better run over to the corner grocery and find out," grinned Tim. "Want to send some picture postals home?"

"How in the dickens shall we ever find our way back to anywhere?" went on Jack, grumblingly. "May take the rest o' our lives to do it. We haven't even seen a glimpse o' that mountain where Wanna's gold mine—"

"Hey, cut it out, Jacky," interposed Dick. "You're breaking rule number one again—that makes the seventy-eighth time."

"Suppose you think some bear, or little birdlet, or panther is listening!" jeered Jack. "Hang it! Bet nobody else would be silly enough to fight his way through walls o' bushes an' wade wet creeks like we have. How do you know we're goin' in the right direction, eh?"

"Compass tells us that, Jack," laughed Bob. "Don't worry yourself. By to-morrow we may sight it. Time's up, fellows!"

"Whoop!" cried Tim, suddenly springing to his feet. "Great Scott!" He stopped short, and bent forward, a hand to his ear, listening intently. "Did you hear that,

fellows?"

The report of a gun had echoed faintly.

There was a murmur of surprise and interest.

Tim thrust his hands deep in his trousers pockets, drew a long breath and stared blankly at the others.

"Can you believe it?" he said, softly.

Crack!

For a second time, the silence of the wilderness was broken.

All the boys were now on their feet, eagerly trying to locate the direction from which the sound had come. But opinions hopelessly disagreed.

"Jehoshaphat!" howled Dick, after a moment's tense silence. "That shows how much Jacky knows—and he thinking that we had this corner of the earth all to our little selves. Whoop!"

"What's that grunt for?" sniffed Jack.

Tommy's face was turned inquiringly toward Bob Somers.

"What do you think of it—hunters, eh?" he queried, earnestly.

"Search me, Tom."

"What in the dickens do we care who it is?" growled Jack, shrugging his shoulders. "This gold—er—er—Jabberwock, I mean, has you chaps all nervous; it beats the Dutch how you're actin'. Don't you all begin chirpin' 'bout me again; mind now."

"Perhaps it's the same crowd that was camping out near the ranch-house," remarked Dave, thoughtfully.

"I hardly suppose they would be keeping so close to us as that," said Bob.

"Unless they had a good reason to," hinted Tim, darkly.

"Oh, shucks! Listen to him!" scoffed Jack. "Didn't you ever hear o' hunters an' trappers before?"

"An' nine broncs plugin' through underbrush an' grass an' swampy ground have made a trail that any good woodsman could follow." Tim appealed to the others: "Eh, fellows?"

"Sure thing," answered Sam. "Still, we needn't worry; I guess there isn't any danger of anybody trying to track us, even if Ja—"

"Don't say it!" howled Jack. "Might think from the way you fellows talk I was the only one who had a word to say 'bout it."

"Quit scrapping," laughed Bob, good-naturedly. "There are a lot of hunters in this part of the country. Forget it, and help me stamp out this fire."

When they were certain that nothing remained but a heap of charcoal, the seven walked toward the bronchos.

"Oho," sighed Dave, with a glance at the tree-covered heights above, "I can see our jobs cut out for us. Whoa, Whirligig, whoa! Everything put back on the packhorses, Bob? Good! My turn to lead one, and Dick the other, eh? Well, such is life in the wilds. Here, Whirly!"

He untethered the restive broncho, and coaxingly patted a brown-patched neck. Then, with a nimble spring, Dave was astride his back.

"The lake shore route," quoth Bob; "hill's too steep yet to climb."

The seven horsemen rode in single file, the steady hoof-beats alone breaking the soft murmuring roar of the wind in the forest. At every turn the scenery became more wild and impressive. Dense masses of vegetation defied them to attempt a passage. Frowning reddish cliffs, where erosion had worn away the soft facing of whiter rock, towered high above, to deeply shadow the line of shore.

Passing around one of these crags, Bob Somers, at the head of the column, came to a halt.

"Here's a chance to force our way up, fellows," he said.

"I can feel myself gettin' cracked an' swiped by about a hundred dozen branches already," remarked Conroy, with a dubious glance at the hill. "Whoa—whoa! W-h-o-a, I s-a-y!"

Conroy's pony was hard to manage; suddenly he whirled about, crashing against the side of Dave's packhorse with unpleasant force, then backed toward the water's edge.

"Look out, broncho-buster!" yelled Tim. "This isn't swimming weather."

Jack brought his quirt down with stinging force, and the broncho, snorting angrily, leaped forward, landing with a jolt which almost unseated his rider.

"Confound the vicious little beast!" cried Jack, red-faced and flustered.

Bob Somers' broncho had already started up the hill, fighting bravely to force a passage through a mass of underbrush. In places trees grew so close together as to leave scarcely room enough to pass between; and frequently only quick and skilful dodging enabled them to escape low-hanging branches. Once Dick Travers was almost swept from his saddle by a sturdy limb which he imprudently tried to thrust aside.

Not long after, a yell came from Tommy Clifton. "Wow! My, oh, my, but that stung!" he sang out, as a branch pushed forward by the Rambler in advance suddenly came back and lashed his shoulder. "Look out, Jack; it'll swipe you, too."

The ascent soon became steeper and more open. The character of the soil seemed to change; showers of earth and stones rattled noisily down the slopes. Presently the bronchos were jammed together in the greatest confusion, the way being blocked by a great mass of broad-leafed prickly pears.

"Great Scott! Now we're all at sea on land," chirped Sam. "Gee! What queer-looking plants!"

"I could manage if I didn't have this confounded little packhorse to bother about," grunted Dick.

The bronchos, in the confined space, were fast becoming unmanageable. They started to buck and rear, dangerously close to the prickly leaves.

Bob, with a firm hand, wheeled his pony sharply about.

"We'll have to get out of this," he said, grimly. "It wouldn't be a bit healthy to take a header in among that mess."

Dave, leading his packhorse after him, was now crashing down the slope, and the others, with quirts and voices, succeeded in bringing their bronchos under partial control.

When they pulled up some distance below for a moment's rest, all seven were smarting from the effects of collisions with numerous obstacles.

"I wonder what I ever did to these trees, to have 'em treat me like this," chirped Dick.

"It's a dangerous landscape, son," laughed Bob, rubbing his shoulder.

"That last crack I got completed the first hundred dozen," grumbled Jack. "An'

more to come! Whoa—whoa, you silly duffer. Quick, Sam—get out of the way, or this idiotic bronc'll sail right over top o' you."

Jack was passing through some anxious moments as Sam frantically tried to turn. His bronco thrashed wildly about, threatening to pitch him headlong. Just as he began to have melancholy visions of what might presently happen, the other managed to get out of his way.

"Hello, fellows—this way!" came over the air in Dave Brandon's cheery voice. "I can see the top of the hill from here."

"Bully for you!" cried Bob.

He urged his pony ahead, jumped it over a fallen tree, and, after passing the edge of a dense thicket, found the forest again opening out, with the brow of the hill showing high above.

The riders slowly came together from different points, and allowed their horses to cover the intervening space at a slow walk.

At the summit they had a magnificent view of the surrounding country. The hill had a broad flat top, extending off to their left for about half a mile, where it dropped almost vertically to the plain below. They could see the rugged end of the cliff joining a steep declivity which began only a short distance from where they had reined up.

By keeping to the right, the way led directly down into a wide rolling valley dotted with clumps of timber. In the distance, range after range of hills stretched off, the furthest to the north a hazy line of bluish-gray jutting against a higher form, which, at first glance, seemed to be but a cloud.

Bob was staring earnestly.

"Look, fellows!" His voice held a note of excitement. "What is that?"

"A—a mountain!" yelled Tim. "Sure as shootin'! Whoop!"

"You're up in the air, an' so is that," laughed Jack Conroy. "It's floatin' away."

"An' you float away, too," cried Tommy, whose eyes were shining with interest. "Whoop! It's—it's the unvarnished truth."

"Get Dave to rub a drop o' his varnish on it, an' see if it still looks the same," grinned Jack, with a wink. "That enlargin' affair o' yours, if you please, Bobby!"

"We'll give these broncs a rest, eh?" said Bob, dismounting.

He tethered his horse to a convenient sapling, and raised his field-glass.

"Yes, fellows," he announced, calmly, "it's a mountain."

"Whoop—hooray!" cried Dick, enthusiastically.

"Why, anybody could easily see that with only half an eye," laughed Jack.

"Whoa—whoa! What's gettin' into this critter?"

All the bronchos were acting strangely, sniffing the air and beginning to prance wildly about. Jack Conroy's was snorting, showing every evidence of fear, and all his rider's efforts failed to quiet him.

"Whoa, w-h-o-a!" yelled Jack desperately tugging at the reins. "W-h-o-a!"

The sorrel whirled around in wide circles, showing the whites of his eyes; and each moment every broncho in the group seemed to grow more frightened.

"Thunderation!" cried Bob, springing toward his own mount, and seizing the bridle. "Wonder what's the matter?"

He looked hastily around.

A slight commotion suddenly sounded from behind a group of trees. All heard a low, ominous growl; and even before it had ceased Jack Conroy's broncho, rendered uncontrollable by fear, had bolted, and was fairly flying over the ground directly toward the bluff.

As the boys realized his danger, they gave a cry of alarm.

CHAPTER XI

THE RUNAWAY

Without an instant's hesitation, Bob Somers vaulted into the saddle. His quirt came down with stinging force on the broncho's flank. Snorting, the animal bounded high in the air—a mad race was on.

A cold air rushed past Bob Somers' face as the ground began to fall behind at a rate which fairly made his head swim. Leaning almost upon the broncho's neck, he urged him forward with quirt and voice until the animal was galloping at a nerve-racking pace. Trees, bushes and rocks seemed to be falling together, and whirled by in the wildest confusion.

A single misstep, and the rider might be hurled with crushing force to the ground.

But Bob Somers gave little thought to this. He saw Jack Conroy just ahead, fighting desperately to swerve the broncho from his headlong course; and every instant the sorrel was carrying his rider nearer to the brink of the cliff.

The sight nerved Bob to the most desperate exertions. The blows of the rawhide quirt fell faster. Frowning brow and grim-set lips told of a determination which would never give up while the slightest hope remained. Faster, but not fast enough, tore his broncho.

From behind came the sound of a thundering cavalcade and shouts of encouragement. A cold chill seemed to strike his heart when the realization came to him that he was scarcely gaining on the runaway.

"Jump when you get the chance!" he yelled.

As his voice was flung to the breeze, Bob's broncho stumbled, and the rider, hurled violently forward on the animal's neck, felt its mane lashing his face. With a supreme effort, he recovered from the jarring shock.

"J-u-m-p!" he again shouted, in a ringing voice.

"J-u-m-p!" came high above the din of flying hoofs, as the five boys, perceiving that their leader's tremendous effort was doomed to failure, yelled with all the power of their lungs.

The cold, clear sunlight shone brilliantly on the whirlwind of dust and horsemen. Already the edge of the bluff stood before them with terrifying distinctness, and to the boys bringing up in the rear it seemed as if nothing now could save Jack Conroy from being dashed to pieces at the base of the cliff.

The steaming bronchos slackened their headlong pace—the race was over.

Meanwhile Jack Conroy was not as badly scared or helpless as every one imagined. He quickly saw that it was beyond his power to check the frenzied sorrel, and knew that his only chance to escape lay in keeping his wits about him.

Jolted and bumped, he still sawed desperately at the bit and struggled to keep his seat. Peering through narrowed lids, he kept his gaze fixed, with fascinated attention, upon the brow of the cliff. A mass of vegetation slightly to one side rose before him, and not a hundred feet beyond was the fateful goal.

Within that short space the outcome must be decided. In those moments of din and confusion, Jack felt his heart beating with painful force. His eyes were swimming, but his mind had never been more clear or determined.

"I've done my best to save the idiotic little beast from himself," he muttered, grimly, "but he's bound to be dashed to pieces on the rocks below. Now, it's up to me to take a leap for life."

The moment for quick action had come.

Pale faced, but resolute, Jack was slipping his feet out of the stirrups, when a sudden, astonishing vision confronted his eyes—a huge dark form had lumbered rapidly out from the bushes directly in the path of his onrushing horse.

Bewildered, the boy hesitated. Then came a glancing impact which sent him flying over the broncho's head.

CHAPTER XII

THE LOST PACKHORSE

A monster black bear had collided with Conroy's horse, sending the runaway to its knees.

The astounded leader of the Ramblers saw Jack catapulted into the air and bruin knocked flat on his back.

Then his own broncho, with a snort of terror, swerved abruptly, dashing off at right angles.

The riderless horse had turned, and was now thundering diagonally across the turf. Bob Somers' quick eye saw that nothing could prevent his own broncho and the terrified animal from crashing together. With lightning speed, he threw one leg over the pommel and jumped.

Jack Conroy lay stunned by the force of his impact with the ground. But the fresh breeze, together with his strong recuperative powers, almost instantly began to restore him to his senses.

Presently, scarcely realizing what had happened, his thoughts all oddly jumbled together, he half opened his eyes.

A low, rumbling growl brought the light of understanding back to his face. With a strong effort, he struggled to a sitting position, and stared in open-mouthed wonder at a remarkable sight.

"Great Cæsar!"

A black bear but several yards away was just clumsily regaining an upright position. Its little eyes were snapping with fear and anger. The big chap had been so jarred and shaken that only a realization of great danger could have induced him to move.



ITS LITTLE EYES WERE SNAPPING

For a moment, Jack and the bear studied each other attentively. It was a wonderfully short moment, however. Jack, uttering an exclamation, managed to turn and shoot a glance over his shoulder. To his amazement, he saw Bob Somers approaching on foot at top speed and five horsemen fighting to control their bronchos.

"Thunderation!"

The black bear, having evidently come to the conclusion that Jack was responsible for all his misfortunes, gave an angry snarl, opened his mouth to show a row of perfect teeth, and began to lumber forward.

Jack wasn't quite sure whether he had been badly injured or not, but decided that the time to find out hadn't come. Pains and aches seemed to drop away as easily

as the dust from his shoulders when he scrambled to his feet with a lusty yell and fled.

The enemy, apparently satisfied at this tribute to his power, came to a halt, raised his shaggy head and gazed curiously at the horsemen; then, uttering a grunt of extreme disapproval, plunged away.

"Hurt, Jack?" called Bob, breathlessly.

"Hurt?" yelled the others.

Jack stopped his flight abruptly.

Now that all danger, as well as suspense, was over, shooting pains in various parts of his anatomy began to make themselves felt with a force that caused him to wince.

"Hurt, Jack?" cried Bob again, as, with flying leaps, he reached the big boy's side.

Conroy felt his side and shoulder, then his arms.

"I've been dented in about a hundred places, Somers," he grinned, weakly. "Gee, but my shoulder hurts; that crash when I landed was a corker—no bones broken, though. What happened to you, Bob? Had to jump, eh? Just what I was about to do when the bronc-saver came out to say 'Good-day!'"

The other riders, who by this time had succeeded in controlling their horses, cantered rapidly up, and Jack was kept busy for a few moments answering their excited questions.

The relief of the crowd was voiced in a joyous cheer when all presently realized that, in spite of his terrific shaking up and fall, Jack Conroy had escaped serious injury.

"An' don't forget a little 'tiger' for the bear, fellows," laughed Jack. "As a bronc-saver, he was a daisy. No, I wasn't scared, Tommy; never would have let that silly dub of a sorrel chuck me over five hundred an' eighty feet through the air—no, sir. Ouch! Wow! Another wireless!"

"We'd better not do any more traveling to-day, fellows," suggested Bob. "Some mighty good places to camp right around here; what do you say?"

"Suits me," said Jack, ruefully rubbing his shoulder. "I don't feel quite fit, yet. Say, Dave, where'd your packhorse an' the other broncs get to?"

"He broke away just as I overtook the crowd," answered Dave, apologetically. "You see, I hadn't tied the rope very tight, and one glance at the bear was enough."

"Oh!" Jack stared hard at the landscape. "Bet the silly dub's 'bout five miles away by this time, Dave," he drawled. "Don't see 'im anywhere."

"We oughtn't to kick, after your having such great luck," laughed Bob. "A mighty narrow escape, Jack!"

"For the bronc, you mean," corrected the big lad, dryly. "Shucks! This ridin' business is pie for me, if nothin' rises off the earth to hit the little brute. Let's see what it's like at the edge o' the bluff. Then we'd better hustle an' chase after those runaways."

Limping slightly, Jack, with Bob at his side, walked toward the fringe of bushes. Both kept a sharp lookout for bears or other foes, but discovered nothing alarming.

Skirting around the vegetation, they soon came to an open space and peered cautiously over the edge. The sight fairly took their breath away.

A wall of barren rock dropped almost vertically for fully two hundred feet, and from that point sloped abruptly to the valley below. Here and there, on dizzy-looking ledges, patches of stunted vegetation had gained a foothold, and, struggling hard for life, added a touch of contrasting color to the grim reddish rock. At the base, far beneath them, the two looked upon the tops of a dense growth of timber, huge slabs of bare rock and great boulders. The cliff sent a clear, purplish shadow over the rolling valley, to cut sharply against the glittering sunlight beyond.

Jack gave a shrill whistle.

"Great Scott, isn't that awful?" He shivered and drew back.

"You bet; and but for bruin your bronc might be lying dead at the base."

"That's right, Somers! After this, let's be kind to bears. Come on!"

Bob assisted Jack to mount behind Dick, then sprang astride Tom Clifton's broncho, and the cavalcade was in motion again.

Reaching the point where the mad race had begun, they looked earnestly about for any signs of their horses. Those belonging to Bob and Jack Conroy were soon discovered peacefully browsing in the direction of a heavily-timbered

section on the west, but the packhorse had disappeared.

"Oh, ginger!" groaned Dick. "Isn't that about the limit? Hello—he went right down into the valley."

"How do you know?" asked Tommy, quickly.

"It's easy; the little dub has jolted off some of the stuff. See that shiny thing on the ground?"

"Oh, yes!"

"That's one of our canteens, sure; and—why—say, there's the commissary department now, away off, just coming up on that rise; eh, fellows?"

"Yes; that must be the little brute," agreed Tim, shading his eyes. "Havin' the time o' his life, too."

"An' somebody'll have the time o' his life bringin' him back," remarked Jack, with a glance toward his own broncho near the timber line. "It'll take about an hour an' eighty minutes, Dave."

"Correct," sighed Dave. "It was my fault; so the job is up to me."

