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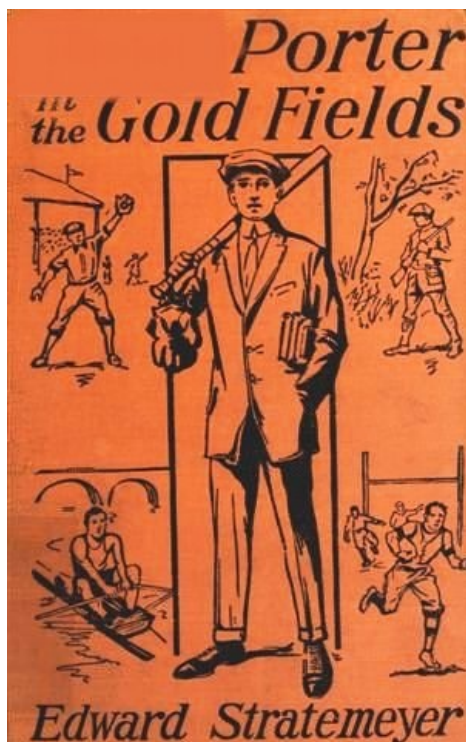
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THE SEARCH FOR THE LANDSLIDE MINE ***



Dave Porter Series

DAVE PORTER IN THE GOLD FIELDS

OR, THE SEARCH FOR THE LANDSLIDE MINE

BY EDWARD STRATEMEYER

Author of "Dave Porter at Oak Hall," "The Lakeport Series," "Pan-American Series," "Old
Glory Series," etc.

ILLUSTRATED BY WALTER ROGERS

BOSTON

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DAVE PORTER IN THE GOLD FIELDS

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"A NUGGET! A NUGGET OF GOLD!" CRIED DAVE.

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"A NUGGET! A NUGGET OF GOLD!" CRIED DAVE.

AS DAVE LOOKED, HE SAW A CORNER OF A DISTANT FENCE FLY APART.

"QUICK, SOMEBODY HELP ME! STOP THAT HORSE FROM FALLING OVER THE CLIFF!"

"IF YOU LOCATE THAT MINE BEFORE WE DO, DON'T YOU DARE TO REMOVE ANY OF MY UNCLE'S LANDMARKS."

PREFACE

"Dave Porter in the Gold Fields" is a complete story in itself, but forms the tenth volume in a line issued under the general title of "Dave Porter Series."

The series was begun some years ago by the publication of "Dave Porter at Oak Hall," in which my young readers were introduced to a typical American lad at a typical American boarding school.

There was at that time a cloud over Dave's parentage, and to clear this away he took a long sea voyage, as related in the next volume, entitled "Dave Porter in the South Seas." Then he came back to school, as told of in "Dave Porter's Return to School," in which he gave one of the local bullies a much-needed lesson.

During a vacation Dave journeyed to Norway, as related in "Dave Porter in the Far North," and then came back to Oak Hall, to win various honors, as recorded in "Dave Porter and His Classmates." Then came an opportunity to visit the West, and how our hero did this is set down in the book called "Dave Porter at Star Ranch." When he returned to school many strenuous happenings awaited him, and what they were will be found in "Dave Porter and His Rivals."

Dave had lived for years with a rich manufacturer of jewelry, and when this man was robbed it was our hero who followed the criminals in a long flight, as told in "Dave Porter on Cave Island." Then, with the booty in his possession, the youth returned home, to go back to school, from which he soon after graduated with honors, as shown in the volume preceding this, entitled, "Dave Porter and the Runaways."

In the present volume are related the particulars of another trip West, taken by Dave and his chums to locate a lost gold mine, willed to Roger Morr's mother by her brother. The boys had some strenuous happenings, and some of their old-time enemies did all they could to bring their expedition to grief. But Dave showed his common sense and his courage, and in the end all went well.

Once again I thank my young readers for the interest they have shown in my books. I trust that the reading of this volume will benefit them all.

EDWARD STRATEMEYER.
February 1, 1914.

DAVE PORTER IN THE GOLD FIELDS

CHAPTER I

THE LANDSLIDE MINE

"Roger, that sounds like a fairy tale—a real gold mine belonging to your mother lost through a landslide!"

"So it does sound like a fairy tale, Dave; but it is absolutely true. The mine was owned by my uncle, Maurice Harrison, of Butte, Montana, and when he died he left it to my mother, who was his sister. On the day he died there was a big landslide in the mountains, where the mine was located,—and that was the end of the mine, as far as my folks were concerned."

"You mean you couldn't find the mine after the landslide?" asked Dave Porter, with deep interest.

"That's it," answered Roger Morr. "The opening to it was completely covered up, and so were the stakes, and several landmarks that showed where the mine was located."

"But why didn't you tell of this before, Roger?" asked a third youth of the group seated on the lawn of Senator Morr's country estate. "Did it just happen?"

"No, Phil, this happened last fall, about nine months ago. The reason I didn't mention it to you and Dave was because my folks wanted it kept quiet. From what my uncle said in his will, the mine must be very valuable, and my folks didn't want any outsiders to re-discover the mine and set up a claim to it. So they started a search on the quiet—hiring some old miners and prospectors they could trust. But the search has been in vain."

"Couldn't they discover the mine at all?" queried Dave Porter.

"No, the landslide was too heavy and too far-reaching. The old miners told my father it was the biggest landslide known in Montana. One prospector said he thought the mine must now be a hundred feet or more underground."

"Had your uncle worked it at all?" questioned Phil Lawrence.

"Not much, but enough to learn that it was a valuable claim. It was in a district that had been visited by landslides before, and so he called it the Landslide Mine."

"Well, your uncle could be thankful for one thing—that he wasn't in the mine when that big slide took place. But you said he died anyway."

"Yes, of pneumonia, on the very day the slide took place. Wasn't it queer? Dad and mother went out to Butte, to the funeral—Uncle Maurice was an old bachelor—and then they heard his will read and learned about the mine."

"And they couldn't get any trace at all, Roger?" asked Dave, as he stopped swinging in the hammock he occupied.

"Nothing worth following up. One of the miners thought he had a landmark located, but, although he spent a good deal of money digging around, nothing came of it. You see that big landslide seemed to change the whole face of the country. It took down dirt and rocks, and trees and bushes, and sent them to new resting places."

"Perhaps the mine was washed away instead of being covered up," suggested Phil.

"No, all those who have visited the locality are agreed that the entrance to the claim must have been covered up."

"Say! I'd like to hunt for that mine!" cried Dave Porter, enthusiastically.

"So would I," returned Roger Morr, wistfully. "I know my mother would like to have somebody find it—just to learn if it is really as valuable as Uncle Maurice thought."

"Well, if you two fellows go West to look for that mine you can count on having me with you," put in Phil Lawrence. "We were going to decide on what to do for the next two months. If Roger says the word—"

"Oh, I could do that easily enough," said the senator's son. "But Dave wrote that he had something up his sleeve. Maybe his plans won't fit into this."

"But they just will fit in!" cried Dave. "At least, I think they will," he added, more slowly. "You say this mine is located in Montana?"

"Yes."

"Well, that isn't very far from Yellowstone Park, is it?"

"No—in fact a corner of the Park is in Montana."

"Then, while the others were taking the trip through Yellowstone Park we could go out to that mining district and try to locate this missing mine," went on Dave, with a smile.

"What are you talking about, Dave?" questioned his two chums, in a breath.

"I'm talking about a personally-conducted tour of the Park that some folks in and around Crumville are getting up. Mr. Basswood, Ben's father, is at the head of it. It's a sort of church affair. They have got my folks interested, and my Uncle Dunston says he will go, and so will Laura, and Mrs. Wadsworth, and Jessie, and half a dozen others you know. They thought maybe we boys would want to go, too."

"Wow! All to the merry!" cried Phil, and leaping out of the willow chair he occupied, he turned a "cart-wheel" on the lawn. "Say, this fits in better than a set of new teeth, doesn't it?" he went on, enthusiastically.

"When is this grand tour to come off?" asked Roger.

"It starts about the middle of July—just two weeks from to-day. The plan is to spend about four weeks in and around the Park, seeing everything thoroughly. You know there are some fine,

comfortable hotels there, and folks like Mrs. Wadsworth don't like to travel in a hurry."

"Going through the Park would certainly be a great trip," said Roger. "And especially with the girls."

"We could travel with them as far as—let me see, what's the name of the place—oh, yes, Livingston. That's where they leave the main line of the railroad to go on the little branch to the Park."

"Well, if they spent four weeks in the Park that would give us plenty of time to hunt for the mine," said Phil, thoughtfully. "But it would be a big job."

"And a dangerous one," added Roger. "Remember, where there have been several landslides there may be more. Fact is, when I spoke to my dad about going out there, he shook his head and said I had better keep away—that the search ought to be conducted by experienced men who understood the lay of the land and all that."

"Oh, we could be careful," returned Dave, impulsively. The idea of going in search of the lost mine appealed to him strongly.

"Sure, we'd be careful," added Phil. "Aren't we always careful? All aboard for the Landslide Mine, say I! Come on, if you are going!" And he grinned broadly.

"Better wait until after lunch," returned the senator's son, dryly. "We might have something you'd like to eat, Phil."

"All right, just as you say." The other youth dropped back into a wicker chair. "Say, doesn't it just feel good to think that we have graduated from Oak Hall and don't have to go back?" he added, with a sigh of satisfaction.

"I'm glad I have graduated, but I am not so glad that I am not going back," answered Dave. "We had some good times at the Hall."

"So we did—dandy times!" cried Roger. "I tell you, I shall miss Oak Hall a great deal. I shall miss our friends and also our enemies."

"Speaking of enemies, I wonder what ever became of old Job Haskers," said Phil.

"I don't know and I don't want to know," came from Dave. "I never want to see that good-for-nothing teacher again. I am glad, on account of the fellows left at Oak Hall, that the doctor discharged him."

"So am I," put in the senator's son. "Just the same, Dave, Haskers will try to get square with us if he ever gets the chance."

"Oh, I know that. But I don't intend to give him the chance."

"Speaking of our enemies, I wonder what ever became of Link Merwell," said Phil. "He seems to have dropped out of sight completely."

"I rather imagine he has left the country," returned Roger. "For if he was around at all, some of the school fellows would be sure to hear of him. Say, he certainly was a bad egg."

"Yes, but not as bad as Nick Jasniff," said Dave. "I am glad they locked that fellow up. He was an out-and-out criminal."

"Let us drop those fellows and get back to this lost mine," interrupted Phil. "If we are really going out to Montana we ought to make some sort of preparations for the trip."

"Oh, we've got two weeks to do that in, Phil," answered Roger. "And please to remember, Fourth of July is coming, and I am expecting several of the other fellows here to help celebrate. We can fix it up about that western trip after the Fourth."

"Who are coming, Roger, did you hear?" asked Dave.

"Shadow Hamilton for one, and perhaps Buster Beggs and Luke Watson. I asked some of the other fellows, but they had other engagements. Old John went down to the post-office for letters a while ago. Maybe he'll bring news."

"Here he comes now," cried Dave, as he saw a colored man-of-all-work coming along the road that ran in front of the Morr estate. "And he's got a bundle of letters."