"Not on your life," chirped Tim. "You'd be back 'bout the time the moon dragged itself up over the hills. Say, Dave, that's a great expression for your book —'dragged itself up'—eh?"

"I'll make a note of it," laughed Dave.

"Whoever is goin' after the commissary department had better drag himself down the hill," remarked Jack, as he slipped from his seat behind Dick Travers.

"I'll go with Tim," announced the latter.

"You chaps almost deserve near-hero medals," chuckled Dave, an expression of intense relief crossing his round face. "Look out for yourselves. Yes; we'll have a fire going by the time you get back. So-long!"

"Or longer," murmured Tim. "Whoop! We may have a fine chase."

"Git up!" shouted Dick.

The two cantered swiftly off. Dick stopped an instant to pick up the canteen.

For a long distance the way led through high, bunchy grass which seemed to undulate like waves of the sea as the breeze swept up from the valley. Gradually the descent grew steeper and more difficult. Ridges, innocent-looking from

above, became on closer inspection difficult passes choked with vegetation and rocks.

The cliff's frowning heights rose higher and higher above them. In the shadow of its gigantic crags they reined up for a moment to rest their tired bronchos.

"Great sight!" said Tim, looking up.

"I should say so," answered Dick, shivering as he recalled Jack's recent danger.

"Gee! In all that excitement, I most forgot our first glimpse o' Wanna's mountain—that must be it. In a few days, Dick, if our good luck keeps up, we'll be prospectin' on its slopes. Honest, it gives me a sort o' funny feelin'."

"If we don't find anything, Tim, I'll have all kinds of the same brand," grinned Dick, softly. "Wouldn't it be fierce? Hello! There's the packhorse now—third ridge."

"Yes! Gee! Let's whoop it up a bit, or he'll reach the Jabberwock first."

In obedience to a touch of the quirt, the sturdy little bronchos bounded off, and were soon treading in single file a wide expanse of soft, marshy ground. On the east they could see a dense forest extending off for a considerable distance.

Presently they were obliged to dismount in a wild little gorge, and force their way through tangled briars to the brink of a stream which tinkled its way merrily between a fringe of tall vegetation.

"Bet the bronc was smart enough to find an easier way than this," grumbled Tim.

"Well, if we're not smart, we're smarting, all right," said Dick, with a faint smile, as he looked at his scratched-up hands. "We'll have a nice, cool drink, fill our canteens, and let the broncs indulge."

The animals quaffed the clear water eagerly; so did the boys. Then, after a short rest, they sprang into the saddle again, crossed the stream, and urged the bronchos up a steep slope.

At the top, Dick turned.

"Hello! One of the fellows is out near the end of the cliff!" he exclaimed, in surprise. "Look, Tim!"

The other cast a glance over his shoulder at the rugged heights, deep in shadow. He saw the figure of a horseman silhouetted clearly against the blue sky, the animal and its rider having more the appearance of a bronze statue than of life.

"Wonder which one o' 'em it is?" murmured Tim, interestedly.

Dick stared hard and shook his head.

The horseman stood for an instant longer; then they saw him whip quickly about and disappear.

"It's Bob Somers—that's my guess," remarked Dick. "We'll soon know. Come on, Tim."

After a hard struggle, the two finally reached the ridge where the packhorse had last been seen; but the animal was nowhere in sight.

"Isn't this the dickens of a note?" growled Dick, in puzzled tones.

"The idiotic little brute can't be very far off, though." Tim spoke consolingly.

There was silence for several moments while each lad stood up in his stirrups to take a searching look in all directions. Between them and the woods was another rise, and beyond this stretched a broad rolling valley encircled by high wooded hills.

The cold, glittering sunlight was fast losing its strength; somber hues were stealing over fields of waving brown and yellow grasses, and, as shadows deepened and lengthened, the dampness and feeling of night crept into the air. A dense silence enveloped the vast expanse of wilderness; even the breeze which gently touched their faces seemed to be dying away.

"If that bronc doesn't turn up mighty soon we'll have to hike back without him," growled Dick, glancing at the sky.

"Oh, ginger! That's only too true," sighed Tim. "Before the moon comes up it'll be black as pitch."

"And if night falls while we're down here, we may do some falling in going up," grinned Dick.

"The prize is yours, son," laughed Tim.

For over an hour the boys kept up their search, finally reaching a dense forest. They ventured only a short distance within its shadowed, mysterious depths, for both realized that to delay any longer would mean a difficult, as well as dangerous, struggle back to camp through the darkness.

"An' we can't do a bit o' good stayin' here," wailed Tim.

"Anyway, it's mighty lucky the grub was divided up between the two

packhorses."

"Their ways are beyond understanding."

"And suppose we lose this one altogether; wouldn't that be awful? All of our prospector's tools snugly tucked away on his back, too."

"For goodness' sake, don't let's even think of such a thing," said Tim, shrugging his shoulders. "Can't imagine where on earth the brute has gone."

"It means getting up mighty early to-morrow morning to look for him again."

"And maybe every morning for a solid month," added Tim, ominously; "an' by that time he'll have scattered the stuff about till the ground looks like the counter of a five an' ten cent store."

Disconsolately, they rode between the great tree trunks toward the light again. By following a route much further to the east the two found traveling easier, and pushed ahead at a fast clip. A sunset glow was rapidly fading; valley and plains became a cold, cheerless gray; undulating ridges cut sharply against the sky, and the gigantic crags towering above them began to assume an air of grim majesty.

A sprinkling of stars was faintly showing in the fast-deepening blue when Dick and Tim at length came in sight of a camp-fire surrounded by a group of shadowy figures.

As the two cantered up, a volley of questions was flung toward them.

"What! You couldn't find the packhorse!" cried Bob, in astonishment.

"Great Scott!" howled Jack Conroy. "This is about the limit."

"And all my fault, too," sighed Dave.

"Bet you're tryin' to spring some kind o' a silly joke on us, Tim," said Jack, suspiciously.

"Not a bit of it, Jack."

"Well, by gum!" The big boy spitefully kicked a glowing ember back into the flames. "We're in a pretty fix now—but I knew it."

"Knew what?"

"That we were goin' to run up against somethin' hard pretty soon."

"Well, Dick and I ran up against a heapin'-over measure o' hard things down there," said Tim, solemnly, holding up his scratched hands for inspection. "Say,

is there a bite to eat?"

Bob Somers pointed to a brace of quail lying on a piece of bark.

"Dave and I went back into the woods," he explained. "Seems to be all kinds of game about; it didn't take us long to get these."

"Which one of you chaps rode out on the end of the cliff?" asked Dick Travers, casually.

"On the end of the cliff!" echoed Bob. "Neither Dave nor I was anywhere near it."

"Well, then, whoever it was looked just too cute for words; you, Sam?"

"We didn't stir from this spot while Bob and Dave were away," answered Sam, earnestly.

"What!" cried Tim, amazed.

"But we saw some one up there," persisted Dick, staring with wide-open eyes at the group, "and if it wasn't any of you, who in the dickens could it have been?"

"Is that another silly joke?" demanded Jack, fiercely.

"Do you think we've just joined the United Order of Funny Men?" snorted Tim, as he sprang to the ground. "It's the unvarnished, bona fide truth; eh, Travers?"

Dick, holding his impatient broncho by the bridle, drew a long breath, and nodded.

"Gee! Here's a nice mystery: first, we hear shots; then, on the same day, a horseman rides up and takes a good long squint at us. Mighty odd you chaps didn't run across him."

"Goodness gracious, this place just seems full of people," murmured Tommy, turning to stare anxiously in all directions.

"And I don't like it a little bit, either," confided Dick. "Do you think—that is—suppose—"

"Say anythin' 'bout Pete Colliver, an' it means a whole lot o' trouble—remember!" howled Jack. He held up a warning finger. "That's settled—or somebody around here will be."

"Oh, get out," growled Dick, leading his broncho to where the others were tethered.

The boys had selected for their camp an inviting spot on a level, grassy stretch. Close by, a growth of scrubby trees and underbrush supplied them with plenty of fuel. On the west was a wide, deep gully filled with a profusion of vines and weeds, between which, here and there, could be seen moss-covered rocks.

"All hands pitch in and get those birds prepared," laughed Bob.

The quail were soon toasting over a bed of red-hot embers and sending forth a savory odor. Even the loss of the packhorse did not seem to affect their appetites in the least.

"Oh, ho," sighed Dave, as he finished his last mouthful, "isn't that Egyptian blackness out there?"

"Looks to me more like good old Washington blackness," grinned Bob.

Outside of a dancing circle of firelight, everything was lost in impenetrable gloom.

The boys wondered if the mysterious horseman knew of their presence, and, if so, why he had not come forward. Then, discussing the prospect of finding their missing beast of burden, Jack Conroy cheerfully insisted that its innocent young life had probably already paid a forfeit to a pack of hungry coyotes.

Leaving Dick Travers to stand first guard, the others finally rolled themselves up in their blankets and turned in, hugging the fire closely, for the air had a decidedly wintry feeling.

Dick began to pace to and fro, the soft pat, pat of his footfalls mingling with the sound of bronchos munching the grass or occasionally stamping. It seemed very lonely and desolate, but he speculated whether, in that mysterious gloom beyond the firelight, there might not be other human beings wandering about; and every unusually loud sound of snapping twig or rustle borne on the wind made him keenly alert.

A long time passed; yawns came with steadily increasing frequency, and on several occasions only heroic efforts saved him from falling over into a doze.

"Hello," he murmured, suddenly, "there's the moon coming up; isn't that dandy?"

In the east, a faint glow was beginning to show. It slowly increased, edging masses of low-lying clouds with lines of silvery white. Dick almost forgot his sleepy feelings as he watched them growing stronger and stronger. Presently the rim of the moon appeared in view over the hills.

"Gee! That's a corking fine sight," muttered Dick. "Wouldn't Dave like—"

His sentence came to an abrupt close.

With a suddenness that made him almost jump, the bronchos began snorting and neighing loudly, evidently in the grip of frantic fear.

CHAPTER XIII

THE BIG CAT

Dick Travers was profoundly astonished.

"Great Scott!" he cried. "What—what—"

As he sprang to the fire, uttering a shout, seized a partly-consumed branch and waved it aloft, the sleepers awoke on the instant.

Tom Clifton jumped up and dived for his gun.

"Now, what's the matter?" he gasped, excitedly.

Dick, without replying, seized his own weapon, and holding the firebrand aloft boldly pushed out into the darkness. Tom, not to be outdone, sprang quickly to his side.

"What in the world is it?" he muttered, in a voice that trembled.

"We may soon find out," answered Dick, softly.

He waved his blazing torch high aloft, turned abruptly, and the animals, straining at their ropes, fell into gloom again. In a few moments the boys had reached the gully. Bob Somers and Sam Randall, clutching burning brands, crept cautiously beyond the circle of light, the others following close at their heels.

"Watch yourself, Dick!"

Bob Somers' voice vibrated over the air in a thrilling undertone.

"Maybe it's a panther," cried Jack, apprehensively.

"Or—or—a man," murmured Tim.

The bronchos suddenly began snorting and neighing again; their sharp heels, as they pranced about, struck the turf with dull, heavy thuds. Then came silence—a tense silence, which sent creepy feelings coursing down their spines.

"Great Cæsar!"

Sam Randall almost jumped in the air. A loud, piercing yell had abruptly jarred through the night. Then:

"Look out—help!"

Almost thrown into a panic, the boys fastened their eyes intently upon the shadowy form of Tom Clifton. They saw him give a sudden spring sidewise, slip, and wildly attempt to regain his balance.

The hasty movement sent the gun flying from his grasp. Then, with a third cry, he toppled over the edge of the gully, to almost immediately disappear from view. The startled crowd heard him crashing down through the bushes almost before they could make a move.

Bob uttered a cry of alarm. In a couple of bounds he cleared the intervening space.

A shrill screech, coming from behind a group of saplings, caused him to hastily fall back.

"A—a—a wildcat!" yelled Sam, excitedly. "Look out there!"

The light from his torch had illuminated the grayish form of a big cat. His ears were thrown backward belligerently, while a pair of yellow eyes, full of sparkle and viciousness, glared defiantly toward them.

Another challenging screech; the lithe body plunged forward.

"Look out!" yelled Dick. "He's coming!"

"Tommy—Tommy!" cried Bob, anxiously, "are you hurt? Hello, Tommy!"

"No!" came an answer, clearly. "Mind your eyes, now—there's—"

Bob didn't hear his concluding words; the cat was already upon him. He acted instantly. Smack! The torch, swung with all the force of his muscular arms, crashed against the animal's head. There was a sound of splintering wood; then a snarl of angry disapproval, as hot flames scorched his assailant's nose.

That touch of fire seemed to take all the fight out of the wildcat. It lunged sideways; and Dick Travers' frantic haste to give the animal plenty of room brought him up against Sam Randall with such force as to send the latter crashing to the ground.

Then the cat swerved abruptly, and, with a final snort of disgust, leaped down the slope.

When Tom Clifton, a badly scared lad, looked over the edge of the bank a moment later, he could, by the light of a flaring torch which lay on the ground,

see Sam scrambling wildly to his feet.

"Great Scott! What's happened?" he cried, breathlessly. "Anybody hurt?"

Tom's reappearance was the signal for so many exclamations that his question passed without an answer.

"Safe and sound?" demanded Sam, whose voice and manner indicated that he was just beginning to get straightened out on the situation.

"You bet!"

"By Jupiter, that's simply great! The fall didn't hurt you, eh?"

"No; but it did the bushes, I can tell you—I ripped 'em up a bit. Landed on a ledge. Where's my gun? Gracious! That animal just missed me by a few feet when he went slipping by."

Bob gave Tom a hand, and helped him up the bank.

"I just about walked into that old codger," panted the lad. "Happened to look around, and saw his ugly face most pokin' me in the ribs. That would make anybody give a start, eh?"

"I wouldn't call it a 'start,' Tommy," grinned Sam; "I'd say a leap through space. How far did you roll?"

"About a hundred and twenty-five biscuit lengths. That's a pun, eh? Rolls and biscuits; and the last bump I got was a crackerjack. Think that cat is going to loaf around here waiting for us?"

"We'll be ready for him, if he does," said Sam.

"It seems to be a regular menagerie up here," laughed Jack Conroy. "What's comin' next, I wonder?"

They straggled back to the fire, piled on more fuel, and now as wakeful as they had ever been in their lives, watched the pale radiance of the moon slowly spreading out over the quiet landscape.

"Say," remarked Jack Conroy, as he suddenly rose from his seat on a log, "I see somethin' over there that doesn't look a bit like a rock, or bushes; an' it isn't a bear, either," he added, earnestly. "Come here, Somers."

"I'm in on this," chirped Tim, springing to his feet. His eyes, following the direction of Jack's outstretched arm, took in an odd-shaped form moving slowly about in the ghostly light.

"That is passin' strange, Jack," he murmured, in puzzled tones. "Thunderation! No animal could have a shape like that and live."

The crowd formed a half-circle around Bob Somers, as he brought out his field-glass and took a long, searching look. When he lowered it, an expression of wonderment rested upon his features. Without answering an eager volley of questions, he raised the glass again, his lips puckering to emit a shrill whistle of surprise.

"What is it, Somers?" howled Jack, impatiently.

"Say, fellows—" Bob's tone, full of amazement, caused a tremor of eager expectancy to run through the crowd.

"Well?" queried Tim, breathlessly.

"It looks—looks—"

"Like what?" almost roared Jack. "Is it a bird, beast, or portable bush?"

"Fellows, it looks exactly as our packhorse ought to in this light and that far off."

There was an instant of silence, then:

"It can't be possible."

"Oh, shucks! You're jokin'!"

"Get out, Bob!"

"A near-member o' the United Order o' Funny Men."

"But it does, I tell you!" shouted Bob. He almost pitched the field-glass into eager Jack Conroy's hands, seized his gun, and, with "Come on, fellows!" flung over his shoulder, started off at a loping trot.

Like a charge of infantry, with weapons shining in the moonlight, they swept through the high grass, jumped over and around obstructions, gradually increasing their pace until it became a wild, headlong spurt.

As they approached the strange-looking object, it began to dawn upon skeptical minds that, after all, it certainly did bear a striking resemblance to the missing packhorse.

Breathless and excited, the seven covered the last stretch in record time, all remaining doubts falling from their minds as swiftly as their flying feet trod the ground.

Right before them, clearly revealed by the moonlight, was the much-wished-for
beast of burden.

CHAPTER XIV

"WHERE IS DICK?"

"Great Scott!" cried Jack, in joy and amazement.

"Shout a little louder, will you?" said Tim, as fiercely as he dared. "That might start 'im off an' give us the chance o' havin' an all night's job."

The packhorse, with a loud neigh, kicked up his heels, and dashed away; but his long rope, catching around a mass of bushes and tree trunks, brought the animal to a sudden stop.

"Doesn't this beat anything you ever heard of?" burst out Dick Travers. "How on earth did this bronc ever get back here, eh, fellows?"

"That's beyond me," said Sam Randall.

"Queerer jinks never happened," cried Tom, his eyes snapping with excitement.

"To think that the silly duffer had actually sense enough to turn around an' toddle back," murmured Jack. "Honest, but this is the most natural dream I've ever had. Aren't you fellows really snoozin' 'round the fire at this very moment? Please don't wake me up."

"Truth is stranger'n dreams, sometimes, Jacky," grinned Tim.

The seven stood silently a moment, looking at each other in the greatest perplexity. The return of the packhorse seemed to hold an element of mystery which appealed strongly to their imaginations.

Had the broncho returned of his own accord?

Bob Somers thought not; and he voiced his convictions a moment later, as he stooped over to examine the rope.

"Fellows, the bronc never could have wrapped it around trunks and branches in this way," he remarked; "that's certain."

Dave Brandon's eyes ran quickly over the hemp.

"Not in a lifetime, Bob."

The crowd, eagerly looking on, nodded approval.

"I should call this the dickens of a puzzle," piped Tom.

"Maybe that strange horseman we saw on the cliff had a hand in it," cried Dick, animatedly; "eh, Bob? Let's see if any of the department store on his back is missing."

A quick search revealed everything in its proper place.

"What does it all mean?" demanded Jack, fiercely. "If some one led the critter back, why did he, or they, leave him here? Nobody could have missed seeing that firelight."

"Ask us a hard one," chirruped Tim. "But isn't this the greatest piece o' luck?"

"And how long do you think the bronc's been here?" asked Dick.

"Another poser," answered Tim. "Perhaps he didn't arrive until after old Luna bobbed up to oversee this part o' the earth again. We could chirp all night about it an' not know. Shall we—"

"We shall," said Dave firmly, between yawns. "The crowd owes a vote of thanks to some person, or persons. Every one is overjoyed, eh? But it mustn't prevent us from getting our sleep. Whose turn on guard is it—yours, Sam?"

"I'm afraid it is."

"That's enough to make all the rest of us afraid."

Smiling broadly, the literary boy walked over to the packhorse, seized his bridle, and when Bob had loosened the rope began leading him toward their camp.

Excitement all over, the seven became conscious of an unpleasant chill in the air. It nipped their hands and faces, making the prospect of hugging close to a roaring fire doubly attractive. So, like a victorious little army, they hurried along, the moon sending their shadows weirdly straggling over the turf, and it didn't take the boys very long to resume their former positions.

Sam took his turn on guard, and after two hours' lonely vigil aroused Tom.

When morning came, an astonishing discovery was made: Dick Travers had disappeared.

It was Jack Conroy, on the final watch, who noted his absence from among the group of sleepers. And by this time a cold, gray light was spreading slowly out in the east. Ghostly streamers of mist hung low, forming cheerless barriers to the view beyond. A screeching hawk winged its way high up. Jack, chilled and

hungry, stopped his almost ceaseless pacing to and fro, and came to a halt before the prostrate figures.

"Hello!" He stared hard, and rubbed his blinking eyes. "Hello! Only five o' 'em," he muttered. "That's mighty odd; where in thunder's Dick? He didn't get up while I've been here, that's sure. Hello, Dick!" He raised his voice. "Hello, Dick!"

Some of the sleepers stirred, but that was all. In the stillness, his voice sounded with a weird, sepulchral tone, and he almost shivered.

"Hello, Dick—I say, Travers, where are you?" roared Jack, beginning to suspect that Dick was trying to play a joke on him. "Come on, now; you'll have to get up earlier'n this to get ahead o' me; trot out!"

Bob Somers hastily unrolled himself from the folds of his blanket and scrambled to his feet; so did Sam and Tommy.

"What's up?" demanded Bob, quickly.

"Dick is," responded Jack.

"Dick?"

"Yes; an' he won't answer me, the silly idiot."

"How's that? He can't be far off."

"Of course he can't; that's what makes it so queer."

The buzz of voices awakened Tim, and soon all but Dave Brandon were upon their feet, eagerly discussing the strange affair.

Sam and Tom explained that during their watches they had paid but little attention to the sleepers.

"Could Dick have left without your knowing it?" asked Bob.

Sam nodded.

"Sure thing, Bob. Sometimes I hiked quite a long distance from the fire."

"Me too," chimed in Tom.

"No 'me too' business here," asserted Jack. "Travers never skipped out while I did my little stunt o' soldierin'; no, sir."

"Oh, cracky! I wonder what it all means!" wailed Tom.

"And so do I," came in drowsy tones from a recumbent figure. "You chaps make

such a hullabaloo I—I—can't—sleep."

Dave's eyes were closing again, when a loud "Dick's missing!" from Jack Conroy opened them wide.

"What—what!" gasped the stout boy, promptly raising himself on his elbow. "Dick missing!"

"Sure as shootin', Dave; he beat it, an' without sayin' a word."

"Did he take his gun?"

"Yes; but he couldn't do any huntin' by moonlight; an' why is he stayin' away such a long time, eh?—it's been hours."

Dave, now thoroughly awake, slowly arose, a worried expression on his round face.

"Oh, ho, but it is strange," he murmured. "Risky business to be prowling around alone in this wild country."

"You bet!" came from Jack. "Bears, panthers an' wildcats likely to be hidin' behind any rock or thicket."

"Dick isn't the sort of fellow to do such a thing without having some good reason."

"What could it be, Dave?"

"Goodness only knows."

"Confound it! This is worse than the packhorse mystery," grumbled Tim. "Let's yell again, an' if there's no answer some o' us ought to prospect around in a hurry."

A volume of ear-splitting sounds rushed off into space. But neither it nor several others which followed brought forth the slightest response.

The boys looked at each other with worried faces.

"Gee! I don't like this a bit," confessed Bob.

"If Dick is playin' a joke on us I'll—I'll make him sorry for it," stormed Jack.

"Let's get away from here," cried Tim, dashing toward the horses.

The bronchos were quickly saddled; Bob, Jack and Tim vaulted upon their backs.

"By the time you have grub ready, fellows, we'll probably be here with Dick," cried Bob, as he gave his pony a touch of the quirt.

The three cantered briskly toward a line of vapory blanket which still stretched gloomily across the landscape. A few moments later their forms were enveloped in the mist and the clatter of hoofs quieted down.

Separating, the three rode about for almost an hour, frequently sending over the air the Rambler Club's special signal. But only mocking echoes answered. It seemed as lonely and desolate as a country never before trodden by human beings.

Meanwhile, the sun, shining like burnished gold through gray clouds, rose higher and higher, and the mist became slowly dissipated. From their widely separated positions the boys eagerly scanned the rolling valley, but not a sign of Dick Travers could be seen.

When they came together again, gloomy feelings were mirrored upon their faces.

"Worse and worse," cried Bob. "I'll fire; perhaps he'll hear that."

Crack! A puff of smoke floated slowly off. Crack! Another thin column joined it.

"Nothing!" Bob Somers' voice had a cheerless ring.

They cantered back to camp, where the others, hoping every moment to have their anxiety relieved, awaited them. Their questions showed plainly how much they were disturbed by the unexpected event.

"It beats the Dutch!" cried Sam, after Bob had explained. "Where in the world can old Dick be?"

"I feel sure he's all right," said Dave, though his voice trembled slightly.

Bacon and flapjacks were nicely browned, while a big coffee-pot hissed joyously upon a bed of red-hot coals; but the six had almost forgotten hunger, only taking time to eat so as to sustain their strength.

"Fellows, I move that we go to the end of the cliff; it's a good lookout point," suggested Dave, when the hasty meal was over.

"Bully idea," agreed Jack.

"An' let's go right away," added Tim.

Breakfast dishes, unwashed, were piled into a bag and thrown on the back of a

packhorse, and a few moments later, with Sam leading Dick Travers' mount, the bronchos were spread out over the level surface, pounding along at a fast gallop.

The sting of the cold air rushing by seemed to bring out every spark of life in the fiery little animals; they fairly flew, and their riders made no attempt to check the headlong flight until a line of vegetation looming distinctly into view warned them that the edge of the cliff was near.

With almost one accord, they reined up, sprang to the ground, found convenient places to tether their ponies and then walked out to the point upon which Bob and Jack had stood the day before.

Six pairs of eyes keenly scanned the vast stretch of nature. It was Dave Brandon who presently broke the tense silence.

"Look!" he said, simply, extending his arm.

Far off, by the line of timber, they saw a tiny thread-like line of blue rising almost straight in the air.

"Smoke!" yelled Jack, excitedly. "By Jove! A camp-fire—it—it must be Dick's."

"Of course," piped Tom, enthusiastically. "Hooray! Knew all the time he was safe. Wow! Isn't this great, though?"

Bob Somers shook his head.

"No use shouting too soon," he said, reflectively. "Why should Dick have built a fire away down there in the valley?"

"Instead o' comin' back to camp," supplemented Jack.

"Yes!"

"That's the next poser, all right," admitted Tom, with a shade of disappointment.

"It might be that horseman Dick and Tim saw up here. And say—"

"Well?" queried Tim.

"Perhaps Dick and he happened to run across each other, and Dick thought he'd stay with him for a while, just for a lark, eh?"

This idea did not appeal to the others.

"Not on your life," scoffed Tim.

"Suppose we fire off a few rounds," suggested Dave. "If Mr. Unknown should happen to hear the racket, he might come out from that timber and favor us with

a view of himself."

"You're certainly the candy kid, all right," laughed Bob, taking the field-glass from its case. "Go ahead with the firing."

Several guns were immediately pointed in the air.

"One—two—three!" counted Bob.

A thunderous report which almost deafened them was carried off on the slight breeze.

Bob had his eyes to the field-glass. The thread-like line of smoke became a whirling column, apparently close at hand. In eager expectancy, he kept the instrument directed close around it, uttering an exclamation as a hoped-for event actually occurred.

A boy was seen moving about at the edge of the timber.

Presently he came out into the open, looking so clear and distinct that something strangely familiar in his appearance made Bob draw a long, deep breath.

"Goodness gracious!"

"Now what?" cried Jack, impatiently. "These—"

Perceiving that Bob had extended the glass toward him, he stopped suddenly and seized it.

"By all that's wonderful!"

In the field of view Jack saw a short, stocky figure, easily recognizable. Then:

"Pete Colliver!" fell from his lips.

CHAPTER XV

RISKY BUSINESS

When Dick Travers wrapped himself in his blanket and lay down by the fire, his thoughts, stirred into activity by the mysterious return of the packhorse, prevented him from sleeping. For some time he wooed slumber, then sat up, staring disgustedly at the crackling fire.

Like a flash, an idea popped into his head.

"If I can't sleep, it's no use staying here," he muttered. "Why not—"

Dick's head dropped, as Sam slowly approached, his form remaining as motionless as any of the sleepers until the sentinel again wandered off into the moonlight.

"I'll do it," said Dick to himself, his imagination fired with a brilliant scheme. "Yes, sir! And if I should find out anything wouldn't those chaps be surprised? Gee! It's a heap better than sleeping."

He waited until Sam was some distance off, then rose softly to his feet, buckled on his cartridge belt, seized a gun from the stack, and silently stole away.

Watching his opportunity, he found it an easy matter to avoid the unsuspecting Sam, a *détour* and convenient vegetation soon putting him beyond danger of detection.

And now that Dick was actually on the way, he began to have serious doubts.

"Bet Jacky 'ud call me a silly idiot," he reflected, with a grin, "but, sure as shooting, somebody brought that bronc back, and I might discover a camp-fire—it isn't likely, though. Still—well, hang it all, there's no sense in backing out now."

He found a certain pleasure in wandering about alone in the poetic moonlight, and also a feeling of danger which kept him keenly alert.

When Dick reached the spot where the packhorse had been found he came to a halt and studied the ground carefully, but his effort was unrewarded. Then he circled slowly around the bushes, sometimes on his hands and knees, hoping to

discover some evidence of a trail through the tall grass. Still there was nothing.

With a muttered exclamation of disappointment, the boy straightened up and walked toward a knoll almost covered with tall cedars. Standing in their long, bluish shadows, he looked over the immensity of valley and hill, solemn and mysterious in the silvery sheen of the moon, with a strange feeling of awe and pleasure.

Almost forgetting his mission, Dick stood absorbed in its contemplation, when he received a shock which made his knees tremble violently.

A human voice had spoken, and the words, though faint, had reached his ears.

"I tell ye I did hear somethin', Pete Colliver; thar's some critter prowlin' 'bout."

"Pete—Pete Colliver!" gasped Dick Travers; "and—goodness gracious—Jimmy of Sellade!"

A whirlwind of thoughts began coursing through his brain. Now the mystery of the packhorse's return was explained; all their suspicions regarding Pete Colliver were confirmed—and in this startling fashion. What were the lumber-boys doing out there in the wilderness? There could only be one answer to that—tracking them.

For a moment, the queer mixture of feelings in Dick Travers' head made him almost dizzy. Then the familiar sound of Pete Colliver's voice steadied his nerves.

"Wal, let the critters prowl. Ye ain't skeered none, is ye, Jimmy? Mebbe 'twas them fellers a-runnin' ag'in. Ha, ha, but ain't they an easy lot? My, oh, my! Didn't I near bust a-tryin' not ter laff when they comes a-swingin' 'long ter see that hoss! Ha, ha!"

"I never seed sich ninnies afore," laughed Jimmy. "An' did ye pipe how the fat un could run?"

"Wal, ye kin jist bet I did; an' if I ever gits a-wrastlin' with 'im that's the way he'll beat it to the tall timber, Jimmy. Maybe the hull crowd o' 'em wasn't skeered o' me, eh?"

As Dick, not yet recovered from his astonishment, listened to these uncomplimentary remarks, his eyes flashed. But this feeling of anger lasted only a moment; a grin began to overspread his face.

"Dick, my boy, you deserve a real hero medal now," he thought. "I wonder what

old Jack will say to this?"

From his position, Travers could tell that the two were very close to him—just a bit down the slope—and he listened intently as Jimmy began:

"If we's a-goin' ter get ter camp to-night we'd better be a-toddlin'. Guess old Jim Reynolds is gittin' peevish a'ready."

"Jim Reynolds!" gasped Dick. "Christopher Columbus! Why, that's one of Slater's men. Gee! Maybe it wasn't a good thing I couldn't sleep! Isn't this a discovery, though?"

"That's what I'm a-stayin' out so late fur, Jimmy; I want 'im ter git more peevish. He ain't my boss, is he? Didn't I put 'im on to the hull thing, eh? Ain't me an' you took all the trouble to track them kids, eh? None o' the gang kin git gay with me; I won't stan' fur it."

"The gang!" repeated Dick, reflectively, with a start. "That has a dangerous sound."

The loud, incautious voices did not reach his ears again for some moments, and when he next heard them it was evident that the pair had started off.

Dick scarcely dared to stir from the obscurity, but, taking courage, he peered out, to see Pete and Jimmy some distance away moving slowly toward the valley.

"Now what's to be done?" murmured Dick, elated at his success, yet at the same time much disturbed by the thought that their plans were so rudely threatened.

His first impulse was to hurry back and arouse the boys; the second to continue investigations unaided, find out where the gang was encamped, and have all the glory of a brilliant bit of detective work to himself.

It was a reckless plan, but Dick Travers' eyes brightened as he thought of it; the lines about his mouth tightened, and, without further hesitation, the boy crept cautiously from the sheltering shadow of the trees and began moving after the slowly retreating forms.

In the bright moonlight, his task was not difficult. He took advantage of bushes and clumps of trees, sometimes bending almost double, or dropping to his knees when the two figures in advance came to a halt.

Pete and Jimmy, totally unsuspecting, scarcely ever took the trouble to look behind them. Their course was far to the east, where the rolling slopes were more free from vegetation. Many times they disappeared from sight, but the

eager trailer never failed to catch a glimpse of them as they reached the top of ridges and walked along their crests.

In three-quarters of an hour Dick saw a dense mass of timber not far ahead, forming a dark, irregular line against the sky. But what presently brought a stifled cry of exultation from his lips was a glimmer of light showing faintly between the trees.

"Hooray!" he murmured. "It must be their camp. This is the dandiest piece of luck. Great Scott! Won't the fellows open their eyes? And Jacky?—Gee! Bet he'll nearly flop over."

Paying little further attention to Pete and Jimmy, Dick steered straight toward the orange glow, scarcely stopping an instant until he was crouching well within the shadow of the timber.

It seemed very dismal and lonely. The network of branches met overhead and ghostly moonlight formed fairylike traceries upon bushes and trunks. In the gloomy, mysterious depths beyond perhaps many dangerous animals might be lurking.

Dick hung back, irresolute; then, drawing a deep breath, kept on.

"Gee!" A cold shiver ran through him. "This is risky business now."

The glow of the fire presently shone clear and bright, while a faint hum of voices came weirdly to his ears.

Dick moved with the utmost care, again dropping on hands and knees, crawling around underbrush and thickets, working along foot by foot, his heart thumping hard, as he saw the dancing firelight now sending its rays over the branches above his head. Twigs smote him in the face; trailing briars caught in his clothes, scratching with a force that made him wince, but he had the satisfaction of hearing the hum of conversation growing louder. Pete and Jimmy, who must have stopped somewhere to rest, had evidently just arrived.

"That sounds like a whopping big crowd," muttered Dick, excitedly. "Wish to thunder I could see a bit better. Horses, too, close about; I hear 'em."

At the imminent risk of being discovered, he had now reached a place where much that was said could be understood.

"So ye sure seen them fellers git that 'ere nag, eh, Pete?" a rough voice demanded.

"Bet yer life we did, Jim," came an answer, "an' they suspicioned, too, as how somebuddy had brung it back; Jimmy an' me hearn 'em."

"Let 'em s'picion," growled another voice; "an' that's all the good it'll do 'em. 'Tain't no use a-stayin' up no longer. Thought ye was a-goin' to take all night, Colliver."

"Oh, I didn't hurry none, Woodie. An' don't ye begin to hand out no sass, now. Yer gittin' ter be as bad as Jim Reynolds. Want us ter beat it, hey? Fur five cents —"

"Quit scrappin'," interposed a voice, in loud tones, "an' turn in. Them kids'll most likely be off by the time the sun gits up. That 'ere gold mine is as good as ourn a'ready, boys."

The conversation continued, while the eager listener tried in vain to gain a point of vantage which would enable him to get a view of the camp. As he stood in the shadow of a tree, and looked overhead at the spreading network of knotted branches, another bold idea entered his head.

"And a mighty risky one," Dick reflected.

However, upon studying the situation, he became convinced that he could climb the tree, take a quick observation, then hasten back to camp, having covered himself with glory. The temptation was too strong to resist.

Resting his gun in a safe place, Dick, with an earnest glance toward the fire, prepared for action. Claspng arms and legs around the trunk, he began to slowly work himself up. Active and muscular, the boy soon grasped hold of a sturdy limb about ten feet from the ground, paused an instant, and then, making one long effort, pulled himself safely astride it.

"Whew!" he murmured. "That's work, all right. The rest of it ought to be easy, though. Crickets!" The limb swung a bit, rattling its branches faintly. "Gee! I'll have to be mighty careful."

With infinite care, he crawled from limb to limb, at length reaching one which stretched directly toward the beacon of flaring light. Dick crept a few feet along it, his nerves tingling with excitement, pushed aside a bough upon which still clung a mass of faded yellow leaves, and peered intently down.

The faintest sigh of satisfaction passed his lips. A picturesque sight was before him. Lolling about beside a big fire were a number of men, their faces weirdly illuminated by the flames. Pete and Jimmy sat on a log, the former still talking

loudly. Behind them, a number of bronchos were tethered, some scarcely seen amid the trees.

Eager and excited, Dick Travers was in the act of counting the men, when, to his horror, a loud crack suddenly reverberated.

As the limb began to bend beneath his weight, the boy barely managed to repress a cry of alarm.