All three boys ran across the broad lawn to meet the colored man.

"Any letters for me, John?"

"Don't forget me!"

"Who's the pink envelope for?"

"Letters fo' all ob yo' young gen'men, I 'spect," returned the man-of-all-work. "Mebbe yo' kin sort 'em out better'n I kin, Massa Roger," he added. "My eyesight ain't no better'n it ought to be." And he handed the bunch of mail over to the senator's son.

"One for Phil and two for Dave," said Roger, looking the mail over. "And four for myself. Pretty

good. Here, John, take the rest into the house."

Without ceremony the three chums returned to their resting place on the shady lawn and began the perusal of their letters.

"Mine is from my father," said Phil. "He is going to take a trip on one of his ships to Nova Scotia and he wants to know if I wish to go along."

"One of these letters is from Gus Plum," said Dave. "He is going to Europe with his folks. The other letter is from—er—from Crumville."

"I'll wager it is from Jessie Wadsworth," remarked Phil, slyly. "Come, Dave, what does the lady fair say?"

"Sends her best regards to both of you," answered Dave, blushing. "She writes mostly about that proposed trip to Yellowstone Park, and wants to know if you fellows are going along."

"One of these letters is from Luke Watson and he will be here to-morrow," said Roger. "And another is from Shadow and he is coming, too. And this one—well, I declare! Just listen to this! It's from Buster Beggs." And Roger read as follows:

"I will be along for the Fourth. I've just had a letter from Sid Lambert, that new fellow from Pittsburg. He says he knows Link Merwell and met him about a week ago. He says Merwell is very bitter against you and Porter and Lawrence. Merwell was going West on some business for his father and then he was coming East. I would advise you and your chums to keep your eyes peeled for him. He can't show himself, for fear of arrest, and that has made him very vindictive. Sid tried to get his address, but Merwell wouldn't give it, and he left Sid very suddenly, thinking maybe that some one would put the police on his track."

CHAPTER II

DAVE PORTER'S PAST

"What do you think of that, fellows?" asked Roger, as he concluded the reading of the letter.

"I am not surprised," answered Dave. "Now that Merwell finds he can't show himself where he is known, he must be very bitter in mind."

"I thought he might reform, but I guess I was mistaken," said Phil. "Say, we had better do as Buster suggests,—keep our eyes peeled for him."

"We are not responsible for his position," retorted Roger. "He got himself into trouble."

"So he did, Roger. But, just the same, a fellow like Link Merwell is bound to blame somebody else,—and in this case he blames us. I am afraid he'll make trouble for us—if he gets the chance," concluded Dave, seriously.

And now, while the three chums are busy reading their letters again, let me introduce them more specifically than I have already done.

Dave Porter was a typical American lad, now well grown, and a graduate of Oak Hall, a high-class preparatory school for boys located in one of our eastern States.

While a mere child, Dave had been found wandering beside the railroad tracks near the little village of Crumville. He could not tell who he was, nor where he had come from, and not being claimed by any one, was taken to the local poor-house. There a broken-down college professor, Caspar Potts, had found him and given him a home.

In Crumville resided a rich jewelry manufacturer named Oliver Wadsworth, who had a daughter named Jessie. One day the Wadsworth automobile caught fire and Jessie was in danger of being burned to death, when Dave rushed to the rescue and saved her. For this Mr. Wadsworth was very grateful, and when he learned that Dave lived with Mr. Potts, who had been one of his instructors in college, he made the man and the youth come to live with him.

"Such a boy deserves to have a good education and I am going to give it to him," said the rich manufacturer, and so Dave was sent to boarding school, as related in the first volume of this series, entitled "Dave Porter at Oak Hall." There he made a host of friends, including Roger Morr, the son of a United States senator; Phil Lawrence, the son of a rich shipowner; Shadow Hamilton, who loved to tell stories; Buster Beggs, who was fat and jolly; Luke Watson, who was a musician of considerable skill, and many others.

The main thing that troubled Dave in those days was the question of his identity, and when one of his school rivals spoke of him as a "poor-house nobody" it disturbed him greatly. Receiving something of a clew, he went on a long voyage, as related in "Dave Porter in the South Seas," and located his uncle, Dunston Porter, and learned for the first time that his father, David Breslow Porter, was also living, and likewise a sister, Laura.

After his great trip on the ocean, our hero returned to Oak Hall, as related in "Dave Porter's Return to School." Then, as he had not yet met his father, he went in search of his parent, the quest, as told of in "Dave Porter in the Far North," taking him to Norway.

Glad to know that he could not be called a poor-house nobody in the future, Dave went back to Oak Hall once again, as related in "Dave Porter and His Classmates." He now made more friends than ever. But he likewise made some enemies, including Nick Jasniff, a very passionate fellow, who always wanted to fight, and Link Merwell, the son of a rich ranchowner of the West. Jasniff ran away from school, while under a cloud, and Merwell, after making serious trouble for Dave and his chums, was expelled.

Laura Porter had a very dear friend, Belle Endicott, who lived in the Far West, and through this friend, Dave and his chums, and also Laura, and Jessie Wadsworth, received an invitation to spend some time at the Endicott place. What fun and adventures the young folks had I have set down in "Dave Porter at Star Ranch." Not far from Star Ranch was the home of Link Merwell, and this young man, as before, tried to make trouble, but was exposed and humbled.

The boys liked it very much on the ranch, but all vacations must come to an end, and so the lads went back to school, as recorded in "Dave Porter and His Rivals." That was a lively term at Oak Hall, for some newcomers tried to run athletic and other matters to suit themselves, and in addition Link Merwell and Nick Jasniff became students at a rival academy only a short distance away.

The Christmas holidays were now at hand, and Dave went back to Crumville, where he and his folks were living with the Wadsworths in their elegant mansion on the outskirts of the town. At that time Mr. Wadsworth had some valuable jewels at his works to be reset, and directly after Christmas came a thrilling robbery. It was Dave, aided by his chums, who got on the track of the robbers, who were none other than Jasniff and Merwell, and trailed them to the South and then to sea, as told in "Dave Porter on Cave Island." After many startling adventures the jewels were recovered and the thieves were caught. But, at the last minute, Link Merwell managed to escape.

When Dave Porter returned again to Oak Hall he found himself considered a great hero. But he bore himself modestly, and settled down to hard work, for he wished to graduate with honors. His old enemies were now out of the way and for this he was thankful.

But trouble for Dave was not yet at an end. One of the teachers at Oak Hall was Job Haskers, a learned man, but one who did not like boys. Why Haskers had ever become an instructor was a mystery. He was harsh, unsympathetic, and dictatorial, and nearly all the students hated him. He knew the branches he taught, but that was all the good that could be said of him.

Trouble came almost from the start, that term, and not only Dave, but nearly all of his chums were involved. A wild man—who afterwards proved to be related to Nat Poole, the son of a miserly money-lender of Crumville—tried to blow up a neighboring hotel, and the boys were thought to be guilty. In terror, some of them feared arrest and fled, as related in "Dave Porter and the Runaways." Dave went after the runaways, and after escaping a fearful flood, made them come back to school and face the music. The youth had a clew against Job Haskers, and in the end proved that the wild man was guilty and that the instructor knew it. This news came as a thunder-clap to Doctor Clay, the owner of the school, and without ceremony he called Haskers before him and demanded his resignation. At first the dictatorial teacher would not resign, but when confronted by the proofs of his duplicity, he got out in a hurry; and all the other teachers, and the students, were glad of it.

"And now for a grand wind-up!" Dave had said, and then he and his chums had settled down to work, and later on, graduated from Oak Hall with high honors. At the graduation exercises, Dave was one of the happiest boys in the school. His family and Jessie and several others came to the affair, which was celebrated with numerous bonfires, and music by a band, and refreshments in the gymnasium.

"And now what are you going to do?" Laura had asked, of her brother.

"First of all, he is going to pay me a visit," Roger had said. "I have been to your house half a dozen times and Dave has hardly been to our place at all. He is to come, and so are Phil and some of the others. My mother wants them, and so does my dad."

"Well, if the others are to be there, I'll have to come, too," Dave had replied; and so it had been settled, and that is how we now find the boys at Senator Morr's fine country mansion, located on the outskirts of the village of Hemson. Dave and Phil had been there for four days, and Roger and his parents had done all in their power to make the visitors feel at home.

"Here is some more news that I overlooked," said Roger, as he turned over one of his letters. "This is from a chum of mine, Bert Passmore, who is spending his summer at Lake Sargola, about thirty miles from here. He says they are going to have a special concert to-morrow afternoon and evening, given by a well-known military band from Washington. He says we had better come over and take it in."

"I shouldn't mind taking in a concert like that," replied Phil. "I like good brass-band music better than anything else."

"How about you, Dave?"

"Suits me, if you want to go, Roger."

"We could go in the car. Maybe ma and dad would go, too."

Just then the bell rang for lunch, and the visitors hurried off to wash up and comb their hair. Roger went to his parents, who were in the library of the mansion, and spoke about the band concert.

"I can't go—I've got to meet Senator Barcoe and Governor Fewell in the city," said the senator. "But you might take your mother, Roger, and maybe some of her friends. The big car will hold seven, you know."

"Sure, if mom will go," and the youth looked at his mother with a smile.

"I might go and take Mrs. Gray and Mrs. Morse," said Mrs. Morr. "They both love music, and since the Grays lost their money, Mrs. Gray doesn't get out very much. I'll call them up on the telephone and find out, Roger;" and so it was settled.

But the other ladies could not go, and in the end Mrs. Morr decided to remain home also. So it was left, the next morning, for the three boys to go alone.

"I'll take the little four-passenger car," said Roger. "No use in having the big car for only three."

"Boys, Roger tells me you think of going West," remarked Senator Morr, who stood near. He was a big man, with a round, florid face and a heavy but pleasant voice. "Think of trying to locate that lost mine! Is there anything you lads wouldn't try to do?" And the big man laughed in his bluff, hearty manner.

"Well, it won't hurt to try it, Senator," replied Dave.

"Not if you keep out of trouble. But I don't want you boys to go to that neighborhood and get caught in another landslide—not for all the gold in Montana," and the senator shook his head decidedly.

"Oh, we'll be careful, Dad," burst out Roger. "You know we are always careful."

"I don't know about that, Roger. Boys are apt to get reckless sometimes—I used to be a bit that way myself. We'll have to talk this over again—before it's settled," and then the senator hurried off to keep his appointment with the other politicians.

In anticipation of the trip, Roger had had the paid chauffeur of the family go over the four-passenger touring-car with care, to see that everything was in shape for the run to Lake Sargola. The lake was a beautiful sheet of water, some eight miles long and half a mile wide, and at the upper end were located several fine hotels and numerous private residences.

The boys had decided to go to the lake by a roundabout way, covering a distance of about forty miles. They left at a little after ten o'clock, calculating to get to the lake in time for lunch. They would attend the afternoon concert, take Roger's chum out for a short ride around the lake road, and then return to Hemson in time for the evening meal.

Roger was at the wheel and it was decided that Dave and Phil should ride on the back seat, so as to be company for each other. Mrs. Morr came out on the veranda of the mansion to wave them a farewell.