CHAPTER XVI

HIDE-AND-SEEK

A pang of fear shot through Dick Travers' heart; almost involuntarily he threw up his hands, catching hold of another limb above his head. The branch he was on gave a second ominous crack, its dried leaves rustling loudly.

With a supreme effort, he drew himself up, the sound of a commotion among the lumbermen ringing in his ears.

"A panther somewhar in the trees!" he heard Pete Colliver yell.

Breathing hard, Dick Travers hung suspended, his feet dangling in the air. For an instant, the fear of a shot being fired made a cold chill run through him; it was on the tip of his tongue to let his presence be known when he discovered that the men who had sprung to their feet were not hurrying in his direction. Screened by a multitude of branches and leaves, he regained courage.

"I'll take a chance and try to get away," he breathed, sturdily. "My! If those rough lumbermen should happen to find me hanging around like this," he managed to smile grimly, "they mightn't be a bit polite!"

The terrific strain on his arms soon began to tell. But Dick, gritting his teeth, twisted about, in an effort to see what was going on.

The men, possibly believing Pete Colliver's explanation to be the right one, were already searching around, and a cold perspiration began to stand out upon Dick Travers' face when his eyes caught the metallic gleam of their guns.

"Gracious!" he thought. "Dicky, you're in a precious bad fix. It won't do to stay here two seconds longer."

Torches were sending yellow streaks flaring among the trees and bushes. Any instant their rays might reveal his presence. Dick instantly began to work his way toward the main trunk, the faint noise of his progress drowned by the crashing of many feet in the brush.

"Wal, the varmint's scooted!" cried Pete, presently.

"Scooted nothin'!" snorted Jimmy. "Didn't I tell ye I hearn 'im away back thar?"

The critter follered us, jist a-waitin' ter jump down on somebody's neck. Hey, what was that?"

Dick Travers' foot had slipped as he rested it upon a limb, and, in an effort to save himself, he had caused the branches and leaves to rattle sharply.

"Hey! What was that?" repeated Jimmy, in affrighted tones.

"I reckon it's a painter, sure nuff, boys!" cried Tom Smull, falling hastily back toward the fire. "Watch yerselves, or he'll chaw yer head off!"

"Skeered, eh?" sneered Bart Reeder. "Don't ye think we uns is more'll a match fur one pesky varmint, Smull? Come out o' that, an' stan' up to it like a man."

"Scar't! I ain't scar't o' nothink that walks," retorted Tom Smull, hotly; "eh, Griffin? By gum, listen ter that!"

Dick, in trying to descend quickly, while the voices were still raised, had missed his hold on the trunk, and gone slipping downward through yielding twigs and masses of leaves. It was more the noise occasioned by the fall than the mishap which sent another icy chill along his spine, for he dropped only a few feet, landing on the ground where there was sufficient vegetation to break the force of his descent.

Scarcely daring to breathe, he crouched low, listening to the excited voices of the searchers, and expecting every instant to find himself surrounded.

Again Dick was on the point of yielding obedience to his overwrought nerves and sending a yell of surrender; but, somehow, it was never uttered. The flickering torchlight was again picking out in strong yellow dashes the limbs above his head.

Pressed hard against the tree trunk, Dick heard rough, angry exclamations, as vines and bushes impeded the lumberjacks' progress, and trembled violently as footsteps grew louder. He seemed to be cornered; his glorious plan doomed to inglorious failure.

"I tell ye, Pete, the critter ain't fur off," cried Jimmy. "Keep yer peepers on the branches, fellers!"

"Only hope they do," reflected Dick. "Cæsar! Wonder if I dare risk it?"

A few yards distant, the moonlight revealed a dense mass of brush and thickets surrounded by high bunch grass.

"With about thirty feet start, I'd wager the whole crowd would never find me,"

thought Dick, grimly. "I won't give up yet—no, sir; here goes!"

Throwing himself flat on his stomach, he began to worm his way toward the goal, taking advantage of every shadow, a loud crashing of feet and flaring light close by showing that there wasn't an instant to spare.

Blades of grass swept into the boy's face; twigs and sticks made his hands smart painfully. But, with a firm resolve not to give up until every vestige of hope was gone, he kept ahead.

"Maybe they'll stop in a few minutes," he reflected. "Whew! All kinds of creeps in this adventure! Ah!"

A feeling of relief shot through him, as he drew up well in the shelter, and cast an anxious look behind.

The sight was disheartening. A half dozen blazing torches could be seen moving about in an erratic fashion, sometimes disappearing behind the trees. There was one, and Dick's eyes fastened upon it with fascinated attention, that kept headed straight toward him.

With his lips tight set, he crawled still further, snuggling down close to the ground, then stopped and began to pull leaves and grasses over his body, until the nearness of the footsteps warned him that it was time to stop.

"Now it's all up," groaned Dick, keyed to a high pitch of excitement.

A heavy footstep close at hand jarred on his nerves like an electric shock. Almost holding his breath, he gazed fearsomely between the twigs of the protecting thicket. The searcher was coming nearer every second. The suspense was almost more than the boy could stand.

A short, stocky figure suddenly emerged into view, skirting around the thicket.

"Pete Colliver!" flashed through Dick Travers' mind.

A blazing pine-knot which drowned the pale green rays of the moon illuminated his irregular features with striking effect. Pete's little eyes were roving eagerly over every low-hanging branch, and a grunt of disappointment fell from his lips—the search had revealed nothing.

"Bust it! Whar has the warmint went, I'd like to know?" he growled.

Pete came to a halt within a few feet of the prostrate form, waving the torch vigorously above his head. Dick felt a cold perspiration standing out upon his face again; another move of the young lumberjack might bring his heavy boot

down upon him.

Motionless, he stared up at Pete, ready to spring to his feet on the instant.

"I reckon the warmint's skipped," came in a surly undertone. Pete stirred, then turned sharply on his heel.

A loud yell had echoed through the forest with startling abruptness.

"Somethin' has ketched Tom Smull!"

The crashing of Pete's footsteps grew fainter; and, as the yellow torchlight vanished, the pale rays of the moon again came in for their own.

The astonished Dick Travers was once more alone.

CHAPTER XVII

SOME ONE TURNS UP

A cavalcade of horsemen was rapidly approaching the edge of the timber in which the lumbermen's camp was situated, the thud of hoof-beats alone breaking the silence of early morning.

With faces grim and determined, the six, at a word from Bob Somers, reined up.

"Remember, fellows, we don't want to have any scrap with Pete," he said, casting a significant look toward Jack Conroy. "Now that we know he's trailing us, it ought to be easy to throw him off the track."

"Pete's camp must be close here," added Sam. "Gracious, but don't I hope Dick is with him! Ready?"

Bob waved his hand. In a moment nine ponies crashed noisily between the trees. There were now no signs of fire or smoke to guide them, but the boys, having judged its position carefully, rode ahead without hesitation.

Within a few minutes their ears were assailed by the sound of loud voices, while a crashing of many feet jarred crisply through the air.

"Great Scott!" cried Bob Somers. "What does that mean?"

Uttering a whistle of amazement, he jerked his horse back almost upon its haunches. The others followed his example.

Presently six silent and motionless horsemen confronted a crowd of lumbermen.

The boys gazed at the familiar, bronzed faces before them as if their minds could not grasp the reality of the scene, while the men, fully as astounded as themselves, stared earnestly back. The heads of Pete Colliver and Jimmy of Sellade were seemingly supported by a mass of shrubbery.

"Gee! If we had only done a bit of reconnoitering first," flashed through Bob Somers' brain. "What silly chumps to run blindly into a thing like this!"

"Wal—wal!" It was Pete Colliver who broke the tense silence. His face wore the most ludicrous expression of dismay. "Whar did you fellows drop from, hey? Never expected ter see nuthin' like this."

"I guess that's right, Pete," answered Bob, dryly.

"Howdy, boys!" Big Jim Reynolds' manner betrayed his embarrassment. "We've been a-campin' right here," he added, awkwardly, "an' if ye'd like to have a bit o' grub, why—yer as welcome as the flowers in May, eh, boys?"

"I reckon they be," came from Bart Reeder, while Tom Smull and Alf Griffin nodded a surly assent.

"Thanks, Jim; we've had our breakfast," answered Bob.

"See here, Pete Colliver," exclaimed Jack, in his usual abrupt fashion, "have you seen Dick Travers?"

"Have I saw Dick Travers, hey?" Pete assumed an attitude which had a decided suggestion of belligerency, then whirled around on one foot, nodding his head knowingly, and exchanging peculiar glances with some of the men. "Wal, I ain't seen none o' yer Dick Travers," he said, facing Jack again, "but—but—" Catching a warning look from Jim Reynolds, he paused; a queer light had kindled in his eyes. "Has he went an' lost hisself?" he finished.

"We don't know what he has went an' did," answered Jack, with tremendous scorn.

"Come up to the clearin', boys," interposed Jim. "Ye ain't in no all-fired hurry, are ye? 'Twon't cost nuthin' ter have a sociable chat."

"Mebbe they think as how we ain't good nuff fur 'em," growled Tom Smull disagreeably, in an aside, to Griffin.

"We don't have a chance to pay many calls out here," said Bob; "eh, Dave? What's that, Jimmy—did we fire those shots you heard?—Sure thing. Whoa, boy!"

He sprang from the saddle and picketed his broncho, the others following an instant later.

With gloomy feelings, more from their failure to find any trace of Dick Travers than the knowledge that from now on a battle of wits would have to be played, the boys trailed after their conductors. They had recognized all but one, having seen them several times at Cap Slater's lumber camp. The exception was a large, rotund person with flabby cheeks, a snub nose, and a long, flowing mustache of a tawny yellow. His attire was strikingly different from that of his companions. He wore a loud, checkered suit, and a vest which had once been white covered his capacious chest. A bright crimson tie fluttered in the breeze, while a derby

hat, looking ridiculously small, was perched on the back of his head. The men addressed him as Buck James.

"Bet he never swung an axe in any lumber camp," whispered Sam to Bob. "Looks like a horsy chap—a sport—to me. Cracky! Wonder what Jack thinks now?"

"Judging by that awful scowl he's wearing, a whole lot," said Bob. "I can't bother about anything but Dick. Look out, Jack."

The big boy's elbow had poked him sharply in the ribs.

"Can you beat it?" exclaimed Conroy, in a hoarse whisper. "Did you ever hear of such nerve in your life? Are you going to put up with it, Bob Somers?"

"Only providing we can't put it down. It's for us to show 'em what kind of stuff we're made of."

"An' we'll do the trick, too," snapped Tim Lovell. "Jacky, can we break your rule number one, now? An', say, Pete C-o-l-l-i-v-e-r!"

A friendly bush aided him to avoid the big boy's hand.

"Never mind, Smarty," warned Jack. "Hello! Look at this horse show!"

A number of mustangs, already saddled, were packed together in a bunch on the edge of the clearing.

"Make yerselves to hum," said Big Jim, as they emerged from the timber. "A purty big room, with a high ceilin', ain't it?" Reynolds chuckled at his bit of humor. "Hello!" he straightened up, "thought you was all here. Who's that a-comin'?"

The crowd of men and boys heard the sound of footsteps crashing through the brush, and caught glimpses between the trees of a form pushing steadily toward them.

"By the great horn spoon, I believe—I believe it's actually Dick Travers!" cried Bob, with an earnest look.

"That's just who it is!" almost yelled Tim, delightedly. "Whoop! Hello, you old scamp! Where in thunder—"

"Cut out any questions," advised Bob, in low tones.

Dick Travers, with easy unconcern, stepped out into the clearing, nodding calmly toward the group.

"Morning, everybody!" he saluted, waving his hand.

"Wal, bust it, if thar he ain't!" Pete stood staring as though he had never been quite so surprised in his life, then, with a couple of strides, planted himself before the newcomer. "Look hyar, young feller, what ye been doin'?"

"What I pleased, Pete Colliver," snapped Dick.

"Wal, mebbe it don't please me."

"Cut it out!" roared Jim, angrily. "Leave 'im alone!"

The young lumberjack folded a pair of muscular arms; a fierce scowl wrinkled his forehead into a network of lines.

"D'ye think I'm skeered o' you, Big Jim?" he demanded, defiantly. "I'll show yer how much I be. See hyar, young feller," his hand fell hard on the Rambler's shoulder, "was you a-skulkin' 'round the camp 'arly this mornin', hey?"

"You're a nice one to talk about skulking, Pete Colliver," retorted Dick, hotly.

"That don't answer my question none, feller."

"Well, I was; and what have you to say about it?"

Pete's arm dropped to his side; his eyes sought those of Tom Smull's.

"Wal, wal! If that ain't the limit. Says as how he done it; that's sumphin fur you, pard."

Smull, whose ill-favored visage was crisscrossed with scratches, clenched a huge fist.

"D'ye know what ye done, boy?" he demanded, fiercely.

"If you'll tell me, I will," answered Dick.

"He carries his spunk with him, all right," remarked Buck James, admiringly.

This frank opinion did not find favor with Tom Smull. Placing himself before Dick Travers, and waving a stubby finger beneath his nose, he snarled, angrily:

"D'ye see them scratches on me face, boy?"

"Guess I could see 'em a mile away," answered Dick, coolly.

"Ha, ha—ho, ho!" roared Mr. James, slapping his knees. "Ho, ho! Ye ain't smart nuff for 'im, Tommy; ye'd best quit it."

Smull, taking no notice of the interruption, went on in louder, more warlike

tones:

"Wal, I was a-huntin' fur a painter when I fall'd, nigh head fust, inter a hole all kivered up with vines an' sich truck—an' you was the kind o' a painter it were, eh?"

"An' ye kin see how he's went an' scratched hisself," added Pete. "Griffin said he seen some one 'arly this mornin' sneakin' 'bout; an' now we know 'twas ye. Git ready, feller!"

"Ready for what?"

Pete dashed his slouch hat violently on the ground, and pushed Tom Smull aside.

"Bust it! Ye've got ter wrastle with me fur that, feller," he yelled, "an' thar ain't nobody here what's big nuff ter prewent it—see?"

His muscular arms were suddenly wrapped around Dick Travers' shoulders, when:

"Let that boy alone, Colliver!" sounded a ringing voice.

Instantly the stocky lad's hand was stayed. Turning swiftly, he saw Dave Brandon confronting him.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE WRESTLING MATCH

For a second, Pete Colliver stared blankly at Dave, whose usually good-natured and smiling visage wore an expression which he had never seen upon it before.

Dick Travers was quick to take advantage of the opportunity. An energetic shove broke the lumberjack's hold, and he stepped aside.

"Wal, wal, fat un! An' what has you got ter say 'bout it, hey?" howled Pete.

"Nothing, now," answered Dave, calmly.

"Oh, ye ain't; but mebbe some one else has, hey? Ye can't bluff me none, feller."

"Quit it, Colliver!" commanded Jim Reynolds, sternly.

"Leave Pete alone, Jim," growled Smull.

"I'll show ye how I quit it, Big Jim," cried Pete, trembling with excitement. His right hand flew around, knocking Dave Brandon's sombrero into the bushes.

The Ramblers sprang forward. But Buck James interposed his big form.

"Git back, boys," he ordered, sharply. "Ye ain't got no call ter stop a squar', stan' up wrestlin' match. I'll see fair play."

"But we—" began Bob.

"Don't bother about me."

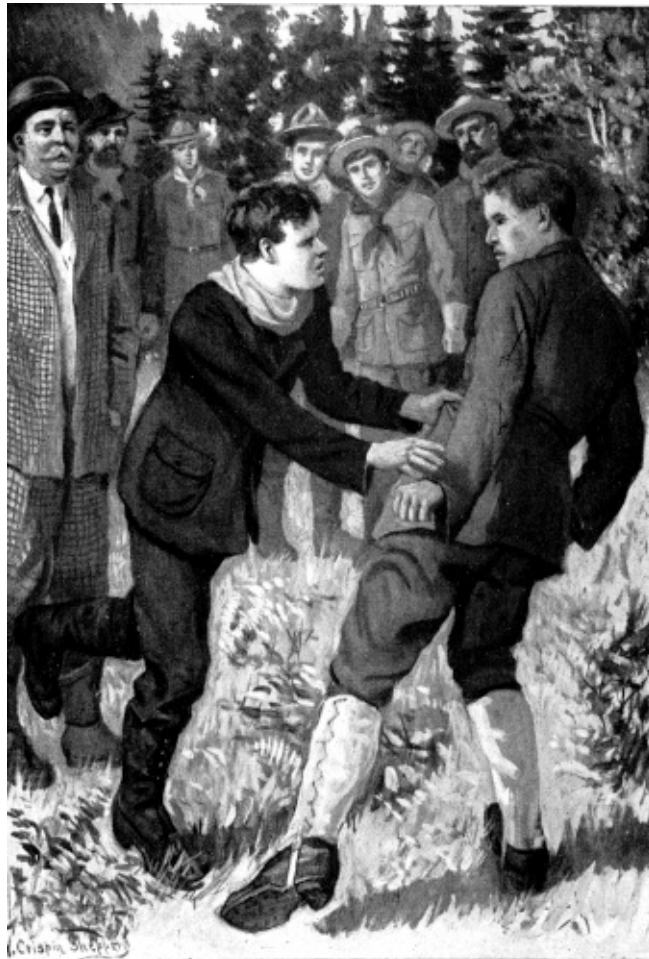
Dave spoke as quietly as though there was no one present but himself and his friends.

The boys looked at the literary youth in astonishment. All knew that Dave Brandon had plenty of courage, but they had never seen his easy, indolent air fall away from him more completely. He stood erect and alert, his eye keenly measuring his heavily-built antagonist.

Dave was inches taller than Pete, but the wide shoulders of the lumberjack indicated unusual strength. Pete's red face expressed all the joy and satisfaction he felt at having at last forced one of the boys to wrestle with him.

"I'll show ye plum quick, big un!" he cried, springing to the attack.

Dave was ready. He nimbly dodged the flail-like arms, and warily circled away, eluding another clumsy effort to seize him by the waist.



HE NIMBLY DODGED

"Yer skeered ter stan' up ter me," scoffed Pete, "but I'll git ye good an' hard in a minute, feller."

"He's a-turnin' pale," said Griffin, with a hoarse laugh.

"His legs is weak a'ready, Pete," chimed in Tom Smull.

Dave was moving his arms like a skilled boxer, and, by nimble footwork, continually evaded Pete's bull-like rushes.