"Keep out of trouble, Roger!" she called. "Remember, there are a good many autos around the lake, and some of the drivers are very fast and very careless."

"I'll have my eyes open," answered the boy. "Good-by!" And then he started the car, put on more power, and swept from the spacious grounds in grand style.

"My, but it is going to be a warm day!" remarked Phil, as they ran into a streak of hot air.

"I hope it is only warm," replied Dave, as he looked at the sky.

"Why, what do you mean, Dave?" asked the shipowner's son, quickly.

"I don't much like the looks of the sky off to the southwest. Looks to me as if a storm was coming up."

"Oh, don't say that!" exclaimed Roger. "We don't want any rain."

"So we don't, Roger. But we'll have to take what comes."

CHAPTER III

CAUGHT IN A STORM

"Some class to Roger's driving!" cried Phil, as the little touring-car swept along, in the direction of Lake Sargola. "Roger, if you ever want a recommendation as a chauffeur——"

"We'll give it to him on gilt-edged paper," finished Dave, with a grin. "But, I say, don't make the turns quite so swift," he added, as they swept around a curve at such speed that he was thrown up against Phil.

"Don't get scared—I know this car as well as Mary knew the tail of her lamb," responded the senator's son, gayly. "Why, we are only making thirty-five miles an hour," he added, half reproachfully.

On and on they rolled, up hill and down dale, and through several villages. At one spot they went through a flock of chickens, that scattered in all directions. Not one was touched, but an old farmer shook a hay-rake at the boys.

"Kill my chickens an' I'll have th' law on ye!" he yelled.

"Never came within a mile of 'em!" cried Roger, gayly, and then the car whirled out of hearing.

As they passed on, the lads frequently looked at the sky. But the clouds, that had been gathering, appeared to drift away to the northward.

"Maybe the storm is going around us," suggested Phil.

"I hope so," answered Dave. "I don't like to travel in an auto in wet weather—too much danger of skidding."

A little later they came in sight of the lake and the first of the cottages, and then they ran up to one of the big hotels. A young fellow on the veranda waved his hand to them.

"There is Bert, now!" cried Roger. And then the young fellow, who had been telephoned to early in the morning, ran down the steps to meet Roger and was speedily introduced to the others.

"It's going to be a dandy concert this afternoon," said Bert Passmore. "The bandmaster is going to play one of his new marches and a medley of patriotic airs, as well as a piece called 'A Hunt in a Storm.' They say it's fine."

"I hope they don't have to play it in a storm," returned Dave, with another look at the sky.

"Oh, that storm has gone the other way," answered Bert Passmore. "They often do up here."

"Did you get tickets?" asked Roger.

"Sure; and I've reserved seats for you at our table, too, for lunch, and for dinner to-night, if you'll stay."

"I don't know about to-night, Bert. But I'm thankful to you, just the same. After the concert we want to give you a ride around the lake."

"That will be fine!"

The car was put under the hotel shed, and the boys went in the hotel to prepare for lunch. Mr. and Mrs. Passmore were present and were introduced, and a little later all sat down to eat.

There was an amusement park not far from the hotel and the band concert was to be given there, in a large pavilion that was open on the sides. As it was but a short distance away, the boys allowed the car to stay in the shed and walked to the place. A big crowd was collecting, and by the time the concert commenced, the spot was jammed with people.

"It's a lucky thing your friend got reserved seats for us," observed Dave to Roger. "Just look at the crowds coming in!"

Phil had gone off—to get some programs. Now, as he pushed his way to his seat, his face showed unusual excitement.

"Guess whom I saw!" he gasped, as he sat down.

"Who was it?" demanded his chums, quickly.

"Job Haskers."

"Never!" cried Roger.

"What is he doing here?" demanded Dave.

"I saw him for only a moment," explained the shipowner's son. "He was right in the crowd and I couldn't follow him."

"Was he alone?" asked Dave, with increasing interest, for he had not forgotten the trials and tribulations this former teacher of Oak Hall had caused him.

"I don't know that, either—there were so many people around him."

"Maybe you were mistaken, Phil," said Roger.

"Not much! I'd know Job Haskers out of a million."

"I think we all would," murmured Dave. "Did he see you?"

"I don't think he did. He was over there—that's all I know about it," and Phil pointed with his hand into a crowd on their left.

"We can take a look around for him between the parts and after the concert," said Dave; and then the brass band struck up and the concert began.

The various musical numbers were well rendered, and encores were numerous. The concert was divided into two parts, with fifteen minutes intermission, and during that time the boys from Oak Hall and Bert walked around, the former looking for Job Haskers. But if the former teacher of Oak Hall was present the boys failed to locate him.

During the second part of the concert came the wonderful new march and the fantasy, "A Hunt in a Storm," and both came in for prolonged applause. Then came a medley of national airs, ending with the "Star Spangled Banner," at which the audience arose; and the performance came to an end.

"Wasn't it fine!" cried Roger, enthusiastically.

"Yes, indeed," answered Dave, warmly. "I am glad we came over."

"Couldn't have been better," was Phil's comment.

"Quarter after four," said Roger, consulting his watch. "Bert, we can take you around the lake with ease before we start for home."

"Yes, and you can have dinner with us, too, before you go," was the reply. "Now don't say 'No', for father and mother expect it, and so do I."

"All right, then, we'll stay," answered Roger, after a look at Dave and Phil. "We can start for home about eight o'clock, or half-past."

The boys walked back to the hotel shed and got out the touring-car. Bert took the vacant seat beside Roger, and away the party bowled over the highway that ran around Lake Sargola.

"I wish we had a car," said Bert. "But dad won't get one, because, last summer, a friend of his was killed in an automobile accident."

"Well, that's enough to take the nerve out of any one," was Dave's answer.

The car rolled on, and Bert asked about the doings of the boys at Oak Hall, and told of life at the technical training school which he attended. They had almost circled the lake when Roger slowed down.

"What do you say to a trip to the top of Sugar Hill?" he asked.

"Sugar Hill?" cried Bert. "Can you go up that hill with this car?"

"Sure!" was Roger's prompt reply. "It's pretty steep, I know, but I'm sure I can make it."

"It's a fine view from there, Roger. But the hill is pretty steep towards the end."

"Oh, I'm not afraid of it." The senator's son turned to the others. "What do you say?"

"I'll go anywhere," declared Phil.

"Same here," laughed Dave. "But don't be too long about it, Roger."

"Why?"

"I think that storm is working its way back again."

"Oh, nonsense, don't be a croaker, Dave! It won't rain in a year of Mondays!" cried the senator's son, and then he put on speed once more, and headed the touring-car for Sugar Hill.

The place mentioned was an elevation about a mile back from the lake. It was almost a mountain in size, and the road leading to the top was anything but a good one, being filled with ruts and loose stones. But the engine of the car was powerful, and it was not until they were almost to the top of the hill that Roger had to throw the gears into second speed.

"Some climb and no mistake!" murmured Dave. "Can you make it, Roger?"

"Top or bust!" was the laconic answer.

Scarcely had the senator's son spoken when there came a loud report from the front end of the car.

"A blowout!" gasped Phil.

"The front tire on this side has gone to pieces!" announced Bert. "Will you have to stop?"

"Can't—not here!" announced Roger, grimly. And then he shut his teeth hard and turned on more gasoline. Up and up they bumped, the burst tire cutting deeply into the rough stones. But the power was there, and in less than thirty seconds more the car came to a standstill on the level top of Sugar Hill.

"Phew; that was a narrow shave!" remarked Bert, as the boys got out of the car. "Roger, what

would you have done if you couldn't go ahead? There wasn't room to turn."

"I knew there wasn't room, Bert; that's the reason I made the car go up," was the reply. "It was a bad hole to get caught in."

"I guess it cost you the shoe," remarked Dave, as he examined the article. "Pretty well cut up."

"It was an old one, anyway, Dave. Now we'll have the pleasure of putting on one of those new ones," and he smiled grimly, for he did not like that task any better than does any other autoist.

"Oh, we'll all help," cried Phil. "It won't be so bad, if we all take turns at pumping in the air."

"Wish I had one of those new kind of machine pumps on the car," answered Roger. "But I haven't got it, so it's got to be bone labor, boys." And then the damaged wheel was jacked up and a new shoe with its inner tube was put on and inflated. All told, the job took the boys a full half-hour, for the new shoe was a tight fit and did not want to go over the rim at first.

"Hello, what do you know about this!" cried Phil, as they were finishing the blowing up of the tube. "It's raining!"

"Yes, and look how black it is getting over yonder!" exclaimed Bert. "We are in for a storm now, sure!"

"I was almost certain we'd catch it," said Dave. He unscrewed the pump from the wheel. "Roger, we had better get back to that hotel just as fast as we can."

"My idea, exactly, Dave, for I don't want to be caught on this hilly road in a storm."

"Better put the top up," advised the shipowner's son. "It's going to pour in a few minutes."

"And hadn't we better put on the chains, too, Roger?" questioned Dave. "It may be dangerous work going down the hill if it rains hard."

"Yes, we'll put up the top and put on the chains," was the quick reply of the senator's son. "You fellows attend to the top and I'll see to the chains."

By the time the top had been put up and fastened it was raining steadily. Also, the wind was beginning to blow, showing that the downpour was liable to become worse.

"Fasten the side curtains, Phil; I'll help with the chains!" sang out Dave, and while the shipowner's son and Bert fastened the curtains, so as to keep out the driving rain, our hero aided Roger.

"You'll get wet, Dave; better get in the car," panted Roger, who was working as rapidly as circumstances permitted.

"No wetter than you," answered Dave, and then he pulled the second chain in place and fastened it. Both boys got into the touring-car just as a heavy crash of thunder sounded out.

"Phew! listen to that, and look at the lightning!" cried Phil. "Say, if you are ready, Roger, we had better get out of here!"

"If you can only get back to the hotel," murmured Bert, anxiously. "If I were you I'd not think of going home until the storm clears away."

"Back to the hotel will be enough for me," answered Roger. "All ready?" he asked, for he had already cranked up.

"All ready," answered Dave, who had gotten on the front seat, thus allowing Bert and Phil the better shelter of the tonneau of the car.

The senator's son started up the automobile and made a circle on the top of the hill. Then, just as there came another flash of lightning and a loud crash of thunder, the boys began the long and perilous journey down the rough road leading from Sugar Hill.

CHAPTER IV

A QUESTION OF STOCKS

"Some rain, believe me!"

It was Dave who uttered the remark, as the touring-car commenced the long and dangerous descent of Sugar Hill. A sheet of water was dashing against the wind-shield, which had been raised as high as possible.

"I wish it was driving the other way," answered Roger, who was peering forward. "It covers the glass so I can hardly see."

"Better take it slow," suggested Dave.

Another flash of lightning lit up the scene, accompanied by a crack of thunder that made some of

the boys crouch down for a second. Then came more wind and more rain.

"I hope the wind and lightning don't throw a tree down across the roadway," cried Phil, loudly, to make himself heard above the fury of the elements.

"We've got our eyes open!" answered Dave. "I'll look over the wind-shield," he added, to Roger, and lifted a corner of the front curtain for that purpose.

"You'll get wet, Dave."

"Not a great deal, and I'd rather do that than have an accident," was the reply.

Roger had thrown the car into low gear, so that the power was really acting as a sort of brake. Slowly they slid along, over the wet stones and dirt. Then came a sharp turn, and the senator's son slowed down still more. The touring-car skidded a distance of several feet, and all held their breath, wondering if they would go down into a small gully, or waterway, that lined the road on one side. But in another moment that danger was past, and all breathed more freely.

But almost immediately a fresh peril confronted them. At another turn Dave sent up a warning cry:

"Brake up, Roger, there's a tree or a big limb ahead!"

Through the rain-covered shield the senator's son saw the obstruction. He set both the hand-brake and the foot-brake, and all heard the wheels and the chains scrape over the stones and dirt. But the car could not be stopped, and two seconds later crashed into the tree limb, a branch of which came up, striking the wind-shield and cracking it.

"Look out for that glass!" yelled Bert, in fresh alarm. "Don't get any in your eyes, Roger!"

The youth at the wheel did not reply. Dave, quick to act, seized a lap-robe that was handy and held it up in front of Roger, who did not dare to leave the wheel. Then came a jingle of glass, but the pieces fell at the feet of the boys in the front of the car. The automobile itself slid on another ten feet, dragging the tree limb with it.

"Say, that was a narrow escape!" muttered Phil, when the danger seemed over.

"We'll have to see how much damage has been done," declared Dave.

He crawled from the car and Roger followed. The other boys were also coming out in the storm, but the senator's son stopped them.

"No use in all of us getting wet," he said. "I don't think the damage amounts to much. A mud-guard is bent and the hood is scratched and the glass broken, but I guess that is all. But we'll have to get the limb from under the car before we can go ahead again," he added, after an inspection.

"Can't you leave it as it is and use it as a drag down the hill?" questioned Bert.

"I wouldn't do that," advised Dave. "It might hurt some of the machinery under the car. I think we can get it out somehow, Roger."

Both set to work, in the wind and rain. It was far from a pleasant task, and despite the fact that each had donned a dust-coat, both were pretty well soaked before the limb was gotten away from the car. Then Roger made another inspection of the automobile.

"I think it's O. K.," he said. "Anyway, we'll try it." And then they cranked up once more; and the journey was continued.

It was a slow trip, and at each turn on the hill the senator's son came almost to a stop. He was thinking they might meet a wagon coming the other way, but neither vehicle nor person appeared. Sometimes the visitors at the lake went to Sugar Hill for a picnic, but evidently the concert, and the thoughts of a possible storm, had kept them away this day.

"Down at last!" cried Roger, presently, and a moment later the touring-car rolled out on the smooth and broad highway that connected with that running around Lake Sargola.

"And I am mighty glad of it," declared Phil, as he breathed a deep sigh of relief.

"Now for the hotel, and there I will see if I can't get you fellows some dry clothing," said Bert. "I guess each of you can wear one of my suits. You are both about my size."

They took the shortest route to the hotel, arriving there fifteen minutes later. Roger ran the automobile to the porch and allowed the others to alight and then took the car to the hotel garage.

"Well, I am glad to see you boys back!" exclaimed Mr. Passmore. "How did you come to break the wind-shield?" And then he listened with interest to the story the lads had to tell.

"Can't they stay here to-night, Dad?" asked Bert, a little later, when Roger came in. "I want to let them have some of my dry clothing, and it is storming almost as hard as ever."

"Certainly, they can stay, if they will and we can get rooms for them," replied Mr. Passmore.

The matter was talked over, and Roger called his parents up on the telephone. A big room

containing two double-beds chanced to be vacant in the hotel, and the lads took that. Then Dave and Roger donned some clothing that Bert loaned them while their own garments were being dried and pressed. A little later all went into the dining-room for dinner.

"This will knock out the concert for to-night," remarked Bert, during the meal.

"Yes, and we can be glad we attended this afternoon," answered Dave.

"They are going to have a dance here this evening," said Mrs. Passmore.

"Oh, we don't want to go to any dance!" cried her son. "They are not dressed for it, and besides, I've got it all arranged. We are going to bowl some games—Roger and I against Dave and Phil."

"Very well, Bert, suit yourself," answered the mother. "But if you wish to dance, perhaps I can introduce your friends to some of the young ladies."

But the boys preferred to bowl and so went to the basement of the big hotel, where there were some fine alleys. They bowled five games, Dave and Phil taking three and Roger and Bert two. In one game Dave turned a wide "break" into a "spare," and for this the others applauded him not a little.

The games over, the boys washed and then went upstairs to watch the dancing. Bert and Phil danced a two-step with some young ladies that Bert knew. Just as they started off, Dave caught Roger by the arm.

"What is it, Dave?" asked the senator's son, quickly.

"Maybe I'm mistaken, but I just thought I saw Job Haskers!"

"Where?" and now Roger was all attention.

"Going into the reading-room with another man."

"Humph! Say, let us find out if he is really here."

"He isn't staying here, I know that."

"How do you know?"

"I asked the clerk."

While speaking the two youths had walked away from the ballroom of the hotel. Now they found themselves at the entrance to a long, narrow apartment that was used as a writing and smoking room for men. Half a dozen persons were present, several writing letters and the others talking in low tones and smoking.

In an alcove two men had just seated themselves, one an elderly person who seemed somewhat feeble, and the other a tall, sharp-faced individual who eyed his companion in a shrewd, speculative manner.

"That's Job Haskers, sure enough," murmured Roger, as Dave pointed to the sharp-faced man. "Wonder what he is doing here?"

"Well, he has a right to be here, if he wishes," returned Dave.

The two former students of Oak Hall stood at one side and watched the man who had been their teacher for so long and who had proved himself dishonorable in more ways than one.

"Unless I am mistaken, he is trying to work some sort of a game on that old gentleman," whispered Dave, a few minutes later. "See how earnestly he is talking, and see, he is bringing some papers out of his pocket."

"Oh, it may be all right, Dave," replied the senator's son. "Not that I would trust Job Haskers too far," he added, hastily.

The two lads continued to watch the former teacher of Oak Hall. He was still arguing with the old gentleman and acted as if he wanted to get the stranger to sign a paper he held in his hand. He had a fountain pen ready to be used.

"I'm going a little closer and look into this," said Dave, firmly. "Perhaps it's all right, but that old man may not know Haskers as we do."

"We can go around to the back door; that is close to the alcove," suggested Roger, who was now as interested as Dave in what was taking place.

By walking through a narrow hallway the boys reached the door the senator's son had mentioned. This was within a few feet of the alcove, and by standing behind the door Dave and Roger could hear all the former teacher and the elderly gentleman were saying.

"It's really the chance of a lifetime," urged Job Haskers, with great earnestness. "I never knew of a better opportunity to make money. The consolidation of the five mills has placed the entire business in the hands of the Sunset Company. If you sign for that stock you'll be doing the best business stroke you've done in a lifetime, Mr. Fordham."

"Maybe, maybe," answered the old gentleman, hesitatingly. "Yet I really ought to consult my son

before I do it. But he is in Philadelphia. I might write——"

"Then it may be too late," interposed Job Haskers. "As I told you before, this stock is going like wildfire. And at thirty-five it's a bargain. I think it will be up to sixty or seventy inside of a month—or two months at the latest. You'd better sign for the hundred shares right now and make sure of them." And Job Haskers held out one of the papers in his hand and also the fountain pen.

Roger and Dave looked at each other and probably the same thought flashed through the minds of both. Should they show themselves and let the elderly gentleman know just what sort of a man Job Haskers was?

"I guess we'd better take a hand——" commenced Dave, when he paused as he saw the old gentleman shake his head.

"I—I don't think I'll do it to-night, Mr. Haskers," he said, slowly. "I—I want to sleep on it. Come and see me again in the morning."

"The stock may go up by morning," interposed the former teacher of Oak Hall. "It went up day before yesterday, two points. Better bind the bargain right now."

"No, I'll wait until morning."

"Well, when can I see you, Mr. Fordham?" asked the other, trying to conceal his disappointment.

"I'll be around about ten o'clock—I don't get up very early."

"Very well, I'll call at that time then," said Job Haskers. "But you might as well sign for it now," and again he held out the paper and the pen.

"No, I'll wait until to-morrow morning," answered Mr. Fordham, as he arose. "It's time I retired now. I—I'm not as strong as I once was."

"I am sorry to hear that. Well, I'll be around in the morning, and I am sure you will realize that this is a good thing, after you have thought it over," said Job Haskers, with calm assurance, and then he and the elderly man left the room. Dave and Roger saw them separate in the main hall of the hotel, the old gentleman going upstairs, and Job Haskers out into the storm.

CHAPTER V

A TRAP FOR JOB HASKERS

"What do you think of it, Dave?"

"I think Job Haskers is up to some game, Roger."

"Selling worthless stocks?"

"Yes, or else stocks that are next door to worthless."

"I wonder who the old gentleman can be? He looks as if he might have money. That diamond ring he wears must be worth several hundred dollars."

"Supposing we ask Mr. Passmore about him?" suggested Dave.

"That's the idea."

The youths found Mr. Passmore in a protected corner of a side porch, smoking. Most of the storm was now over, but it still rained.

"Tired of bowling, eh?" said Bert's father, who was a wholesale dealer in rugs.

"Mr. Passmore, we want to ask you some questions," said Roger. "Do you know an elderly gentleman here by the name of Fordham?"

"Fordham? Yes, I've met him. Nice man, too, but rather feeble."

"Is he alone here?" asked Dave.

"Practically. He has a son that comes to see him once in a while. Did you want to see him?"

"We have seen him, and we were wondering if we hadn't better have a talk with him," explained Dave.

"We'll tell you how it is," put in Roger, who knew Mr. Passmore well. And then he and Dave related the particulars of what they had seen, and told something of what Job Haskers was.

"Hum! This might be worth looking into," mused the rug dealer. "Of course, these stocks may be all right. But it looks rather fishy to me. Years ago I bought some stocks like that and they proved to be utterly worthless. It certainly won't do any harm to tell old Mr. Fordham what you know about this man Haskers."

"I'd hate to get into a row—" commenced Roger.

"I wouldn't—not if I was going to save that old gentleman's money for him," interrupted Dave. "Job Haskers sha'n't pull the wool over anybody's eyes if I can prevent it!"

"Oh, I am with you there, Dave!" cried the senator's son, quickly. "I was thinking that perhaps we would warn this Mr. Fordham without Haskers knowing anything about it."

"Better not try to do anything to-night," said Mr. Passmore. "You can see Mr. Fordham in the morning, and I'll be present, if you wish it."

A little later the two boys found Phil and Bert coming from the dance, and told their old school chum of what they had witnessed.

"Of course, we ought to expose Haskers!" declared the shipowner's son, who was not likely to forget how he had suffered at the hands of the former teacher of Oak Hall. "We'll go to this Mr. Fordham and tell him just what a rascal Haskers is!"

The doings of the day had made all the boys tired, and they slept soundly. Dave was the first astir in the morning, but the others, including Bert, soon followed. The storm had passed and the sun was shining brightly.