"He must think the movin' pictur' fellers are takin' a crack at the show, an' want him ter draw it out," commented Buck James. "Move in close, you Pete. Watch yerself, now—ah!"

Pete had at last succeeded in getting a hold, and the two were at it in deadly earnest, kicking up the turf, as they struggled back and forth over the clearing.

The boys shouted encouragement to Dave, while Smull and Griffin, highly excited, crowded so close to the contestants that Buck James felt called upon to interfere.

"Give 'em room!" he commanded. "Ah! Sarves ye jist right, Tom Smull!"

Dave, by a tremendous effort, had broken Pete's hold, and sent him spinning back, to bring up with great force against Tom Smull. The latter, swept off his balance, uttered a howl of anger, and fell in a heap upon the ground.

Pete Colliver had never dreamed of such resistance. It began to dawn upon him that his antagonist was of a different kind from any he had ever met in the lumber camp.

With a yell of rage, he dashed headlong toward Dave, intending to end the contest by one supreme effort.

Pete managed to plant an elbow under the stout boy's chin, forcing his head back. Then, putting forth all the power of his muscular body, he followed up the advantage.

A groan came from the Ramblers as they saw Dave yielding.

"Ye've got 'im a-goin' sure, Pete," yelled Smull, whose feelings had been considerably damaged by his tumble.

"Don't crowd 'em!" again warned Buck James, his flabby face shining with pleasure. "I didn't expect to see no sich a go as this 'n."

"Get out! Fatty only needs nuff room ter fall in," piped Jimmy of Sellade, hilariously. "Oh!"

By a dexterous twist, Dave had wriggled out of danger again, and dropped on all fours, with his opponent clinging to his back.

Pete Colliver, with disheveled hair wildly tossing in the breeze, paused, puffing

heavily. A curious, dumfounded look, which all the rough shouts of encouragement flung toward him failed to remove, had settled over his brick-red face.

"Pete's lost his nerve," cried Jack.

"He couldn't throw you in a hundred years," shouted Tim, gleefully.

Dave unexpectedly fell flat on his face, his surprised opponent sprawling across his prostrate form. Then, with a swift movement of tremendous power, Dave began turning over, and a roar came from the boys when they saw Pete's shoulder rising high in the air.

The latter wildly attempted to loosen his hold—and succeeded. But the impetus of Dave Brandon's push kept him rolling over, and, like a flash, the stout boy had turned and pounced upon him.

The astounded Pete, frantically struggling to arise, found himself thrown backward with a force that fairly took his breath away. He struck the turf sideways, and, by the aid of a bush, pulled himself over on his stomach.

"None o' that, Colliver!" roared Buck James. "Ye ain't wrestlin' bushes. Next time ye do it I'll disqualify ye."

"Much you've got ter say 'bout it," puffed Pete.

"Don't waste no breath in talkin', Pete," counseled Jimmy, in worried tones. "Keep yer peepers open; he's a-layin' fur ye."

"An' I know whar he'll be layin' in another minute," snarled Pete, slowly rising.

Any one less stout-hearted than Dave Brandon might have quailed before the fierce looks and threatening attitude of the lumberjack. Pete's eyes blazed with fury. His big hands were opening and closing convulsively, and his massive chest heaved with physical and mental stress. He had counted upon an easy victory, and, so far, the advantage was all on the other side.

Only fitful gusts of wind and stamping of horses' hoofs broke the tense silence, as the two boys faced each other again.

Like boxers sparring for openings, they circled about, each wary and determined. Pete's reputation was at stake, while Dave, thoroughly aroused, felt that he, too, must prove his mettle. He quickly ducked and danced away as Colliver's arm swung toward him.

"You'd best take it on the run, feller," fumed Pete.

He had now thrown aside all caution. Spurred on by Tom Smull's loud yells, he hurled himself recklessly toward his cooler opponent.

It was a chance for which Dave had been waiting. Taking swift advantage of Pete's awkward lunge, he secured an arm and leg hold, jerking him around with a force that brought a shout from the excited boys. Even Pete Colliver's muscular shoulders were powerless to resist the fierceness of Dave Brandon's counter attack.

With the veins in his forehead bulging out, the Rambler, calling every ounce of strength to his aid, bore Pete backward, threw him heavily to the ground, and fell across his prostrate form.

Colliver tried in vain to squirm and twist away. Slowly, inexorably, his shoulders were forced back to the ground, and while a chorus of shouts from the boys swelled into a storm of applause, Pete was pinned down hard and fast—conquered.

The abrupt and decisive ending of the contest was viewed by the lumbermen almost in silence; their astonishment seemed too great for words. Jimmy, Alf Griffin and Tom Smull stood staring blankly, as though they were unable to believe that the heretofore invincible Pete was lying before their eyes vanquished at last, and by a mild-looking stout boy. Dismay was written on their bronzed faces, but there were gleams of satisfaction, however, on some of the others.

"Mebbe it won't stop that yawp o' hisn," remarked Buck James, complacently.

"Wal, I swan!" exclaimed Jimmy, violently. "If this hyar ain't a go! Bet five cents the big un dasn't try it ag'in."

"Five real cents! Oh, you reckless boy!" gurgled Jack.

Deeply crestfallen, Pete Colliver rose to his feet. The violence of his fall had taken all the fight out of him for the moment.

"I didn't have a fair chancet," he snarled. "Jist wait, feller; I ain't done with ye yit."

"Don't have any hard feelings, Pete." Dave, breathing hard, extended his hand. "Shake!"

"The only thin' that'll git shook is you, fat un; an' it'll be afore long, too."

Colliver's face reflected all the angry passions which surged within him, and his

fists were clenched, as he stalked to and fro.

It was not in Dave's nature to crow over a victory. With a wave of his hand he stilled the comments of his enthusiastic friends.

Pete spoke again:

"Think nobody won't have none o' that gold mine but yerselves, do yer?" he sneered.

"Cut it out, Pete," stormed Jim Reynolds. "Boys," he added, turning toward the Ramblers, "as yer champeen wrastler says," he smiled in a conciliatory fashion—"we don't want no hard feelin's."

"That's a plum sure thing," agreed Bart Reeder.

"Now, we're a-wantin' to do the squar' thing by ye. If thar's a gold mine 'bout, 'tain't no more yourn 'n ours—see the p'int?"

"Of course it ain't," growled Alf Griffin.

"An' so, why not be frien'ly-like, an' jine in with us?" Jim spoke persuasively. "Eh, what d'ye say?"

"It'll save ye a heap o' trouble, I'm a-thinkin'; an' don't forgit it," mumbled Tom Smull, ominously, scratching his scratched-up face.

"Listen to reason, boys," pleaded Buck James.

"Well, this is a good one!" burst out Jack Conroy, hotly. "Here you fellows have been doggin' us like so many cats, sneakin' an' spyin' about our camp—an' now! Why, thunder, it beats the Dutch—never heard o' such nerve."

"Of course we won't do it!" cried Dick.

"Eh?" snarled Tom Smull, with a threatening gesture. "Ye'd best not get too chipper, young un."

"If ye don't—" began Alf Griffin.

"See here!" A snort from Jim Reynolds stopped him. "You fellers are sp'ilin' the hull business." Then, his voice becoming pleasant, he went on: "I feel sure the boys'll agree to our plan. Why not stay with us a spell, an' talk it over?"

"No, Jim; it wouldn't be a bit of use," answered Bob Somers, quietly. "We haven't the slightest intention of joining in with any one; so we'll say good-bye!"

Smull's eyes were blazing.

"Are ye a-goin' ter be sassed an' stood off by a parcel o' kids?" he demanded. "Ain't ye man nuff ter say to 'em, 'See here, you young shrimps, ye've simply got ter do what I tells ye,' hey?"

"Easy—easy," counseled Buck James.

"Yes; quit it," interposed Dan Woodle.

"That's right—everybody had better quit it!" Jack Conroy's voice drowned all others. "I can just tell you this: you chaps can't scare us; an' you might as well turn about, an' steer your way back to Cap Slater's lumber camp, where you belong."

"Well, I swan!" Jimmy stared at the speaker in open-mouthed wonder.

"Sich talk—bust it!" howled Pete, still choking with anger. "I'm ready fur wengeance, now; bust it! Look out!"

Turning, he made a sudden spring toward Dave Brandon.

Bob Somers, however, stepped between them.

"That will do, Pete," he said, quietly.

"I won't stan' no more o' sich nonsense, Colliver," added Jim Reynolds. "Git back!"

His huge hand grabbed Pete by the shoulder, and the stocky lad was hurled aside.

Bob and his companions seized the opportunity to take their departure, a proceeding to which Griffin and Smull voiced loud objections, while Jim Reynolds called out:

"Don't go 'way riled, boys; can't we talk over this thing a bit?"

"No!" answered Bob, firmly; "the last word's been said."

Sending a chorus of good-byes over their shoulders, they made toward their bronchos.

The seven quickly mounted, and rode out into the open. Quirts cracked, and the riders found themselves being carried down a gentle slope.

None drew rein until rise after rise had been passed, and the line of timber left far behind.

"Well, Dick Travers, what have you to say for yourself?" said Bob Somers,

severely, as they finally halted. "Don't you know you took an awful risk in hanging around that camp?"

"You mean hanging on to a tree, I guess," grinned Dick.

"Tell us all about it."

The boys listened attentively to his story.

"Of course," concluded Dick, "I wasn't going to come away without my gun, and didn't dare go back for the longest time. Besides," he confessed, whimsically, "I forgot the number of the tree and couldn't find it till early morning. I got a glimpse of you from the woods, and walked right out, like a little major."

"Whew! You took a long chance," exclaimed Jack. "It's a mighty lucky thing you didn't stop a load of buckshot skulkin' 'round their camp in spooky hours."

"Or something worse," added Tom, with a shiver.

"Anyway it all turned out for the best," quoth Bob. "We know now what we have to buck up against. Dave Brandon," he added, "you're a positive wonder."

"Isn't he, though?" chirped Tim. "Great Scott! When Pete flopped over on his back I could hardly believe it—greatest sight I ever saw. Did me a lot of good, I can tell you."

"Let me echo that remark," laughed Sam. "Say, fellows, I got a chance to chin a bit with Jimmy; he told me how those men got their horses."

"Let's hear 'bout it; an' talk fast," said Jack.

"Buck James is a horse dealer at Rawdon, so they let him in on the thing provided he would supply the ponies. Pete and Jimmy traveled on foot—took them nearly all night—but they managed to reach Wild Oak, where they encountered Slater's men. And do you know—"

"What?" asked Tim, impatiently.

"They actually made Buck James pony up with a pair of ponies."

"Whew! There's nerve for you," commented Tim.

"Yes; and Jimmy was boasting about it to beat the band—said that Pete threatened to blow the whole thing to people in Rawdon, an' that scared 'em. They thought everybody in town 'ud be tagging at their heels."

"Well, I'm glad Pete got taken down a peg or two," growled Jack.

"Say, Dick, did you find out why they brought our packhorse back?" asked Tom, abruptly.

"That's an easy one, son; the jacks knew well enough that we had to have grub—thought perhaps we might get discouraged and skip back, if packy didn't turn up; see?"

"Guess that's the idea. Shows how much they have to depend 'pon following us."

"Sure thing, Tom."

"Well, Dick, you and Dave have had a lively time, all right," remarked Bob, reflectively. "Now, we have to think of a way to throw those fellows off the track; it won't be so easy. Smull and Griffin are pretty desperate men. Suppose we do as much traveling by night as we can, eh?"

"Bully idea," agreed Dick. "Cæsar, but this is an exciting life. Don't let's waste a minute."

The seven looked carefully around; but the country appeared absolutely deserted. There were many ridges and clumps of trees, however, which could easily have concealed their trackers.

By noon the gray expanse of cloud was rapidly sweeping away, and shafts of sunlight blazed through the openings. The boys took but little time to eat, pushing rapidly on toward the hills, and at sundown the rolling swells of the valley had been crossed and they were encamped in the midst of a wild-looking range.

A small fire was built in the shadow of an enormous boulder, and when dusk fell the glowing embers were stamped out. The group sat about in utter darkness, listening to the dismal howls of a pack of coyotes and the mysterious sounds from a near-by wood, strangely clear in the silence of the night.

With Bob Somers on guard, the others finally turned in and slept until the moon was rising above the hills. Then, aroused, they quickly saddled their ponies and vaulted upon their backs.

A clear, silvery radiance enveloped the landscape, but shadows in ravines were deep and gloomy. They soon reached a dreary, marshy stretch lying between two hills. Tall, tangled grasses and stagnant pools sent their rank odor floating over the air, while the clear, brilliant moon was mirrored in sharp, metallic dashes upon ooze and water. As they passed through, a long-legged water-bird rose before them with a startled cry.

On hard ground again, the travelers allowed the bronchos to choose their own pace.

"Hold up, thar!"

This startling command fell upon the boys' ears with a sharpness that fairly took their breath away. One moment they seemed to be absolutely alone, and the next found themselves facing two horsemen who had dashed from a thicket close by.

The summons came again:

"Hold up, thar!"

CHAPTER XIX

BOB LOSES

The astounded Ramblers gazed in consternation at Tom Smull and Alf Griffin. They saw the lumbermen's revolvers flashing in the moonlight, and a single glance convinced them that the two were in deadly earnest.

A touch of Tom Smull's quirt sent his pony almost into that of Bob Somers', but he jerked the animal around in time.

"I reckon ye won't be so confounded sassy, now, pard!" he exclaimed, in a voice ringing with triumph.

Bob Somers looked into the barrel of a revolver held close to his head, while Alf Griffin, waving a huge weapon from side to side, had the rest of the crowd covered.

"Well, what do you want, Tom Smull?" asked Bob, as soon as his astonishment allowed him to speak.

"Now, that 'ere language sounds jist a leetle bit better, pard," exclaimed the lumberman, with a gruff laugh. "Me an' Griffin has went to a precious sight o' trouble ter git this hyar interview. We want ter be frien's o' yourn."

"Then you might as well show it by pointing that revolver some other way," suggested Bob.

"Where's the rest o' your bold, brave gang o' sneakers?" demanded Jack Conroy, hotly. "Throw down those shootin' irons, an' I'll bet the whole crowd wouldn't dare face us three seconds. An'—"

"Thar it goes ag'in!" snorted Tom Smull, violently. "Best be a bit keerful, younker. If yer never smelt powder smoke a-blowin' in yer face, it may be time fur yer to smell it now. But we ain't a-talkin' ter you; our business is with the ginerel—Somers."

"Well?" queried Bob.

"I reckon it will be, if yer acts peaceable-like. You've got a drawin' showin' whar that streak o' pay dirt is, an' me an' Alf sure needs it."

"Hand it out, pard!" came from Griffin. "Ye kin jine our crowd, an' we'll share alike."

"Of all the nerve I ever heard about this is the biggest!" stormed Jack.

"It won't pay none ter git sassy," warned Smull. "Give me that drawin', Somers!"

"And if I don't?" asked Bob.

"'Twon't make a particle o' difference; we'll hev it all the same."

"Well, in that case, suppose you come and take it!"

The lumbermen listened to these words in amazement. Tom Smull stared wonderingly at Bob.

"Wal, if this don't beat all creation!" he cried. "I s'picion as how ye'll find out it don't pay none ter run ag'in Tom Smull." The lumberman, still keeping his weapon leveled, roughly seized the bridle of Bob's pony. "Come now," he added, scowling fiercely, "no more foolin'!"

A few seconds of silence followed this command. Highly indignant and alarmed, the boys gazed intently toward the two principals facing each other in the moonlight. If the lumberjacks secured possession of the map it might give them such an advantage as to threaten the success of their expedition. And it was galling to think of their very first attempt to outwit the trailers meeting with complete defeat.

Breathlessly, they watched Bob Somers. His arm flashed up so swiftly that their eyes could scarcely follow its movement.

Tom Smull's pistol hand received the full force of the blow. Then a quirt came down with stinging force upon the broncho's back, and the bridle was torn so suddenly from the lumberman's grasp as to almost throw him to the ground.

Bob Somers, encouraged by the cries of his excited chums, put spurs to his horse and galloped recklessly down the valley, while Tom Smull, with a yell of rage, started off in hot pursuit.

"Stop—stop!" he bawled.

A grim, determined expression on Bob Somers' face indicated clearly that he had no intention of obeying this command. Lying almost flat upon his pony's back, he urged him ahead until trees and bushes were whirling by with bewildering rapidity.

But fast as his pony tore, Tom Smull's went faster; and he realized that it was only a question of a short time when he would be overtaken—and then?

"There's going to be one of the liveliest musses Tom Smull was ever mixed up in," murmured Bob Somers, grimly.

"Stop—yer can't git away!"

Over swells, down the sides of little gullies, and across level stretches, the mad, headlong race continued, the shrill cry of a skulking coyote close at hand alone rising above the clatter of hoofs.

"I've got yer, pard!"

Bob Somers was on the point of wheeling his pony about, in order to face his determined pursuer, when the animal's fore legs suddenly plunged into a morass. It had been completely concealed by densely matted grasses and other vegetation.

As the snorting pony sank up to his knees, a stream of liquid mud shot into the air. Bob Somers found himself jarred from the saddle and catapulted over the animal's head. He landed at full length, and lay almost stunned amidst the grass and ooze.

Tom Smull had, perhaps, never been more astonished in his life. By the narrowest margin, he succeeded in pulling his own horse up in time. Then, with a whoop of triumph, he swung himself from the saddle.

"Knew I'd git ye, pard!" he yelled.

As Bob endeavored to rise from the soft, yielding surface which had so fortunately saved him from injury, he caught a glimpse of a dark form struggling through mud and vegetation toward him.

He turned and threshed about, fighting hard to free his legs from the entangling rushes.

"No yer don't!" jeered Tom Smull.

A violent shove sent Bob on his back, and, as his eyes gazed into the lumberjack's triumphant face, he also saw the barrel of a revolver again poked toward him.

"Mebbe that won't keep yer quiet fur a spell!" grinned Tom. "'Tain't allus healthy ter smell powder smoke, young un."

He tore Bob's khaki jacket roughly open, and in another instant his big hand was feeling for the inside pocket.

The precious map was there.

Bob Somers groaned inwardly. He heard a gruff exclamation of joy. The document, held in Tom Smull's hand, was shining in the soft, greenish moonlight.

When the lumberjack's eyes rested upon the crude lines, his exultation was so great that he seemed to entirely forget his victim.

"Ha, ha! The identical thing! It 'ud sarve ye jist right, pard, if I handed yer a clip or two fur all the trouble ye give me; but thar ain't nuthin' mean 'bout me."

The lumberman was of an immensely strong and wiry build, and the idea of a boy actually having the courage to attack him never entered his mind. Bob, however, working quietly, had succeeded in getting his legs loose, and, while the other was still gloating over his victory, rose to a standing position. Tom Smull, unprepared for such sudden action, received a powerful blow which struck the revolver from his hand. Then, before a howl of pain had ceased, he found himself gripped by a pair of muscular arms and forced over backward.

The astounded lumberman struggled fiercely to regain his balance, but the combination of slippery surface and unpreparedness was too much to successfully combat. A few brief instants of desperate struggle; a wild threshing about among the reeds and ooze; a splashing of water; the peculiar, sucking sound of gripping mud, as boots were drawn from it—then:

Tom Smull, panting for breath, toppled suddenly over, and brought up with a resounding squash where the mire was deepest.

The object of the battle, wafted away by the breeze, had settled down beneath a huge tree a few yards beyond the edge of the marsh.

"I'll pay ye fur this!" howled the lumberjack, furiously.

His big hand gripped Bob Somers' leg.

But the boy had seen and heard something which instilled into him new courage and determination—a sound of beating hoofs and the sight of a line of horsemen sweeping along at reckless speed.

Tom Smull realized that quick action was necessary. He struggled furiously, both to retain his hold upon Bob and extricate himself, only to fail completely.

Bob tore his leg loose, while, at every move, Smull plunged more deeply into the slimy mud and plastered it more thickly upon him.

Just as Bob Somers, feeling that victory had been won, voiced a loud warning to his friends to look out for the marsh, a startling interruption took place.

A limb of the tree close by began to shake and creak—and it was not the breeze that caused it. A flutter of dead leaves and twigs floated mournfully downward, while two brilliant spots glowed among the dark branches. Then a low, ominous growl filled the boy's heart with dismay.

Smull was oblivious to all this; he had ears for nothing, and eyes only for the scrap of paper beneath the tree. Relieved momentarily from the hindrance which Bob had caused to his movements, he staggered and plunged toward dry ground.

The limb creaked again. A long, savage snarl rose harshly upon the still night air.

"A painter!" cried Tom Smull. His voice was hoarse with sudden terror. "It's a painter! The two of us is goners!"

CHAPTER XX

GOLD CREEK

Madly the lumberman hurled himself forward, seized the map, and turned in the direction of his broncho, while, but an instant afterward, a long, tawny body sprang from the limb and landed on the edge of the marsh.

All thoughts of Wanatoma's drawing vanished from Bob Somers' mind, as he stood with but a few yards between him and a panther. The moonlight revealed the animal's ears thrown far back; his tail was lashing fiercely; he seemed on the point of leaping again.

"Great Scott!" breathed Bob.

The boy's hand flew to his holster. Backing slowly away, he kept his revolver leveled at the animal's head; his hand was steady, though his heart thumped hard. It was a moment of great suspense. Almost mechanically, he saw the riders looming up clearly in the moonlight.

"Watch yourself, Bob! We'll get him!" came encouragingly from Dick Travers' lips.

The loud yells of the boys and clatter of hoofs evidently caused the animal to decide that his enemies were too many to contend against. Still growling and snarling, he whisked about, took several great leaps, and, skirting along by the marsh, disappeared behind a clump of trees.

With a sigh of great relief, Bob Somers faced his excited friends.

"Hurt?—No; not a bit of it, fellows; but the map's gone—and all the fault of that wretched varmint!"

"The map gone!"

These words, repeated by several voices, sounded in accents of the deepest gloom.

"Quick—don't lose an instant!" cried Bob. "You may be able to overtake him, and get it back. Help me get my bronc out of that awful mess, Dick."

Fired with a determined resolve, five boys immediately cracked their quirts, and

the bronchos were in motion again, pounding swiftly off in the direction taken by Smull and Griffin.

Bob and Dick managed to capture the former's badly-frightened animal just as it was floundering out of the mire, and presently galloped, side by side, after the now faint and shadowy forms of the other riders.

Occasional sharp, yelping cries echoed dismally between the hills, and within a short time they caught a glimpse of a pack of coyotes, an undulating line of gray sweeping across the narrow valley. A bit further along, the boys came upon Dave, in charge of the packhorses.

"I couldn't keep up the pace with these beasts," he explained.

"Think the fellows had any chance?" asked Bob, eagerly.

Dave shook his head.

"I'm afraid not," he answered. "They had too good a start. Gracious, Bob, you're in a pretty mess!"

"Tom Smull is in a worse," said Bob, grimly. "How did you chaps manage to break away from Griffin?"

"Sam suddenly gave a terrible yell, hung over the side of his pony like a Mexican vaquero about to pick a handkerchief off the ground, and started suddenly. The rest of us—well—we felt sure Griffin wouldn't shoot—took our chances, anyway, and bolted after him."

"Bully for you! Say, it certainly makes me sick to think of that panther mixing in just at the wrong time."

"The worst kind of luck," groaned Dick. "What's to be done?"

"Make a great rush for the mine, and beat those fellows out. It's going to be a free-for-all race now."

"That's right," agreed Dick. "My, oh, my, but I do feel wild."

They sat in silence for a few moments, straining their ears to catch any sounds of the pursuit.

"The timbermen have the map, an' they'll keep it forever an' two days," grumbled Dick. "Hello! Here come the boys!"

The five, after an interval which seemed very long, cantered up, their ponies breathing hard and flecked with foam.

"The scamps made a clean get-away," growled Jack.

"Bet the whole jig is up," wailed Tom.

"Oh, I rather guess not," snorted Tim Lovell. "There'll be some lively doin's before this crowd gives up."

This sentiment met with general approval.

As the bronchos had been pushed pretty hard, the boys decided to camp at the first suitable place.

"This is a great valley, full o' coyotes, playful panthers, an' desperate timbermen," remarked Jack, disgustedly. "Wonder what's comin' next."

"Plenty!" grunted Tim.

In a gash in the hills they came to a halt, built a fire against a rocky wall as a protection, and all but Tim Lovell turned in.

And each sentinel, in his turn, heard enough to make him keep his senses keenly alert. Several times the sound of skurrying feet rose with unpleasant distinctness, causing the lonely sentinel to picture in his mind the gray forms skulking close by.

In the early morning Bob made a drawing of the map, and, as all had studied it carefully, no detail was forgotten. Immediately after breakfast they were off, following a deep gully.

It did not end in a pocket, as Jack Conroy gloomily predicted, but opened out, forming an amphitheatre between wild, barren hills. Keeping to the north as closely as the configuration of the land would allow, the party struggled on, now in the midst of boulders, then halted by the undergrowth in some woods so dense that the sunlight scarcely filtered in.

But as each mile seemed to fall slowly and grudgingly behind them, they could see from points of vantage a great bluish mass rising higher, its outlines cutting more sharply against the sky. A towering summit of a peculiar blunt shape proved beyond doubt that this was their goal.

At the top of a high ridge they gazed with fascinated attention toward the mountain, their pulses quickened with excitement.

Perpetual snow, above pine forests, shone with dazzling luster; a succession of wild-looking crags extended off to the right and left until the furthest peaks were but faint grayish patches.

"Mount Wanatoma!" said Bob, in solemn tones.

"Mount Wanatoma!" echoed the others.

"Christopher! Let's hurry!" cried Dick, nervously. "See any signs of those lumberjacks, fellows?"

Each, taking turns with the powerful field-glass, stared in all directions. But nothing appeared within the circle.

"That doesn't prove anything," sighed Tim. "You may be sure they're not far away."

"Smull and Griffin acted like a pair of pirates," growled Tom.

"Pirates are water-birds, Cliffy," suggested Sam.

"Well, I'll bet Tom Smull felt like a water-bird for a few minutes," retorted the other, with a very faint grin.

"There's goin' to be snow before long," remarked Tim, "an'—"

"It would mean good-bye to gettin' back for six months," supplied Jack. "Snowed up in the mountains; I suppose that's the next thing'll happen, Timmy."

They stopped only a few minutes for lunch. Full of determination to win the race against all odds, the boys forgot fatigue, pushing their hardy little bronchos to the utmost limit.

When night came, after the hardest day in the saddle they had ever experienced, it found them encamped in the foot-hills, with Mount Wanatoma looming majestically above them. Its apparent nearness was deceptive, however, and all realized that many miles of rough, dangerous country had still to be crossed.

A cold wind was sweeping down from the heights, and from somewhere in the darkness came the sullen murmur of a rushing torrent. Sleep seemed banished from the thoughts of all save Dave. After supper, they paced restlessly to and fro before a fire built in a deep hollow, their shadowy forms touched now and again by the ruddy glow. None cared to venture far away, for, as on the night before, they realized that the blackness hid many a snarling foe.

At an early hour next morning the seven were again in the saddle, traveling through fields of waving yellow bunch grass. They followed an almost straight course to a point where the hills were sharply cleft, forming a wide, deep gorge. Through the center trickled a tiny stream bordered with scrubby willows. The rough, scarred hills on either hand ended abruptly, and, beyond, a series of

ridges, some thickly covered with pine, others of bald, reddish rock, rolled off in crests, rising higher and higher until they joined the stupendous mass of Mount Wanatoma.

The vastness of nature impressed the boys strangely.

"Honest, it makes me feel like a little crawling ant," remarked Tim, with a deep breath.

"An' you look the part, all right, Timmy-Tim," grinned Jack. "An' Tommy! Why, he's 'most disappeared."

"Oh, you get out, Jacky. There's not such an awful lot of you, either," retorted Tom, stiffly. "Besides," he added, "I'm a half inch taller'n I was in Wyoming; honest, I am."

"Goodness gracious! Look at the giant!" chirped Jack. "Measure yourself every day, I s'pose?"

"By the time we reach the gold mine, he'll be a six-footer," laughed Tim.

"That's all right; I may be looking down on you some day, smarty," snorted Tom.

To the north! was the slogan; yet they were as often compelled to struggle east or west, pushed aside by huge barriers of rock or impenetrable forests.

About one o'clock the boys dismounted near the mouth of a gloomy canyon. On the frowning slopes of "Mount Wanatoma" they saw masses of dark, rich pines, gigantic piles of rock, and precipices with sheer drops of hundreds of feet. And there was a cascade, too; a thin dash of white tumbling from a dizzy ledge, growing broader as it fell, until, at the bottom, it spread out sharply into a fan-shaped form, glittering in the sunlight.

A torrent roared its way through the canyon, slashing past grim, gray rocks, a churning mixture of green and white, carrying on its battling surface occasional branches and bright-colored autumn leaves.

Close to the water's edge, the boys collected a quantity of fuel and started a fire. Dick and Tim officiated as cooks, and soon had ready a generous supply of bacon, flapjacks and coffee.

While they were busily engaged in disposing of the last morsels, Dick jumped abruptly to his feet.

"By the great horn spoon—look!" he yelled.

The eyes of the startled boys followed the direction indicated by his outstretched arm.

Uttering cries of dismay, they jumped to their feet.

Far up on the mountain slope, several moving specks could be plainly seen against a background of rocks. Small as the objects were, they cut out sharply in the form of horsemen.

Bob Somers was the first to break the silence.

"Great Scott! What in thunder do you think of that?" he gasped. "And so far ahead!"

He stared, in turn, at six downcast faces.

"I—I don't—can't understand it," quavered Tom.

"The lumberjacks are up there; the jig's up, too," pronounced Jack, dejectedly.

"But—but"—stammered Dick—"just look at the way we've traveled. They must be birds."

"A straight line is the shortest distance between two points; guess those chaps managed to keep closer to it than we have," came from Dave.

The crowd could not shake off the gloomy feelings which beset them. The horsemen had disappeared, but they kept staring up at the white patch of rocks, half expecting to see other riders pass across its surface.

"Knew it was goin' to be a wild goose chase by a pack o' wild geese."

"Oh, is that so, Jacky?" cried Tim, hotly. "An' but for that megaphone voice o' yours you might be chirpin' a different tale."

"Here—don't you dare blame it on me! Never spoke 'bout it yourself, I s'pose? Oh, no! Nobody did but me, eh?"

"I don't care what you say, Conroy; it's all your fault. I told you—everybody did."

"Cut it out!" Jack made a threatening gesture. "Cut it out, or you'll take a tumble, an' a mighty large-sized one!"

"Quit jawing," interposed Bob. "I'm surprised at you fellows. Are we such weak dubs as to call ourselves beaten before we even begin to climb that mountain? I rather guess not!"

All caught his spirit of enthusiasm. Saddle-bags were hastily repacked, and within a few minutes the bronchos were in motion again.

The boys were glad enough that they did not have to make the passage of the canyon. Led by Bob, they strung out over a flat strip by the edge of the torrent, soon finding a place to ford.

Plunging in, the bronchos snorted, as icy water gripped their legs and bodies; a fiercely surging flood splashed over stirrup-leather and boots. The Ramblers could scarcely control their sturdy little animals, as they slowly fought their way across.

Two hours later, after a hard climb, the seven were sprawling in the midst of sage brush on the slopes of "Mount Wanatoma," with a stiff southeast wind howling around them. White clouds which scurried swiftly through the blue often hid the snow-clad summit.

"Some weather soon," predicted Dave.

"Squalls, I'm thinkin'," muttered Jack, savagely.

From their elevated position they saw a vast area of hills, gorges and forests, all finally lost in a gray, misty line which met the sky. The torrent swept its crooked course to the eastward; waving fields of bunch grass shone with a golden luster, and forests of pine were sharply edged with light. The sun was already creeping near the rim of the western hills.

The boys jumped into the saddle again, but before a couple of miles had been covered found themselves facing a disheartening fact—the poor jaded bronchos could go no further.

"Napoleon's crossing of the Alps was nothing like this," quoth Bob, as he swung himself to the ground.

"Dave'll now have a bit o' history to write for his journal," sighed Tim—"The Ramblers crossing Mount Wanatoma."

"And just to think! We're stuck here for the night," growled Dick, with a glance at the tired bronchos. "Those poor little beasts deserve a real medal," he added. "They tried hard enough."

"We'll have one made from the very first gold we strike," remarked Jack, sarcastically, disregarding Tim's angry glance.

Disconsolately, they hunted about for a camping site, and found one near by. A

fire was soon built, and supper cooked.

Twilight, and then night seemed to close down upon them with astonishing swiftness. Not a star peeped forth. A blustery wind moaned between the trees, carrying with it a suggestion of winter gales.

"We'll be snowed up," Jack again predicted, gloomily.

"An' I don't care if we are," snapped Tim.

"S'pose if it blizzards it'll be all my fault, too," mumbled Jack.

The night seemed long and dismal. Almost benumbed with cold, the early dawn found them astir again, and the journey was resumed with all possible speed.

Their voices held an eager note which told of excitement but partially repressed. Before the sun set again they would know their fate.

For hours they rode steadily, skirting around the mountainside, forced higher and higher up the slopes by innumerable obstacles. Sometimes they crossed narrow ledges where a single misstep would have meant a frightful plunge down rough, jagged precipices.

"Humph! Here's where we seem stumped at last," remarked Jack, as the bronchos emerged from a belt of timber.

Just ahead, a reddish pinnacle of rock, almost as straight as a cathedral tower, and rising for hundreds of feet, presented a strangely impressive spectacle.

Bob Somers looked dubiously at the slope which slanted sharply from its base.

"A risky job getting around, fellows."

"A pippin," said Dick, with a deep breath.

"Well, we can do it," asserted Tim. "Come ahead."

The boys scarcely dared to look at the depths below when the sure-footed little bronchos began cautiously treading the steeply-inclined surface, sometimes sending small landslides sweeping down the slope. All uttered sighs of relief when they again reached safer ground.

About mid-afternoon Bob raised his hand.

"Listen, fellows!"

The boys pulled rein in the midst of a deep pine forest.

"Do you hear anything?"

"Runnin' water?" queried Jack.

"Yes! Do you know what I think?" Bob paused. "Wanatoma said we'd run across a stream on the opposite side of the mountain—"

"Sure as shootin', that must be it," cried Tim, eagerly.

"And told us it flowed directly toward the gold field," chimed in Sam Randall, his face aglow with excitement.

"Now, according to my reckoning, this is just about the place where we ought to find it. That stream over there is certainly Gold Creek; so we have only to follow its course down the mountain to locate our mine. But—"

"Well?" questioned Tom.

"Those lumberjacks are ahead of us in the game. Big Jim is smart enough to understand the map. The word 'stream' on that line ought to show him the right place."

"And that awful big X 'ud simply screech it into his head," said Jack.

"I 'most hate to go on," said Tim, looking fiercely at Conroy, as he always did when anything disturbed him.

"Oh, my! I only hope they lost themselves somewhere," said Tom. "So let's hurry, Bob. I can hardly wait."

"Dive ahead for Gold Creek before worry stops our Tom from growin'," quoth Jack, with a strong effort to appear easy and unconcerned.

The bronchos' hoofs began kicking up the pine-needles and cones again. The sunlight cut curious streaks in the dim recesses of the gloomy woods, spotting trunks and boughs with its brilliant radiance.

As the Ramblers made their way in and out among the trees, a musical tinkle of running water came more clearly to their ears.

"I see it! I see it!" cried Tim, raising himself in his stirrups, and pointing excitedly.

A cool, silvery streak was showing between the trees.

"The thread that should have led us to fame and fortune," mused Dave Brandon.

"Gold Creek, fellows!"

Dick Travers was the first to reach the edge of the swiftly-running stream. The

boys watched in silence the clear water tumbling down the steep descent, dashing briskly against rocks and snags, its never-ceasing roar rising high above the pulsating murmur of the pines.

Nervous and excited, with grim-set expressions, they put their bronchos in motion again, following the course of the stream as closely as dense vegetation would permit.

Broad shafts of light soon penetrated the woods, and before long only scattered groups of trees lay beyond.

Not a word was spoken as the ponies walked around the last of these and came to a halt on a knoll which commanded a clear view of the far-reaching slopes below.

One glance was enough.

A number of men, widely scattered, were seen digging with pick and shovel.

"Beaten!" cried Dick Travers, in a despairing voice.

CHAPTER XXI

ALONG THE CREEK

The lumberjacks had taken possession of land which the boys considered as rightfully belonging to them. Disappointment, chagrin, and a whirlwind of strange feelings surged through their beings. They had matched uncertainty with hopefulness, and the realization that defeat had actually come was a stunning blow.