"I'd like you fellows to stay here over the Fourth," said Bert, when they went below for breakfast. "Maybe we could have a dandy time."

"Can't do it," declared Roger. "I am expecting company at the house—some more Oak Hall fellows. But you might come there, if you care to, Bert," he added.

"All right, I'll see about it."

Dave and the others had already made up their minds what to do about Mr. Fordham. About nine o'clock they sent a message to the elderly gentleman's room, stating they wished to see him on a matter of importance to himself, and adding that Mr. Passmore would be with them.

"He says for you to come right up," said the bell-boy, who had delivered the message.

"Is he up yet?" questioned Dave.

"Yes, sir."

The bell-boy led the way to the room, which was in a wing on the second floor. All the boys but Bert went up, and Mr. Passmore accompanied them. They found Mr. Fordham seated in an easy chair. He looked quite bewildered at the entrance of so many visitors.

"Good-morning, Mr. Fordham," said Mr. Passmore. "I suppose you are quite surprised to see me at this time in the morning, and with so many young gentlemen with me," and the rug dealer smiled broadly.

"A bit surprised, yes," was the somewhat feeble answer. "But I—I suppose it is all right."

"Let me introduce my young friends," went on Mr. Passmore, and did so. "They have got something they would like to tell you."

"To tell me?" questioned the aged man, curiously. "Sit down, won't you," he added, politely, and motioned to chairs and to a couch.

"We came to see you about a man who called to see you last night, a Mr. Job Haskers," said Dave, after a pause, during which the visitors seated themselves. "Perhaps it is none of our business, Mr. Fordham, but my chums and I here felt it our duty to tell you about that man."

"We don't want to do him any harm, if he is trying to earn an honest living," put in Roger, "but we want you to be on your guard in any dealings you may have with him."

"Why, what do you young men know of Mr. Haskers?" demanded the old gentleman, in increasing wonder.

"We know a great deal about him, and very little to his credit," burst out Phil. "If you have any dealings with him, be careful, or, my word for it, you may get the worst of it!"

"Why this is—er—very extraordinary!" murmured Mr. Fordham. "I—I don't know what to make of it," and he looked rather helplessly at Mr. Passmore.

"Porter, you had better tell what you know about Haskers," said Bert's father. "But cut it short, for that man may get here soon."

In a plain, straightforward manner our hero told of several things that had happened at Oak Hall, which were not at all to Job Haskers' credit. Then he told of the attempt to blow up the hotel, and how the unworthy teacher had tried to throw the blame on the students, and how the truth of the matter had at last come out, and how the dictatorial old teacher had been dismissed by Doctor Clay.

"And do you mean to tell me that this is the man who is trying to sell me this stock in the Sunset Milling Company?" asked Mr. Fordham, when Dave had finished.

"This is the same man," answered Roger.

"Yes, and Dave didn't tell you the half of what can be chalked up against him," added Phil. "I wouldn't trust him with a pint of peanuts."

"Hum! Strange, and I thought he came highly recommended!"

"If he showed you any recommendations I'll wager they were many years old," said Dave.

"This is really none of my business, Mr. Fordham," broke in Mr. Passmore. "But as this man is so well known to these young gentlemen, and he has proved himself to be so unworthy, I would go slow about investing in stocks that he may offer."

"Yes! yes! Certainly!" cried the elderly gentleman. "But—er—why should these young men take such an interest in me, a stranger?"

"We don't want to see Job Haskers get the best of any one!" answered Phil, bluntly. "My opinion of it is, that he ought to be in jail."

"I see, I see! Well, if he did what you say he did, I don't blame you."

"I wouldn't sign for any stock until I had some outside advice about it," cautioned Mr. Passmore.

"Why not wait until your son gets back?" he suggested.

"I'll do it. Mr. Haskers wanted the deal closed at once. But now I won't sign for the stock. I'll wait. My son will be here day after to-morrow at the latest, and he can look into the matter for me. And I am very much obliged to you all for this warning. I think——"

At that moment came a knock on the door, which had been closed. A bell-boy was there with a card, which he handed to Mr. Fordham.

"Bless me! He is certainly on time!" murmured the old gentleman. "It is Mr. Haskers." He looked helplessly at the others. "I—I don't exactly know what to do."

"We'll get out, if you say so," answered Roger, quickly.

"Oh, say, can't we stay and face him?" asked Phil, eagerly. "We'll give him the surprise of his life!"

"Certainly, you can stay!" exclaimed Mr. Fordham, with sudden energy. "I want you to stay. You should not be afraid to say to his face what you have said behind his back."

Dave looked around the apartment. A bathroom was handy, the door standing ajar.

"Supposing we step in there for a few minutes, while you and Mr. Passmore meet Mr. Haskers," he cried. "We'll come out when you say so."

"A clever idea!" cried the rug dealer. "Maybe we'll be able to catch him in a trap!"

"Mr. Passmore, I'll leave this matter to you," answered the elderly gentleman. "You know those young men better than I do."

"So I do, and I'll vouch for Roger Morr and his friends," was the answer. "Show the gentleman up," he added, to the bell-boy. "Don't tell him who is here—we want to surprise him."

As the bell-boy left, the three chums crowded into the bathroom, leaving the door on a crack. Soon there came another knock, and Job Haskers presented himself, silk hat and cane in hand. He was well dressed and evidently groomed for the occasion. He had expected to find Mr. Fordham alone, and was somewhat annoyed on beholding a visitor ahead of him.

"Good-morning, Mr. Haskers," said the elderly gentleman, politely. "This is my friend, Mr. Passmore."

"Happy to know you, sir," responded the former teacher, with pretended warmth. "A lovely morning after the storm," he went on, as he drew off the gloves he was wearing.

"We were just discussing this stock you have been offering to Mr. Fordham," remarked Mr. Passmore, a bit dryly. "The Sunset Company is a new one to me. Did you help to organize it?"

"Well, I—er—I had a little to do with the organization," stammered the former teacher.

"You are a regular stock-broker, I presume, Mr. Haskers."

"Yes, that is my business. But I don't deal in ordinary stocks—I handle only those which are gilt-edged and big money makers," added Job Haskers, with a flourish.

"Been following the business for some years, I presume."

"About fifteen, all told. I used to have an office in Wall Street, New York, but I gave that up, as I found the confinement bad for my health."

"It must be a pretty exacting business," went on Mr. Passmore.

"It is, sir. When a fellow is in stocks he can't follow much of anything else."

"I'd hate to follow stocks for fifteen years."

"Do you mean to say you have been handling stocks for the past fifteen years?" questioned Mr. Fordham, slowly.

"Exactly, sir—ever since I gave up my position as cashier of a Boston bank," returned Job Haskers, smoothly. "And now, to get down to business, as my time is somewhat limited. I suppose you are ready to subscribe for that stock?" And the former teacher brought forth a paper and his fountain pen.

"We'll see," mused Mr. Fordham. "Dealing in stocks for the past fifteen years, eh? How long since you gave up your office in Wall Street?"

"About—er—two years," stammered Job Haskers. He looked keenly at Mr. Fordham and then at Mr. Passmore. "What—er—why do you ask me that question?"

"Mr. Fordham probably thought it strange that you could be dealing in stocks and teaching school at the same time," answered Bert's father, dryly.

At this announcement Job Haskers' jaw dropped.

"I—I don't understand you," he stammered.

"Well, you will understand in a minute," returned the rug dealer, blandly. He raised his voice. "Boys, I guess you had better come in now!"

CHAPTER VI

ANOTHER SURPRISE

The boys had listened to all that was said, and now they lost no time in filing into Mr. Fordham's bedroom.

Job Haskers stared at them in amazement, and his face dropped in consternation.

"Porter!" he gasped. "And Morr and Lawrence! Wha—what does this—er—mean?"

"Perhaps you know as well as we do," answered Dave, sharply.

"You have been spying on me!"

"We are here by permission of Mr. Fordham," returned Roger.

"How did you know I was to call?"

"Never mind about that," put in Phil. "We are here, and that is enough."

"And we know all about what you are trying to do," added Dave.

"This is a plot—a plot against me—to ruin me!" spluttered the former teacher of Oak Hall. "Oh, you needn't try to disguise it! I know all of you!"

"We have no plot against you, Mr. Haskers," replied Dave, calmly. "If your business is perfectly legitimate——"

"Never mind about that!" interposed Job Haskers, hastily. He jammed the paper and his fountain pen in his pocket. "You can't make a fool of me! You have been following me up, and you mean to—to—do what you can to—er—get me into trouble." He backed towards the doorway.

"What is your hurry, sir?" asked Mr. Passmore, and he quietly placed himself in front of the door.

"Let me pass! Let me pass!" shrilled Job Haskers, and now he looked thoroughly scared.

"Don't you wish to talk this matter over?" questioned Mr. Fordham, wonderingly.

"No, sir. I am not going to stay here to be made a fool of!" cried the former instructor. "Let me pass, I demand it!" he added, to Bert's father.

"Oh, all right, if you insist," answered Mr. Passmore, and stepped aside. At once Job Haskers threw the door open and retreated to the hallway.

"Just wait, you young scamps! I'll get even with you for this!" he exclaimed, shaking a long finger at Dave, Roger, and Phil. "I'll show you yet! You just wait!" And with that threat he literally ran down the hallway and down the stairs and out of the hotel.

"Say, he's some mad, believe me!" was Roger's grim comment.

"I think he is more scared than anything else," returned Dave. "He acted as if he thought we had trapped him in some way."

"Just how it struck me," put in Phil. "He certainly didn't lose any time in getting away, did he?" and the shipowner's son grinned broadly.

"He had a guilty conscience," was Mr. Passmore's comment. "Mr. Fordham, I think you can

congratulate yourself that he has left."

"I think so myself, sir," replied the old gentleman. He looked kindly at Dave and his chums. "It looks to me as if you had saved me from being swindled," he continued. "If he had a fair sort of a proposition I think he would have stayed."

"I think so myself," added Mr. Passmore. "Just the same, supposing I look into this Sunset Company for you?"

"As you please, Mr. Passmore. But I doubt if I care to invest—after what I have heard and seen of this fellow, Haskers," answered the old gentleman.

The matter was talked over a little more and then the boys and Bert's father departed, first, however, receiving the warm thanks of Mr. Fordham for what they had done. In the foyer of the hotel the chums fell in with Bert.

"Say, I saw that Haskers fellow shoot out of the hotel in a mighty hurry," he said. "You must have made it hot for him."

"We did," answered Dave. "Where did he go?"

"Up the lake road, as fast as he could walk."

"I wonder where he is stopping?" mused Phil.

"We might take the auto and follow him?" suggested the senator's son. "There is no hurry about our getting home."

"Let's do it!" cried Dave, for he was as curious as the others concerning the former teacher of Oak Hall.

"If you don't mind I'll go along," said Bert.

So it was arranged, and letting Mr. Passmore know of their plans they soon got ready for the trip.

"Now, don't get into any trouble," warned the rug dealer, as they were about to depart. "That fellow Haskers may be like a rat—very ugly when cornered."

"We'll keep our eyes open," answered Dave.

Soon the touring-car was rolling over the lake road, in the direction Job Haskers had taken. The storm had left the road a trifle muddy in spots, but that was all. Overhead the sky was blue and the sun shone brightly.

Less than a quarter of a mile was covered when those in the touring-car saw a figure ahead they knew to be Job Haskers. He was walking along more slowly now, his head bent down as if in deep thought.

"I suppose he is trying to figure out what to do next," was Phil's comment. "Wants to locate another sucker—if he can."

"Such a man ought to be in jail," said Bert "He may rob some poor fellow and do it in a legal way, too,—so that the man won't be able to get back at him."

Roger had slowed down, so that the touring-car kept well behind the former teacher. Presently the boys saw Haskers turn up a side road, one that led to a small hotel, standing on a hill overlooking the lake.

"He's going to the Fenton House," said Bert. "Maybe he is stopping there."

"Possibly," returned Dave.

Slowly following the man, they saw Job Haskers enter the hotel and walk in the direction of the reading-room. Roger stopped the car and turned to the others.

"Well, what's the next move?" he asked. "Want to go in?"

"What's the use?" asked Phil. "We'd only have a lot of words with him. He's got a right to stay here if he wants to."

"Let's go in anyway," said Dave. "You must know somebody here," he continued, turning to Bert.

"Oh, yes, I know several young fellows and girls," answered the lad who was spending the summer at the lake.

"Then we can pretend to be calling on them," put in Roger.

Leaving the touring-car standing in the road, the four youths entered the hotel. They glanced into the reading-room, and noted that over a dozen persons were present. Then Dave gave a low cry.

"Look, boys! What do you think of that?"

He pointed to one corner of the reading-room, where two persons sat on a leather couch, one with a newspaper in his hand.

"Why, it's Link Merwell!" gasped Phil. "Merwell as sure as you're born!"

"How did that rascal get here?" murmured Roger.

"Who is it?" asked Bert, curiously.

"That fellow who is on the couch with Haskers," whispered Dave. "He used to go to school with us at Oak Hall, and then he had to leave, and after that he and a fellow named Jasniff robbed Mr. Wadsworth's jewelry works."

"Oh, yes, Roger told me about that. You fellows followed the rascals to Cave Island, didn't you?"

"Yes, and we caught Jasniff, but Merwell got away."

"Then why not have him locked up right now?" demanded Bert.

"It's what we ought to do," declared Phil.

"Haskers and Merwell must be in with each other," was Dave's comment. "Maybe Merwell is trying to sell some of that Sunset Company stock, too."

"Wonder if we can't hear what they are saying?" said Roger. "It might help us to make out a case against them."

"We can go around to that side window and listen," suggested Phil, and pointed to the window in question.

This was quickly agreed upon, and the four boys left the hotel and walked out on a gravel path close to the window. As the day was warm, the window was wide open.

"No, it was a frost!" they heard Job Haskers say, in harsh tones.

"He wouldn't buy the stock?" queried Link Merwell.

"Worse than that, Merwell. I was trapped, and I had all I could do to get away."

"What do you mean?"

"Do you know who was there, with that old man, when I went to see him?"

"I have no idea."

"Three of the boys you hate—Porter, Morr, and Lawrence."

Merwell started back in consternation.

"You don't mean it—you are fooling!"

"It's the truth. They were there and ready to have me arrested, I suppose. I got out in a hurry." Job Haskers gave a deep sigh and wiped the perspiration from his forehead.

"Did—did they follow you?" asked Link Merwell, nervously.

"I don't think so—I didn't give them time. Oh, this is too bad! I expected to get a lot of money from that old man," and Job Haskers shook his head, sadly.

"I told you it wasn't safe to stay around here," was Merwell's comment. "Why not go out West with me? It will be much safer there, I am sure."

"My funds are low."

"I'll stake you, as the miners say."

"How much money have you?" asked Job Haskers, a bit more hopefully.

"Enough to take us both West. I made dad come down—he sent the money order this morning, and I just got it cashed. I told him if he didn't come down I'd have to give myself up to the police, and that would disgrace the whole family."

"I see." The former teacher of Oak Hall gritted his teeth. "Oh, how I wish I could do something to punish Porter and those others!"

"Humph! you don't wish that any more than I do," replied Link Merwell, scowling. "I'm going to do something some day, mark my words!" he added, vindictively.

At that moment the agent for a big observation car that ran around the lake approached the boys on the gravel path beneath the window.

"Wouldn't you young gentlemen like to take a nice ride this afternoon?" he asked, in a business-like tone. "A fifty-mile ride in our new observation touring-car, visiting all the points of interest around the lake, and taking in Creswood, Lighton, and Tomkins' Mill—a two-hours' ride for one dollar." And he held up a handful of tickets.

"We don't want any ride," answered Dave.

"We have our own touring-car," added Roger, pointing to the car.

"Oh, I see, all right," said the man, and passed on, to hunt for customers elsewhere.

When the man had started to speak his voice had carried into the reading-room, and much surprised to think others were so near, both Haskers and Merwell had gotten up from the couch to glance out of the window.

"Well, I never!" gasped Merwell.

"They must have followed me after all!" groaned Job Haskers.

The youth who had been mixed up in the robbery of the jewelry works grabbed the former teacher by the arm.

"We can't stay here—at least I can't!" he whispered, hoarsely. "I am going to dust!" And out of the reading-room he glided, and Job Haskers followed him.

"Where shall we go?" asked the former teacher, his shaking voice showing how much he was disturbed.

"I don't know—but I won't stay here," returned Merwell. "Have you much baggage? I have only a Gladstone bag."

"I have a suit-case, that is all."

"Then let us pack up and get out by the back way. We can pay our bills later. Come on, there is no time to spare!"

CHAPTER VII

A GATHERING OF OAK HALL BOYS

"Well, they are gone, that's certain!"

"Yes, and there is no telling where they went to."

"Must have slipped out by a back way."

"They sure are a slick pair."

It was some time later, and Dave and the other boys stood on the broad piazza of the hotel discussing the situation.

Following the talk with the observation car agent they had looked into the reading-room only to discover that Job Haskers and Link Merwell had vanished. At once they had rushed into the building, looking through the hallways and other rooms that were open to the general public. Not a trace of the two evildoers was to be found anywhere. Then they had consulted the clerk at the desk, and through him had learned that only Job Haskers was stopping at the place.

"But he has a young friend here, a Mr. Smith—Jackson Smith," the clerk had told them. And then he had described the fellow called Jackson Smith, and Dave and his chums had felt assured that it was Link Merwell under an assumed name. Finally a visit had been paid to the rooms Haskers and Merwell had occupied, and both had been found vacated, with the keys sticking in the locks.

"And neither of 'em stopped to pay his bill," the clerk had told them, mournfully.

"I am not surprised," Dave had answered. "They are a bad pair."

The clerk had wanted to know the particulars, and the boys had told him as much as they deemed necessary. Then they had come out on the piazza of the hostelry, wondering what they ought to do next.

"I don't think it is worth while trying to follow them up," said the senator's son. "If you caught Merwell you would have to appear in court against him, and you know what a lot of trouble you had appearing against Jasniff;" and this statement was true.

"Oh, let them go!" cried Phil. "Say," he added, "did you hear what Link said about bleeding his dad for money? Isn't he the limit!"

"That proves he isn't working for a living," remarked Dave. "And to think that he told me he was going to reform!"

"That sort of a chap doesn't reform," asserted Roger.

"Oh, I don't know. Gus Plum reformed."

"Yes, but Plum isn't like Merwell, or Jasniff. He was simply overbearing. These other fellows are downright dishonest."

The four boys walked back to the automobile, and soon they were returning to the hotel at which Bert was staying. By that time it was close to the lunch hour and so the visitors were invited to stay over for something to eat.

"Didn't catch that man Haskers, eh?" remarked Mr. Passmore, as he came up, in company with

Mr. Fordham.

"No, he ran away," answered Roger, and then he and the others told of what had occurred.

"I am very thankful to you for saving me from a bad investment," said Mr. Fordham. "I shall not forget it." And he kept his word, for later on, after he had consulted with his son and found out just how worthless was the stock in the Sunset Milling Company, he sent each of the boys a fine pair of gold cuff-links.

After lunch the lads remained with Bert for about an hour and then took their departure for Roger's home, where they arrived some time before dark. As they rolled up the driveway a surprise awaited them.

"Look who's here!" exclaimed Dave. "Hello there, Luke!"

"Hello yourself," answered Luke Watson, with a broad grin. "I thought you chaps would be along soon."

"And Shadow!" cried Roger, as another form came into view, from the Morr piazza. "This is a surprise! I didn't expect to see you quite so soon."

"Oh, we hadn't anything special to do, so we came ahead," answered Luke. "Hope it won't put you out?"

"Not at all, glad you are here." There was a general handshaking, for the automobile had now come to a stop and the boys had piled out to greet their former schoolmates.

"Say, that puts me in mind of a story!" burst out Shadow Hamilton. "A fellow made a date with a girl for six o'clock. Well, at five—"

"Wow!"

"Shadow is onto the game already!"

"Say, Shadow, give us a chance to say how-do-you-do first, won't you?"

"I believe Shadow would try to tell a story if he was going to a funeral."

"Oh, say!" burst out the former story-teller of Oak Hall. "That puts me in mind of another. Two Irishmen went to a funeral and——"

"Shut him off!"

"Put a popcorn ball in his mouth!"

"Make him apologize on the spot!"

At once the four others surrounded the would-be story-teller and pushed him from the gravel path to the green lawn. Then followed something of a wrestling match, all the lads taking part.

"Let up, will you!" panted Shadow, breaking away at last. "I won't tell any stories if you don't want to listen to 'em. But just the same, that story about the Irishmen was a good one. And that about the fellow who went to see the girl at five o'clock is a corker. You see his watch had stopped and he——"

"Jump him!"

"He can't stop, no matter how hard he tries!"

"Let's stand him on his head and make him tell it backwards!"

Again there was a rush, but this time poor Shadow took to his heels and rushed up on the piazza, just as the door opened and Mrs. Morr came out to greet the boys.

"Roger!" exclaimed the lady of the mansion, turning to her son, "what in the world——"

"Only a little horse-play, Mom," replied the son, with a smile. "We are so glad to see the fellows that we have to let off a little steam."

"It looked like a fight to me."

"Oh, nothing like that, Mrs. Morr," said Dave, quickly. "Only fun; isn't that so, fellows?"

"Of course!" was the quick reply.

"Have you met Luke and Shadow, Mom?" asked Roger.

"Yes, about an hour ago. I told them that you had telephoned that you were on the way home, so they said they'd remain out here, watching for you. I showed them what room they were to occupy," added the lady of the mansion.

"Fine!" cried Roger. "I'll put the car away for the present, and then we'll fix up for dinner and listen to those stories Shadow had to tell."

"Somebody said Buster Beggs was coming," said Luke.

"Yes, he'll be here the night before the Fourth."

Quarter of an hour later found the whole crowd of boys upstairs in the house. In anticipation of the Fourth of July party, as she called it, Mrs. Morr had turned over one wing of the second floor of the big house to the youths. There they could "cut up" to their hearts' content.

"Say, this is something like old times at Oak Hall!" cried Phil, as the youths gathered in one of the bedrooms and proceeded to distribute themselves in various attitudes on the chairs and the bed. "Somehow, I think we are going to miss that school!"