For some moments Bob and his companions sat almost motionless in their saddles.

"It's all up!" groaned Tom Clifton.

"We've traveled a long way for this," wailed Dick, with a choking sensation in his throat.

"Did you ever hear of such awful luck?" growled Tim, directing a look of intense anger and scorn toward Jack Conroy.

"I wonder—I wonder if they've found any trace of gold," murmured Sam, in a tone of the deepest dejection. "Who are those fellows on the nearest ridge?"

"Look like Reynolds and Woodle to me," answered Dave, with a sigh. "There's Pete, away down at the bottom; see him?—Just a little square dot."

"Christopher! I don't think we ought to stand for this!" cried Jack Conroy, hotly, shaking his fist in the air. "Haven't we enough spunk to—"

"The odds are against us, Jack," put in Bob, quietly.

"Nothin' doin'," said Tim.

"I don't know about that!" fumed Dick. His voice trembled with indignation. "It makes me so wild I can't even think straight. Come on, fellows!"

A long, undulating slope of treacherous soil stretched downward. The bronchos slipped and slid along it, and, occasionally, the boys had to dismount and lead the way on foot, or prospect around to find some reasonably safe route. It was, therefore, a long time before they came abreast of the men.

The rushing torrent at this point was too dangerous to ford, so they kept steadily on, paying no attention to a number of loud salutations.

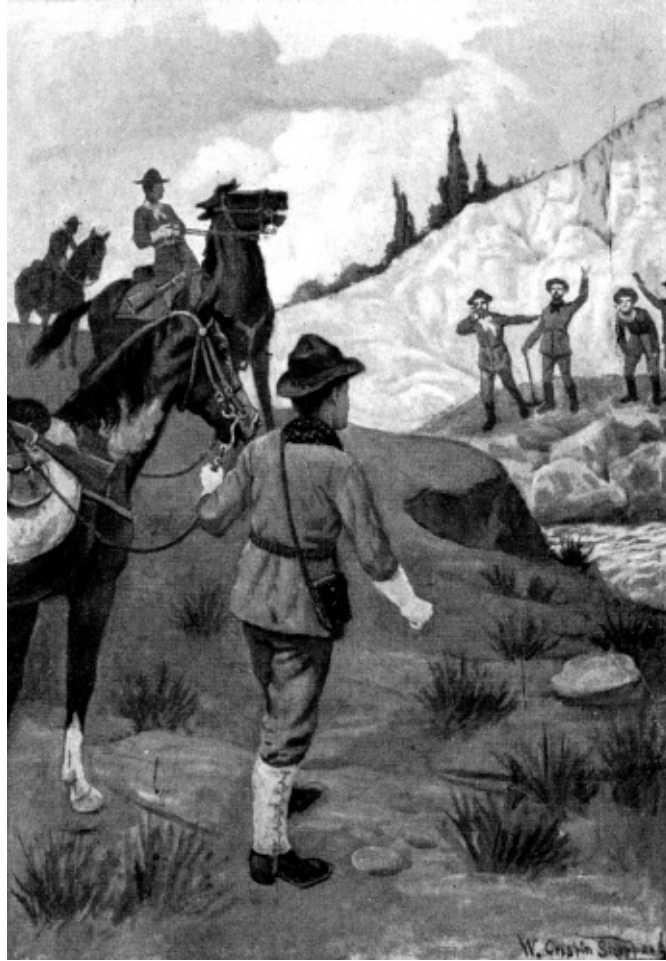
Hails from several figures below soon followed, sounding astonishingly loud and distinct, and among them Pete Colliver's voice was easily recognizable. As the seven caught it, the scowls on their faces deepened.

The stream swept around in a great snake-like curve, cutting its way between two sharply gashed ridges. Fifteen minutes of careful riding brought the boys near the pebble-covered bottom of one of these miniature gorges.

Upon the opposite bank, Smull, Griffin, Pete Colliver and Jimmy stood lined up, grinning broadly, while the two men who had been working on the slope were slipping and scrambling down the rocks and turf toward them.

"Wal, wal, if hyar they ain't, at last!" laughed Pete, boisterously. "Didn't git losted, arter all, hey?"

"Ye can't stake out any claims here, pards," said Tom Smull, "but if yer a-lookin' fur jobs as laborers mebbe we kin perwide 'em."



"YE CAN'T STAKE OUT ANY CLAIMS HERE"

"Ha, ha!" roared Pete. "Feelin' kinder sore, eh? Didn't wanter go in on eq'al shares! Wal, bust it, there ain't a-goin' ter be no eq'al shares! Ha, ha!"

"Don't I feel sorry fur 'em!" snickered Jimmy of Sellade.

"If you uns ain't too all-fired proud ter throw 'round a pick an' shovel fur a rough crowd like us, come acrost an' begin," suggested Tom, his features screwed up into an extraordinary smirk.

A fiery spot in Dick Travers' nature was touched.

"You're a lot of scoundrels!" he cried, shaking his fist. "You haven't a bit of right to that claim, and if there's any law in the country you won't be squatting on it long."

"Put us off, pard," jeered Alf Griffin.

"See here, Jim Reynolds!" exclaimed Bob, as the big lumberman and Woodle, panting from their exertions, joined the others, "did you order Tom Smull and Griffin to hold us up?"

"Nary a bit on't," answered Jim, earnestly. "Didn't know whar they'd gone, or nothing till they gits back an' shoves the drawin' under me nose."

"Then you thought it was all right for them to do it, eh?"

Jim scratched his head.

"'Tain't nateral ter expect a man ter give up a chancet like that, is it? If them fellers is still o' a mind, ye kin come in with us."

"Wal, I ruther guess not!" howled Tom Smull, fiercely, beginning to pace to and fro. "Nix on that."

The bantering expression left his face. He glanced toward Alf Griffin, and the swift interchange of looks between the two told of a determined resolve to keep the Ramblers out.

"An' none o' ye don't darst to cross the crick," came from Pete, as he stalked belligerently to the edge of the bank.

"Get out, grouchy!" scoffed Jack. "Let's call his bluff, fellows, an' get over the splash."

"Come ahead!" cried Dick, excitedly.

"Look hyar!" Smull's warlike tone matched his scowling visage. "Mebbe you fellers is a-sp'ilin' fur trouble, hey? My advice is: don't start nuthin', but git back ter that lumber camp whar ye belong."

"Ho, ho!" laughed Jimmy.

"And ye kin ask Cap Slater fur our old jobs."

"'Tain't right ter rile the lads," protested Woodle, earnestly. "Quit it, Tom Smull."

"I reckon it ain't you as is runnin' me tongue," retorted Smull. "But fur me an' Griffin, mebbe we uns wouldn't never hev made this strike o' pay dirt."

A strike of pay dirt!

Then Wanatoma's gold mine was a reality—an actual, tangible thing. Bob Somers' eyes ran rapidly over the mountain slope on the opposite side of the

torrent.

He saw huge areas of rocks and turf, spotted with scrubby trees and patched with weeds and grass. Here and there grew prickly pear trees, their broad, spiked leaves grayed by yellow dust. Above were the pine forests, and masses of rocks forming great cliffs and precipices, and rising to a stupendous height the crown of perpetual snow. At the base, some distance off, were evidences of ancient landslides—gigantic piles of earth and rocks, with crumbling tree trunks protruding from the mass.

Bob Somers' thoughts were abruptly swung into another channel by a war of words between Pete Colliver and Conroy.

"What! You dare me to come over, eh?"

"I say ye dasn't!"

"Well, by gum, Wengeance Cauliflower, you an' a gatling gun together couldn't keep me back."

"Jack—I say, Jack," interposed Bob Somers, hastily, "hold on; no use in stirring up trouble."

The only answer was a sharp crack of Conroy's quirt.

The sudden leap of his broncho and a loud splash of water set all the other animals prancing about in the narrow gorge. Jack's trusty little steed snorted, as the powerful current bore him along; flying spray soused high above the rider's boots. But Jack, intent upon showing his courage, steered straight toward a deep cut in the opposite bank.

Fearing that the impetuous lad might involve the crowd in a disturbance of tremendous proportions, Bob Somers also plunged his broncho into the stream. Then, one by one, the others followed.

The lumberjacks stood in silence, watching the struggle between the riders and the seething flood. Presently Jack Conroy's dripping horse scrambled ashore.

With a yell of defiance, the lad rode through the cleft, soon finding a place where he was able to ascend.

"Well, here I am, Wengeance!" laughed Jack, making directly toward Pete Colliver.

Pete took a step forward, and there was a curious look in his eyes, as though some resolve he had made afforded him immense satisfaction.

"I see ye, big un!"

Smack! Smack! His open palm struck the sorrel on the flank with terrific force.

The broncho gave a great bound, almost tossing Jack over his head.

Highly indignant, the boy strove desperately to regain control of the animal, while peals of uproarious laughter came from several of the lumberjacks.

Boys and men, too occupied to have eyes for anything beyond their immediate surroundings, failed to observe a horseman emerge from the timber above and stare earnestly toward them.

As Jack Conroy, fuming with anger, at last managed to drop from the saddle and rushed toward Pete, Bob Somers whirled his broncho around and rode between them.

"Hold on, Jack," he pleaded, earnestly. "Stop! Grab him, Dave!"

A hand reached up and gripped his arm. Bob turned quickly, to get a nearer view than he liked of Tom Smull's features.

As he voiced an emphatic protest, fingers were closed tighter about his wrist. Then came a sudden, violent jerk which pulled him over sideways. He was just able to withdraw his feet from the stirrups and swing his leg over the pommel when the frightened broncho bolted.

By a skilful movement, Bob managed to land on his feet.

"I'll show ye, pard," snarled Tom Smull. "Shoved me inter the squash, hey? I reckon as how ye won't feel any ter the best when I gits through with ye."

"Ha, ha, hyar's whar we gits wengeance!" shouted Pete Colliver.

It was a moment of the utmost confusion. Riderless horses were swinging wildly over the uneven ground, while the indignant boys rushed up from different points to give aid to Bob and Jack.

A fierce battle was about to be waged, when a clatter of hoofs, together with a loud yell, caused all eyes to be suddenly turned toward the mountain slope.

"Hey! Leave them fellers alone, or every hair on yer heads'll git blowed off!"

Men and boys recognized that gruff voice and the thick-set figure which sat astride a weary-looking mustang.

"By all that's wonderful; it's old Cap Slater!" yelled Tim Lovell.

CHAPTER XXII

CAP TAKES A HAND

It was indeed old Cap Slater who finally came to a halt facing them, and his appearance created such intense astonishment that hostilities were instantly forgotten.

All stared at the burly captain as though some apparition had suddenly risen before their eyes.

"Wal, wal, if there ain't actooally the old feller!" cried Pete in accents of the deepest wonderment. "I never s'picioned as how he'd be mean nuff ter hev went an' follered us."

"It's a great go, all right," said Jimmy, weakly.

"What does all this mean, Reynolds?" bellowed Slater, as his eyes ran over the group in a fierce, questioning stare.

"Means? Why, it means that these men have swiped a claim—a claim that rightfully belongs to us," spoke up Bob, as soon as his astonishment allowed him to speak.

"They hev, hey?" The answer seemed to put Cap Slater into a towering rage; he shook his fist violently in the air. "Ter think that arter all the trouble I has went to it were too late ter prewent this! It's nuff ter make a biled owl blink." Slater's tones, too, spoke volumes of disappointment and chagrin. "I want the hull story; an' I want it quick!"

"These two men, Smull and Griffin"—Bob pointed an accusing finger at the lumberjacks—"held us up and stole our map; and now they want to start a fight."

Captain Slater's face had darkened by degrees, until a heavier scowl had perhaps never rested upon it.

"The most disgracefulest thing I ever hear tell of! Never thought as how ye'd do anything like that, Jim Reynolds."

His voice roared above the steady drone of the torrent.

"Anybody else would hev done the same thing," mumbled Jim.

"I don't wonder yer voice has got weak. I'm a-comin' closer, so ye kin whisper."

Captain Slater eased his burly form from the saddle, shook a cloud of dust from his travel-stained garments, then strode up to the lumbermen. He stood before his former employees, a stern figure of a man, like the symbol of outraged justice. Under his steely glare they seemed to perceptibly wilt and shrink away.

"Now then, Reynolds," his jaws clicked ominously, "I'm a-goin' ter see fair play."

"This hyar ain't yer lumber camp, Cap," growled Tom Smull.

"I want nothing from sich as you. That little shrimp o' a Pete, an' Griffin, an' you orter be tied up together like a bunch o' herrin' an' dropped clean off the earth."

"When ye was cap'n o' a floatin' tub, it's a wonder every man aboard didn't turn pirate," mumbled Griffin, as he and Smull hastily fell back before this outburst.

"Ye'd look 'andsomer if ye'd let out a few reefs in that face o' yourn, Griffin," the captain replied grimly. "Now then—"

"Say, captain!"

Bob Somers stepped up and whispered something in his ear.

"Hey?" Slater's red face took on a bewildered expression. He turned, his eyes roving in all directions. "What, Somers?"

Bob spoke quietly a second time.

The captain's big, flaming handkerchief came out, to mop his face in a vigorous fashion.

"Roll me down a timber slide if—if—"

Words seemed to fail him; he paused, while Pete Colliver looked on in open-mouthed wonder.

"Hey, Jimmy, d'ye pipe that?" he exclaimed, hoarsely. "They're crawlin' a'ready—skeered."

"An' the old un has losted his nerve."

"Yes—bust it; an' his voice, too!"

"Git out, ye little toad. I won't hev ye a-walkin' on the same ground as I do. It's a positive wonder that grin o' yourn don't start a landslide big nuff ter kiver up all the gold. Come on, lads!"

The lumberman began leading his mustang away, while Bob, with a "Get your broncs, fellows!" started after his own, which stood close by.

Not far down the slope, in a little bowl-shaped valley washed at the foot by the swirling torrent, Bob Somers and Captain Slater, sitting on a boulder, awaited the others.

Dick and Jack were the first to arrive.

"Now, for goodness' sake, Bob, what does all this mean?" demanded Dick, impatiently.

"Just this: I believe Reynolds' crowd hasn't located the mine, after all."

"What—what—made a mistake? You don't—you can't mean it! How—"

"Ter my mind, I'll wenture ter say it's as sartin as that a bullfrog can't drive an ox-team," remarked the captain, solemnly.

"Hold on—wait a minute! Here come the other fellows," roared Jack, excitedly.

In a short time they were all together.

"Jehoshaphat!" cried Jack, when Bob had begun again. "Warble your reasons fast."

"Listen: didn't Wanatoma tell us the creek flowed through a level plain at the base of the mountain?"

There was a moment of thoughtful silence.

"I'm sure he did!" cried Sam Randall, excitedly. "I remember now. And all around us it's—"

"Hilly, to beat the Dutch."

"I don't know whether Wanna said the gold was at the point where the stream reached the base or not," supplemented Dave, "but he certainly did mention the fact that it was where Gold Creek took a big bend and that the land was level."

"Well, can you beat it?" gasped Tom. "Oh, if it should only be true! I'll bet the stream changes its course further along."

"Jingo! Perhaps we were just a little bit too quick in gettin' excited an' givin' up the game," murmured Jack. "Bully thought o' yours, Bob!" He seized Tom, and began to waltz him around, to the accompaniment of a very loud, unmusical whistle. "Hooray!"

"Remember that voice, Jacky!" cautioned Tim.

"Oh, my, oh, my! but wouldn't I laugh if Bob is right!" blurted out Jack, hilariously. "Come on—let's beat it!" Deftly tripping Tom, he deposited him in a heap on a patch of dried grass. "Come on!"

"After such an exciting session, I think a recess ought to be taken," demurred Dave, "unless Captain Slater wants the floor."

Dave's words instantly changed thoughts into another channel. All eyes turned toward the captain; a bombardment of questions pelted him from every side.

The former skipper waved his hand.

"Yer git nuff force back o' them woices o' yourn ter work a power boat," he remarked, slowly. "It's a long story, but it's quick told. How did I hear 'bout the mine? Wal, I'll begin at the beginnin'."

The boys listened to the captain's story with the greatest interest, punctuating his remarks at frequent intervals by exclamations. He told them he had ridden back to Lovell's camp, to give warning of the lumbermen's departure, and that the former had provided him with all the information he could—even a rough sketch showing the location. Lastly, Captain Slater said something which caused the biggest surprise of all:

"I hit yer trail once or twicet. 'Member that big cliff 'way back yonder?" He waved his hand.

"Bet your life," answered Jack, with a peculiar grin.

"Wal, I think I seen a couple o' ye from the top."

"Great Cæsar! Was that you?" cried Tim. "Why, the boys had a camp only about three-quarters of a mile from there. How in the world did you miss running into it?"

"I hearn shots a-comin' from the timber; thinks I, mebbe that's Reynolds' gang, so I gallops over."

"Guess it was Dave and I after game," volunteered Bob.

"Wal, I didn't see nothing but the biggest an' blackest bear in all creation." The captain grinned reminiscently. "The old nag can't stand nothing wusser ter look at 'n Tom Smull's face; so he up an' runs; an' splash me in that crick, if I didn't begin ter think he was a-goin' ter take me back ter the lumber camp."

The boys laughed heartily.

"I done the best I could fur ye."

The crowd's answer to this was so hearty and sincere that, for once in his life, old Cap Slater felt slightly embarrassed, and, to conceal it, he again mopped his face with the big red handkerchief.

They sat around for some time, and were on the point of leaving, when two mounted men suddenly appeared on the rim of a rise just above them.

"Sufferin' crickets!" cried Cap Slater, with a steady look. "Bart Reeder an'—an'—must be a circus nigh abouts, an', sartin sure, that feller's the ringmaster."

Mr. Buck James, looking very large and important, in his checkered suit and white vest, sat astride a small dejected-looking mustang, with his long legs dangling close to the ground. Bart Reeder, thin and small by contrast, followed on a dun-colored pony.

"Makes me think of Don Quixote and Sancho Panza," gurgled Dick. "Wondered where the two chaps had gotten to."

"I tell ye, Reeder, this here place is a frost," came from Buck James. "Outside o' one place what Smull an' Griffin acts cracked over, I ain't seen nuff yellow specks to—hello!"

His eyes had suddenly lighted on the party.

"As I live, Cap Slater!" yelled Reeder, in sepulchral tones. "Great Scott! Whar—whar—"

"Captain Slater—the old un I hear so much about?" queried James, interestedly.

"The identical feller," almost stuttered Reeder. "Whar'd ye come from, Cap?"

"Me aeroplane is hitched on to the moon till I gits ready ter leave," answered the captain, gruffly. "Toddle on! An' when ye gits done lookin' at me, checkers—"

"Sir!" said Buck James, haughtily.

"Sir to you, sir! An' I venture ter say as how a suit like that is handy nuff when you wants ter hev a game, sir!"

"Do you know who I am?"

"I ain't pertic'lar to learn; my eyes is hurt nuff with them clo'es."

Uttering a loud guffaw, the captain turned away, and seized his mustang by the

bridle, while Buck James, highly indignant, lost no time in riding away.

"Now, let's follow the stream and see if we can find that level stretch and another bend," said Bob, in low tones. "Hear what James said, Dave—a 'frost'? More I think of it, the more certain I feel they're—"

"Goin' to have an awful awakening," grinned Tim; "eh, Jack? Whoa, little codger!"

He sprang into the saddle.

One by one the bronchos clambered up a steep bank, and were presently cantering briskly over ridges patched with stunted spruce and sage brush. On one side lay "Mount Wanatoma"; on the other, a vast reach extending toward a distant mountain chain.

Gray, threatening-looking clouds, which had stretched all morning on the horizon, were now advancing, and gusts of chilling wind buffeted the riders with unpleasant force.

After about a half hour's steady march, Sam Randall, some distance to the right of the main body, halted, and his shrill whistle wafted over soon brought the echoing hoof-beats to a stop.

"Hello, what's the matter?" called Bob.

"Look—look! See anything ahead?"

Sam's excited tones instantly forced attention upon the distance.

"Goodness gracious! As I live—a couple o' horsemen!" cried Tim, with a whoop.

"Where—where?" demanded Tom, earnestly.

"Don't you see 'em—right by that group of evergreens? There—they moved!"

"Cracky! I believe you're right."

Tom seemed perfectly dumfounded.

"Mebbe a couple o' hunters," suggested Cap Slater. "We ain't quite off the earth yit."

"An'—an'—why, say—is that a bear they have with 'em?" blurted out Jack, his eyebrows knitting in perplexity. "Somethin' whoppin' big, anyhow. Where's your glass, Bob?"

An animal of no small proportions had suddenly popped into view beside the horsemen.

"What do you see, Somers?" cried Jack, eagerly, as the field-glass was leveled.

A very strange expression came over Bob's face. He stared, apparently in speechless astonishment, paying no attention to the impatient queries which came from all sides.

"I say," howled Jack, "can't you speak?"

"It doesn't seem possible," murmured Bob, at length.

His voice indicated the greatest bewilderment.

"What doesn't seem possible?" yelled Dick.

"I can't believe it!"

"Then don't, but tell us what it is," cried Tim, while Tom, highly excited, cracked his quirt so sharply that every broncho immediately began to prance about.

"Well," howled Jack, when the animals had quieted down, "for the last time, Somers—"

"Why—that is Mr. Lovell, Wanatoma, and the Great Dane," was Bob Somers' astonishing answer.

CHAPTER XXIII

GOLD!

"Unk and Wanna!" cried Tim, incredulously. "Get out, Bob; you can't stuff me!"

"Or me, either!"

"A mighty poor joke!"

"Didn't think that o' you, Somers!"

"Here; look for yourself, Jack!" retorted Bob.

The big lad eagerly seized the field-glass and raised it to his eyes.

"I'm dreamin'—I know I'm dreamin'," he mumbled. "Next minute I'll wake up an' find myself in the cabin. Booney, is breakfast ready?"

"It's sartin'ly Lovell an' the Injun, when he gabs like that," commented Cap Slater. "Wal, if this hyar ain't nuff ter make a catfish act perlite to a cat I ain't never been scratched by a bramble!"

"Whoop!" cried Dick, delightedly. "Wonder what in thunder it all means?"

"Unk an' Wanna!" murmured Tim. "It—it—well, I give it up."

"Come ahead, fellows!"

Bob cracked his quirt, and the next instant the bronchos were galloping at a reckless rate over the uneven surface.

By degrees the two distant specks began to assume the familiar forms of Mr. Lovell and the aged warrior. Then a deep-throated bay rose above the sound of flying hoofs.

Bubbling over with joy and excitement, the boys gave a chorus of yells; again came a deep bay from the Great Dane, and an answering shout from Uncle Stanley.

Fast as the horses galloped, it was not fast enough to suit the impatient riders. It seemed as though the intervening space would never be covered, and a feeling of relief shot through them as they saw the horsemen begin to canter in their direction.

"Unk—I say, Unk, is that really you?" called out Tim. "I can't believe it's true, even now."

"Yes, Tim; and I'm mighty glad, as well as relieved, to see you, all safe and sound. How are you, captain?"

With the skill of cowboys, the seven brought their bronchos close alongside the two men, while the Great Dane, still uttering his musical bays, capered wildly about.

Amid the confusion, the din of questions and answers, and the stamping of horses' hoofs, Wanatoma, the aged warrior, sat dignified and silent, though the brightening of his eyes told of a feeling of satisfaction.

"Now, Lovell, I'm a-waitin' ter find out what all this means."

The captain's big voice boomed out above the others.

"Wanna, old boy, this is certainly a great surprise."

Jack had ridden up close to the Indian, and was energetically shaking hands.

"Quick, Uncle Stanley, do tell us something," pleaded Tim. "Have you seen those lumberjacks? Do you know what Bob Somers thinks?"

"Boys, boys, give me a chance," laughed Mr. Lovell. "Order, order! Now, Bob, what is your idea?"

"That the men have staked out the wrong place."

Wanatoma, with an approving glance, nodded.

"The white boy is keen, like Indian brave," he said, slowly.

"Then—then do you really mean to say Bob is right?" stammered Tim, with a great flash of hope. "Quick, Uncle Stanley, tell us."

"We have already staked out the Rambler Club's Gold Mine!"

A silence far more impressive than the wildest demonstration could have been followed this amazing announcement. The boys stared at one another, then at the lumberman, and from him to Wanatoma.

"I felt sure of it," said Bob, at length, with a great sigh of relief.

"Just to think of the luck," mumbled Tim.

"Honest, it seems too good to be true," chirped Tom, breathlessly.

"Sartingly beats all creation, that's what it does," remarked Cap Slater, in a tone of positive conviction.

"And—and did you really find gold?" asked Sam.

"The rocks are filled with specks that glitter like the sun," said Wanatoma. "Come, you shall see. Indian's work is done; he is content."

A certain pathos in his voice stilled a wild burst of enthusiasm. The redman, whose once powerful shoulders were bent by the weight of years, presented a picturesque spectacle. Long hair fell loosely over his blanketed shoulders; an eagle feather fluttered in the breeze; age had dimmed the luster of his eyes and lined his face with deep-set wrinkles, but the dignity of the warrior still remained.

"Wal, Wanna, yer the whitest Injun the rain ever beat ag'in," remarked Cap Slater, breaking in upon the silence. "Shake!"

He urged his mustang forward and leaned over.

The gruff old lumberman and the Indian clasped hands. One by one, the boys followed his example; then, with a "Come ahead, boys," Mr. Lovell cracked his quirt and was off.

Their ride, which was not long, took them through a narrow gorge between two low hills. From this they emerged upon a vast level plain, dotted with great clumps of evergreens.

"Aha! There's another bend in Gold Creek! See it?" cried Bob.

"Well, I should say so," shouted Tim, excitedly. "My, what a head you have, Bob Somers. Can it be—can it actually be there? Oh, ginger! Quick—tell us, Uncle Stanley."

Mr. Lovell waved his hand, taking a sweep of the rugged slope and level stretch at its base.

"Boys—The Rambler Club's Gold Mine!"

"Hooray—hooray!" yelled Bob; and the shout which blended in with his grew in volume until old Cap Slater himself seemed affected by the fever of excitement.

Presently quirts were given a final crack; the bronchos leaped forward, and, in another moment, the crowd caught sight of a lean-to near the base of the mountain and in the shelter of a pine woods.

Soon they dropped from the saddle before it.

The efforts of each to be the first to see the interior resulted in considerable confusion, which Jack straightened out in his usual way, Tim and Dick flying off at a tangent.

But there was too much suppressed excitement for the fun to continue long. Hearts were beating fast, and their eyes sparkled.

Wanatoma seized a pick and shovel resting in a corner.

"Come," he said, laconically.

Skirting around the woods, he led the way up the slope, showing a flash of his old-time strength and agility. They scrambled after him, over turf and rocks, Mr. Lovell and Captain Slater bringing up in the rear. It was hard work for the ex-skipper, who grunted and puffed with the exertion.

At a considerable distance from the base, the Indian halted, while the boys, eager and excited, surrounded him.

"Great Scott! to think it's actually here!" murmured Bob.

"Wow! Isn't it grand?" piped Tom, with an almost irresistible desire to break into a wild fit of laughter.

After a few moments' rest, Wanatoma raised his pick, and began the attack. Soon quartz was disclosed. Under the vigorous blows, several pieces were broken off, and rattled downward.

But none got very far—eager hands pounced upon them.

"Gold—gold!" yelled Jack, hilariously, as he held up a chunk and waved it back and forth, to show a number of gleaming specks. "Gold! See, fellows—gold! an' piles of it!"

In a wild burst of enthusiasm, he seized the pick from the Indian's hands, and attacked the ground with furious strokes. Every blow sent a shower of earth and stones and small pieces of quartz flying in the air and over the slope.

With the perspiration standing out on his face, Jack worked away; and when he presently flung aside his pick and knelt beside a pile of quartz which the others had collected, Tim seized it.

As the boys saw outcroppings of gold, they gave vent to their feelings in sibilant shouts. They scrambled still higher up the slope, where the rocks rose in

miniature cliffs, tufted with weeds and vegetation, or crowned by bristling prickly pears.

Those who hadn't picks or shovels dug at the surface with stones and sticks, exposing in places the underlying strata of quartz. Small landslides whizzed continuously down. Tom slipped, and rolled until a jutting rock stopped his progress. Jack, too, in a reckless attempt to scale an almost perpendicular wall, lost his footing, and went sliding and bumping in another direction, to pick himself up with a hilarious shout.

But the boys, now in the full grip of the gold fever, paid no attention to these mishaps. From one point to another they climbed, the sharp clink of the pick blending in with their shouts, as new discoveries were made.

"Never expected to see anythin' like this," cried Jack, exultantly. "When the news gets out, won't it make a sensation?"

"The California rush o' forty-nine'll be beaten to a frazzle," laughed Tim.

"And the Klondike forgotten," chirruped Tom.

Again Jack seized the pick, and began to dig frantically. Then, as if suddenly awestruck at the thought of the wealth which might lay hidden beneath the frowning slopes, he straightened up.

"Isn't it wonderful!" he exclaimed, softly.

"Oh, ho!" said Dave Brandon. "I almost have an inspiration for a poem on gold."

The violence of the excitement slowly began to abate. With aching backs and weary arms, they finally flung themselves on the rocks, to take long, deep breaths of cool, refreshing air.

"Now, Uncle Stanley," began Tim.

"Oh, yes; I suppose you are going to tell me that explanations are in order," laughed Mr. Lovell, who had seated himself on a slab of rock.

"That's the idea exactly."

"I have a powerful strong feelin' that the restaurant department ought ter be got a-goin'," observed Cap Slater, bluntly.

"So have I," added Dave.

"Then I proposes an immediat adjournment," went on the other. "Yarns sound a heap better when ye ain't a-gittin' no wireless signals o' distress."

With a laugh, Bob seconded the motion. Accordingly, the boys rose to their feet, and, in a lively fashion, began scrambling down the slope.

A fire was built, and willing hands kept gathering fuel until a great pile rested in front of the lean-to. While the meal was cooking, Bob, peeping inside, caught sight of a pile of snow-shoes.

"Hello, Wanna," he said; "think you'll need those things?"

The Indian nodded and pointed to the gray sky overhead.

"Yes; soon a heap big snow," he answered, slowly.

When appetites were finally satisfied, and all were content, Mr. Lovell, with the boys forming a circle about him, began again:

"Our friend here"—he indicated the lumberman—"has no doubt told you how he brought me very disquieting news."

"Disquietin' nuff ter make this old salt holler."

"Well, I felt that you must be intercepted at all hazards. The Portland steamer was due to pass that afternoon, so my little sailboat, the 'Penguin,' was hastily made ready. There was a good, stiff wind, and Joe Waller succeeded in putting me aboard the 'Evergreen State.'"

"An' maybe it didn't s'prise us to see you on a real, nautical steamboat," gurgled Jack, with a wink at Tom.

"And all my efforts and the megaphone combined couldn't make you understand?"

"Not a word," said Bob.

"Well, it may be for the best, after all. Naturally, I expected Don Mason to land you at Wild Oak; but weather sometimes alters plans. We arrived in due course at Rawdon, and I immediately hurried back to Wild Oak, expecting to meet you there.

"My disappointment was great on realizing that the 'Osprey' had sailed by. It was absolutely necessary for me to return to the lumber camp that night. What should I do? An answer suggested itself—leave a note at the post-office."

"And did you?" cried Tim.

"Yes; I thought possibly you might think of going there."

"Well, we certainly didn't," said Bob, cheerfully.

"So it seems," laughed Uncle Stanley. "Anyway, I was obliged to hire a rig and leave immediately."

"Wonder how it was we didn't meet somewhere on the road," mused Dick.

"The driver told me we could save time by taking another route."

"Another route?" queried Tim.

"Yes; one which, while not so good as the main thoroughfare, takes a short cut through the woods. As it was, I barely had time to catch the steamer.

"Wanatoma was at the camp; and the story of the lumberjacks' visit to his cabin determined us to follow you."

"It was certainly a dandy thing to do," said Tim.

"A great deal of important business had to be left to Warrington. We bought horses at Rawdon—"

"Not from that 'ere livin' checkerboard, I s'picion," broke in Cap Slater, with a gruff laugh.

"Oh, no!" Mr. Lovell smiled. "We made no attempt to follow your trail, as both Wanatoma and I thought it wiser to push on with all possible speed to the mine, stake it out, and then keep a sharp watch for your coming. What's that, Dick—did we know the lumberjacks had arrived? Oh, yes; and it made us very nervous about you, indeed."

"Glad to see us, I'll bet," piped Tom.

"I don't think I was ever more relieved in my life," confessed Uncle Stanley. "If you hadn't come to-day, Wanatoma proposed starting off on a search."

"Oh, ho," laughed Dave, "you need never have any fear about us."

"The next thing is to get back to civilization and file a formal claim with the government," went on Mr. Lovell. "Wanatoma has most kindly agreed to stay here; and, of course, boys, you will show your skill as carpenters by building him a comfortable cabin."

"Well, we will—I should rather say so!" cried Bob, enthusiastically. "Jolly fun, too!"

"You bet," agreed Dick. "Hooray! An' we'll make him a good one."

"And say, boys, I move we call this 'The Jabberwock Mine,'" grinned Jack.

"Wal," commented the captain, rising to stretch his arms and legs, "if this hain't been an ewentful day, I never fired a lazy logger."

The next few days were busy ones for the seven. The sound of saws and axes reverberated sharply in the woods, and the sturdy little bronchos were used to drag fallen trees to the site of the cabin.

Mr. Lovell was a little fearful, after looking over some extraordinary drawings made by Jack Conroy, that the boys had laid out for themselves a whole winter's work; but, by carefully avoiding any reference to these interesting documents, Bob, as engineer, succeeded in having constructed a strong, commodious cabin. Bunks and benches were built along the walls, and perhaps no architect of a world-famed structure ever felt more proud of his work than did the boys when the cabin was completed.

Buck James and Bart Reeder wandered over, one day, to get the surprise of their lives.

Buck was just as imposing as ever, but his expression indicated a subdued and disconsolate spirit.

"From what I hear, you fellers seem to win out every time," he remarked. "Weren't that claim no good? ye ask. Wal, there was one or two spots whar the rocks showed a few specks o' yaller, but that was all."

"Maybe that suit o' yourn driv'd the gold away, sir," remarked Cap Slater, casually.

Buck James scowled, but paid no attention to this observation.

"We had sense nuff to soon see thar weren't nuthin' worth while at that claim, but Smull an' Griffin"—he made a deprecating gesture—"couldn't be dragged away. An' Smull told us to chase back to the lumber camp if we didn't like it."

Captain Slater guffawed loudly.

"So we leaves 'em, and, arter prospectin' about to the east, finds sumphin a bit better, an' put up location notices."

"An' where are Smull an' Griffin now?" asked Tim.

Buck James seemed to bristle up.

"Wal, would ye believe it, arter all our trouble, they comes up at last, says as how they hadn't been able to find no more yaller streaks, an', cool as ye please, says they was comin' in with us ag'in."

"An' did you let 'em?"

"We did not!" snorted Buck James, his capacious chest swelling out with indignation. "'Nuthin' like that,' says I. They gits huffy—so does we, eh, Reeder?—an' arter two minutes o' talkin' that ye could have heard fur a mile, we chases 'em."

"An' I guess they know better'n ter ever come back," added Reeder.

Wanatoma patted the Great Dane's head.

"Ugh! It is well," he said, "for they have the spirit of the coyote, who sinks his fangs into his wounded mate."

"I reckon as how checkers ain't sich a bad feller when ye gits ter know 'im," commented Cap Slater, after the two men had gone. "Lovell, the air's gittin' sharper, eh?"

"Yes, captain!"

"An' to-morrer we uns leave Wanna all ter his lonesome. Wal, I s'picion as how some o' us'll git back ag'in afore long."

They were standing around a fire built just outside the cabin. Chilly gusts of wind made the flames crackle and roar, while showers of embers carried off on the breeze danced briskly along over the rocky surface which extended before them. A gray canopy of cloud stretched overhead.

The wind, increasing in force, whistled around the corners of the cabin, its mournful cadence rising high above the sighing of the pines.

"And just to think," remarked Dave, softly, "how soon the scene must change—I mean our scene. Instead of the wilderness and life in the open, it will be the Kingswood High School and hard study."

"But spring and vacation time will come again," said Tom. "I do wonder, Dave, what you will have a chance to write about next?"

"You may be sure that, as historian of the Rambler Club, my services will be required to describe some very interesting and exciting adventures, eh, Bob?"

And Bob agreed.

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