"Miss it! Well I guess yes!" answered Dave. "And that puts me in mind of something. I was thinking——"

"Whoop! Is he going to tell stories, too?"

"Say, Dave, that act belongs to Shadow."

"No, I wasn't going to tell a story," answered Dave. "I've got an idea for a club."

"A club? What do you mean?" asked Roger. "Do you mean for us to get up a club?"

"Yes, the Oak Hall Club, to be composed of fellows who attended Oak Hall for a year or more."

"Great!"

"Let us do it!"

"We'll make Dave president," cried Roger.

"And you treasurer," added Phil.

"And Shadow chief story-teller," put in Luke, with a grin.

"Huh! What's the use of being chief story-teller when you won't let me tell a story?" grumbled Shadow. "But I know what I'll do," he added, with a sudden twinkle in his eye. "If you won't let me talk, I'll write it down. And I'll write a sentence none of you can read and be sure of," he went on.

"What's that?" asked Phil, curiously. "A sentence none of us can read? Maybe you'll write it in Choctaw, or Chinese."

"No, I'll write it in plain, every-day United States, and none of you will be sure how to read it."

"What's the riddle?" demanded Dave, who saw that the story-teller had something up his sleeve.

"Give me a sheet of paper and a pencil and I'll show you," returned Shadow.

Paper and pencil were furnished by Roger, and the story-teller quickly wrote down the following:

"After a row the sailors had a row!"

"Now read it out loud!" cried Shadow, as he passed the paper to the others. All gazed at it for several seconds.

"I pass," remarked Dave, calmly.

"Why, that's easy!" cried Phil. "After a ro——Say, Shadow, what do you mean, did they quarrel or row the boat first?"

"Maybe they rowed the boat twice," suggested Roger, with a grin.

"Or had two quarrels," suggested Luke. And then a general laugh went up.

"You've got us this time, Shadow!" cried Dave. "Give him a lemon, somebody, for a prize," and then another laugh went up.

"That idea of an Oak Hall Club is a good one," said Luke. "But you can't organize it now—the fellows are too scattered."

"Oh, I was thinking we might do it later on—perhaps this winter," answered Dave.

The newcomers were much interested in what Dave, Phil, and Roger had to tell about Job Haskers and Link Merwell, and various were the opinions advanced as to what had become of the pair.

"They are both mighty sore, because they had to leave Oak Hall in disgrace," said Luke. "Every one of us had better keep his eye peeled, for they'll make trouble if they get half a chance." And then the bell rang for dinner and the boys went downstairs.

The next day the lads were all busy getting ready for the Fourth of July. It had been arranged that they should have quite a display of fireworks on the lawn of the senator's home, and many folks of that vicinity were invited to attend.

"Here is Buster Beggs!" cried Roger, that evening, and the youth who was so fat and jolly hove in sight, suit-case in hand. He shook hands all around and was speedily made to feel at home.

"Glad you are going to have fireworks," he said to Roger. "I don't care much for noise on the Fourth, but I dote on fireworks. Let me set some of 'em off, won't you?"

"Of course," was Roger's reply. "We boys are going to give the exhibition, while the older folks, and the girls, look on."

"But we are going to have a little noise—at sunrise," put in Phil.

"What kind of noise—a cannon?"

"No, some firecrackers."

"Oh, that will be all right," answered Buster, thinking the firecrackers were to be of ordinary size.

So they were—all but one. But that one was a monster—the largest Phil and Roger had been able to buy. They had not told the others about this big fellow, not even Dave, for they wanted the explosion of that to be a surprise.

"It will sure make them sit up and take notice," said Phil to Roger, as the pair hid the big cannon cracker away in the automobile garage.

"We'll set it off back of the kitchen," answered Roger. "It won't do any harm there."

On the night of the third the boys retired somewhat early, so as to be up bright and early for the glorious Fourth.

They had been sleeping less than an hour when a sudden cry awakened them.

"Fire! Fire! Get up, boys! The garage is on fire, and I am afraid the gasoline tank will blow up!"

CHAPTER VIII

FIRE AND FIRECRACKERS

"What's that!"

"The garage on fire!"

"Say, look at the blaze!"

Such were some of the cries, as the boys tumbled out of bed, one after another. A bright glare of fire was dancing over the walls of the rooms.

"It's some brushwood behind the garage!" announced Dave, as he poked his head out of a window to look. "It's that big heap the gardener put there yesterday."

"He shouldn't have placed it so close," said Luke. "Why didn't he rake it to some spot in the open?"

All of the boys were hurrying into their clothing as fast as possible. The alarm had been given by Senator Morr, and by the chauffeur, who slept in a room of the barn next to the garage.

"Oh, Roger!" gasped Phil. "That big cannon cracker!"

"I was thinking of it, Phil!" returned the senator's son, hurriedly. "We must get it out somehow!"

"If it goes off it will wreck the building!"

"Yes, and the gasoline tank with it!"

The tank in question was not underground, as would have been safer, but was located in a bricked-up place at one side of the garage. In the storehouse were two barrels of gasoline, and also some lubricating oils. If that storehouse caught, it would certainly make a hot and dangerous blaze.

Pell-mell down the stairs rushed the youths, one after another. In the meantime Senator Morr was dressing and so were the others of the household.

"Be careful, boys! Don't go too close!" warned Mrs. Morr.

"Watch out for an explosion!" puffed her husband. The senator was so stout that dressing in a hurry was no easy matter for him.

When the boys got out in the garden they found the chauffeur and the gardener at work, trying to pull the burning brushwood away from the garage. The flames were crackling merrily and the sparks were flying in various directions.

"I'm going in and get that big cannon cracker," said Roger to Phil, in a low voice, so that the others might not hear.

"I'll go with you, Roger. Be careful, though, the sparks are flying all round that doorway."

"I've shut everything!" bawled the chauffeur, as he saw Roger at the big sliding doors. "Better not open up, or the fire will get inside."

"I've got to go in, Jake!" answered Roger. "I've got to get something out."

"What?" asked Dave, who was close by.

"Never mind, Dave. It's something that can't be left in there," and so speaking Roger slid open a door and hurried inside the garage. Phil came directly behind him.

On the floor, in a corner, was a box with ordinary firecrackers in it—about two hundred packs in all. On top of this was a package in paper containing the big cannon cracker.

"Lookout!"

"It's on fire!"

Thus yelled both boys as they saw that the flames from the brushwood had made their way into a corner of the garage, just where the firecrackers had been placed. For an instant they hesitated, then both leaped forward again and commenced to stamp out the fire.

It had caught at a corner of the box containing the smaller firecrackers and was also at the paper containing the cannon cracker. This Phil caught up, knocking the fire away with his hand.

"What are you after, anyway?" The question came from Dave, who had followed his chums into the building. Buster, Shadow, and Luke were outside, at the rear, helping to pull the brushwood away and stamp out the flames.

"Firecrackers—a box full!" cried Roger. "We must get it out!"

"A giant firecracker!" added Phil. "Big enough to blow down a house!" And he held up the package and then made a dive for the outer air, for the garage was now full of smoke.

Dave understood on the instant, and stooped to pick up one end of the burning box. Roger took the other end, and thus they ran from the garage.

Crack! crack! crack! It was the small firecrackers in the box that were beginning to go off, the pieces flying through a lower corner of the burning box.

"Into the back yard with it!" cried Roger. "Keep it away from the buildings!"

"All right, this way!" answered Dave, and then the pair made for something of an open lot behind the kitchen of the mansion and there threw the box on the ground. Crack! bang! crack! went the firecrackers, going off singly and in bunches, until all were shot off.

"It's a pity we didn't save 'em," said Roger, mournfully.

"It's a grand good thing they didn't go off in the garage," returned Dave.

"Well, I saved the big cannon cracker anyway," said Phil, as he walked up at that moment.

"Where did you put it?" questioned Roger, quickly.

"Over there, in a corner of the fence. I didn't want to take any chances, otherwise I might have taken it to the barn."

"Better leave it outside, where it can't do any damage," said Dave.

While talking, the three boys had been running back to the garage. There they found their chums and the men at work, including Senator Morr, all hauling the burning brushwood away and pouring water from a small hose on the flames. The most of the fire was out, so they found little to do. Only one corner of the garage had been touched, and for this the senator was thankful.

"But it was careless of you, James, to put that brushwood there, so close to the building," he said to the gardener, "Don't do it again."

"If you please, sir, I didn't put the brushwood as close as that," replied the gardener, stoutly. "Somebody else did that."

"What!" cried the senator, in surprise.

"I said I didn't put the brushwood so close to the garage, sir," repeated the gardener. "I put it right there," and he pointed to a spot about fifteen feet from the rear wall of the building. "I was going to burn it up first thing in the morning,—that is if the young gentlemen didn't want the stuff for a bonfire at night."

"But who did put the brushwood up against the garage?" demanded Senator Morr.

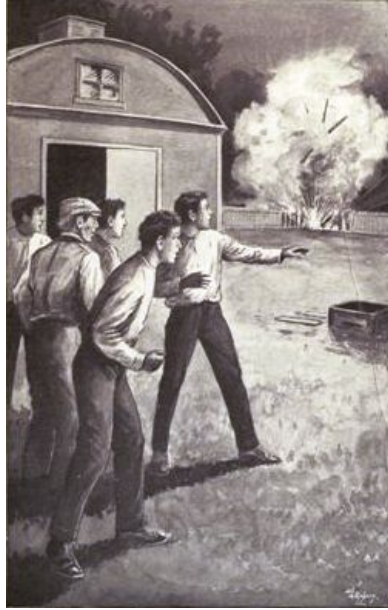
"I'm sure I don't know," put in the chauffeur. "But what James says, sir, is true—he put the heap out there—I was working around the garage when he did it."

"Do you mean to insinuate that this fire was set by somebody?" cried the senator, quickly.

"I don't know about that, sir," answered the chauffeur, while the gardener merely shrugged his shoulders. He was an old man and one who had been trusted by the Morrs for years.

"If what you say is true, I'll have to look into this matter," remarked Senator Morr. "I don't propose to have my garage burnt down, with two automobiles worth five thousand dollars,—not to say anything about the danger to the rest of the place. If I find——"

Bang! It was an explosion like a cannon and made everybody jump. As Dave looked, he saw a corner of a distant fence fly apart, and bits of fire seemed to fill the midnight air. Then followed utter silence.



AS DAVE LOOKED, HE SAW A CORNER OF A DISTANT FENCE FLY APART.

"The cannon cracker!" gasped Phil.

"What could have made it go off?" asked Roger.

"Some sparks from this fire—or else it was lit when Phil took it out," answered Dave.

"What are you talking about?" asked Senator Morr, and when he had been told he shook his head and smiled, grimly.

"Well, I'm glad it didn't go off in the garage," he said. "But after this you must keep your explosives in a safer place. Jake, James, bring some buckets of water and put out that fire from the explosion. It isn't much, but we want no more sparks flying around here."

The water was brought, and soon every spark had been extinguished. Then the crowd went back to the garage, to make sure that no more fire lingered in that vicinity.

"It certainly looks as if somebody had set this fire," mused Senator Morr. "Perhaps a tramp. Have you seen any such fellows around here?" he asked, looking at the others.

The boys had seen no tramps at all, and James said he had seen none for over a week.

"I saw one day before yesterday," said the chauffeur, "but I know he left town that night—I saw him board a freight train."

"Well, it is strange. Keep your eyes open," said Senator Morr, and then he returned to the house, to quiet his wife and retire once more.

"It's mighty queer about that fire," remarked Luke, when the boys were undressing. "It certainly does look as if it was set."

"Dave, do you think Merwell and Haskers would do it?" questioned Roger.

"Yes, if they were in this neighborhood. But have they been here?"

The boys looked at each other. Nobody had seen Merwell or the former teacher of Oak Hall in that vicinity.

"Let us make some inquiries down at the railroad station in the morning," suggested Dave. "If those two stopped off here somebody must have seen them."

"Phew! what a noise that cannon cracker did make!" murmured Phil. "If we had set that off in the morning—as we intended—I reckon it would have woke up the neighborhood pretty well."

"It did wake some folks up," answered Roger, for quite a few boys and men had come up to find out what the flames and noise meant.

"It was certainly some firecracker," was Luke's comment.

"Say, speaking of firecrackers puts me in mind of a story!" burst out Shadow.

"Wow! A story this time of night!" murmured Buster. "I'm going to bed."

"This is a short one," pleaded the would-be story-teller. "A man was giving a celebration one Fourth of July to a lot of children. He had ordered a lot of firecrackers, but they didn't come. So he sent a telegram to the wholesale house in the city. 'Send big and little crackers as ordered at once.' About an hour afterwards he got a return telegram which said, 'Our grocery department is closed to-day. Your order for crackers will be filled to-morrow.'"

"Call that a crackerjack joke?" asked Roger, with a grin.

"Don't crack any more like that, Shadow," added Dave.

"You might get fired if you do," contributed Phil; and then a general laugh went up, after which all of the boys again retired.

In the morning the lads inspected the vicinity of the fire once more, and spent some time in shooting off a pistol and a shotgun which Roger possessed. Then, acting on a suggestion from Dave, they took a walk to the railroad station.

Here an interesting bit of news awaited them, which was to the effect that, owing to some trouble with a bridge about a mile outside of Hemson, two passenger trains and a freight had been held up at the station for several hours.

"Most of the passengers remained in the trains," said the station agent. "But some of 'em got restless and they went over to the hotel, and some walked down to where the bridge was being repaired."

"Did you notice two people in particular?" asked Roger, and described Merwell and Job Haskers as well as he could.

"No, I don't remember seeing those fellows," said the agent.

From the railroad station the boys went to the hotel, and then walked along the country road leading to the Morr place. Presently they met a man driving a milk wagon.

"Say, you had a fire last night, didn't you?" asked the driver of Roger, as he reined up.

"Yes, Mr. Platt," answered the senator's son. "But it didn't amount to anything."

"How did it catch, do you know?" went on the driver of the milk wagon, curiously.

"No, we are trying to find out."

"Maybe it was set. I see two fellers sneakin' around your place last evening," went on Mr. Platt.

CHAPTER IX

WHAT NAT POOLE HAD TO TELL

"You saw two fellows sneaking around our place last evening?" cried Roger, with interest.

"I certainly did."

"What did they look like?" asked Dave.

"I see 'em plainly an' I was wonderin' what they was up to," said the driver of the milk wagon, and then he described the two persons quite minutely.

"Haskers and Merwell, beyond a doubt!" exclaimed Phil. "Now what do you know about that!"

"It certainly is the limit!" murmured Luke.

"Wonder if they are still around?" came from Shadow. "Say, this puts me in mind of a sto——But never mind, I'll tell it another time," he broke off, hastily, as he saw a look of disgust on the others' faces.

"I don't believe they are around," said Dave. "They probably boarded the first train that went over the bridge."

"Just what I think," returned the senator's son.

"Think them fellers set the fire?" asked Mr. Platt, curiously.

"We feel certain of it," replied Roger. "They are old school enemies of ours," he added. "It's only one more score we've got to settle with them," he continued, to his chums, and shut his teeth with a snap.

Nothing further could be learned concerning the mysterious visitors, and finally the boys went back to the Morr mansion, to get ready for the evening celebration. This came off as scheduled

and proved a big success. Fully a hundred town folk were present, besides some from the lake and elsewhere. There were rockets and Roman candles and wheels galore, as well as several set pieces. Some fire balloons were also liberated. Senator Morr had engaged a local band of eight pieces, and if the music was not of a high order it was certainly patriotic, and that counted for a good deal.

Of course the other boys had to hear all about the proposed trip West and, incidentally, about the lost Landslide Mine. From his father and mother Roger got some more details concerning the missing property. A map was produced, and also some papers, and the son was advised to hunt up an old miner and prospector named Abe Blower.

"Abe Blower knew your Uncle Maurice well," said Mrs. Morr, to her son. "They were friends for years. I am sure if you can find Mr. Blower he will do all he can for you, and for me, too."

"Then I'll do what I can to find him, first of all," answered Roger.

At last came the time when Dave must leave the Morr home and return to Crumville. He was going alone, but he promised to keep in constant communication with the others.

"I wish I was going on that western trip," said Shadow, wistfully. "You'll have barrels of fun, and if you do locate that Landslide Mine—well, it will be a big feather in your cap."

"I'd like to go, too," said Buster.

"I reckon we'd all like to go," cried the others, in concert.

"Well, there is just this much about it," returned Dave. "Anybody who has the price can go on that personally-conducted tour to Yellowstone Park, and, so far as I am concerned, you can go from there into the mountains and look for the mine."

"Why, of course!" burst out Roger. "If any of you want to go, just say the word."

This brought on a discussion lasting nearly an hour. In the end several of the lads said they would see what they could do, and would write about it later, or telegraph.

"Say, but wouldn't it be grand if we could locate that lost mine!" cried Phil, enthusiastically.

"Well, we'll have a try at it," returned Dave.

At last came the time for Dave to leave. Some of the others had already gone. Roger drove his chum down to the railroad station in the runabout. The two were alone. Dave noticed that the senator's son seemed unusually thoughtful.

"What's up, Roger?" he asked, at last. "You don't seem quite like yourself."

"Oh, I don't know that I ought to say anything, Dave," was the hesitating answer.

"If there is anything I can do——"

"No, it isn't that." Roger gave a deep sigh. "I wish we could locate that mine!" he murmured.

"So you were thinking about that? Well, we may have luck. Let us hope so," and Dave smiled.

"I might as well tell you how it is," continued Roger, as he drove up to the little railroad station. He looked around, to make sure that no outsiders were listening. "You know father comes up for re-election this fall."

"Oh, does his term as senator run out?"

"Yes. Well, there is a movement on foot to put somebody else in his place. If they do that—well, he'll be out, that's all."

"What will he do then?"

"That's just it. I don't know what he can do. He used to be in an office business, but he gave that up to go into politics. Now, if he gets out, he will have to start all over again."

"Hasn't he anything at all—I mean any business?"

"Not anything regular. He dabbles a little in real estate."

"Then I hope they don't put him out, Roger."

"And—er—that isn't all, Dave. I wouldn't tell anybody but you—and maybe Phil. He has spent a lot of money while in politics—it costs a good deal to live in Washington. I heard him tell mother about it. If he goes out, it will go hard with him. Now, if we had that mine, and it was as valuable as they think it is——"

"I see, Roger. We'll have to do our level best to find the mine."

"If mother had the mine she could let dad use the money in any way he pleased. But if we haven't got the mine to fall back on, and dad gets out of politics—well, it is going to make hard sledding for us."

"Roger, if it gets too bad, don't you hesitate to come to us!" cried Dave, quickly. "I am sure my father, and my Uncle Dunston, would be only too glad to help you out."

"Thank you, Dave; but I don't think it will get to be as bad as that," answered the senator's son. And then the train came along and Dave had to bid his chum good-by.

The car was only half filled with people, so Dave had a double seat to himself. He placed his suitcase in the rack overhead and then sank down by the window, to gaze at the swiftly moving panorama and give himself up to thought.

"Hello, Dave!"

The youth looked up, to see, standing beside him, Nat Poole, the son of the money-lender of Crumville—a tall, awkward youth with a face that was inclined to scowl more than to smile. In the past Nat had played Dave many a mean trick, and had usually gotten the worst of it. Nat had been in the class with our hero, but had failed to pass for graduation, much to his chagrin.

"Hello, Nat!" cried Dave. He put as much warmth as possible in the salutation, for he felt sorry for the boy who had failed. "Bound for home?"

"Yes." The money-lender's son hesitated for a moment. "Want me to sit with you?"

"Certainly, if you like," and Dave shoved over to make room.

"Been visiting an old aunt of mine," explained Nat as he sat down. "Had a slow time of it, too, over the Fourth. Where have you been?"

Dave told him. "We had a dandy time, too," he added.

"It must have been fine." Nat gave a sigh. "I wish I had been—but what's the use? You fellows wouldn't care for me."

"What were you going to say, Nat?"

"I might have been there myself, if I hadn't—well, if I hadn't made a big fool of myself!" burst out the money-lender's son. "Yes, that's what I did, made a fool of myself! Uncle Tom told me the plain truth."

"I thought you said you'd been visiting an aunt."

"So I have, but she's married again,—married a man named Tom Allen, a merchant. He knows father, and he flocked it into the old man in great shape," and Nat actually chuckled. "Told me just what kind of a man dad was—hard-fisted and miserly—somebody nobody loved or wanted to associate with. And he warned me not to grow up the same way—not to think money was everything, and all that. He said a boy ought to be known for his real worth, not his dollars and his clothes."

"He's right there, Nat."

"Yes, he opened my eyes. And when he asked me about Oak Hall, and you fellows, and how I had missed passing, he told me the truth about myself. I—well, I resented it at first, but by and by I got to thinking he must be right, and the more I thought of it, the more I made up my mind that I had been a big fool. And then I made a resolve——" Nat stopped and gave a gulp.

"A resolve?"

"Yes. I resolved that, the first time I met you, Dave, and the others, I was going to eat humble pie and tell you just what I thought of myself." The son of the money-lender was in a perspiration now and mopped his face with his handkerchief.

Dave hardly knew how to reply. Here was Nat Poole in certainly an entirely new role.

"I am glad to know you are going to turn over a new leaf," he returned. "I hope you make a success of it."

"Do you really, Dave?" There was an eager note in Nat's voice.

"Sure I do, Nat. You'd be all right, if—if——"

"Go ahead, give it to me straight, just as Uncle Tom did."

"Well, if you wouldn't be quite so conceited and stuck-up, and if you'd buckle down a bit more to studying."

"That's what I am going to do—buckle down to study next fall. And if I show any conceit in the future, well, I want you and Ben Basswood, and Roger and Phil, and all the others, to knock it right out of me," went on the money-lender's son, earnestly. "My eyes are open and I'm going ahead, and I don't want to slip backwards."

"I'll help you all I can, Nat," and Dave held out his hand, which the other grasped vigorously.

"This talk with Uncle Tom woke me up," went on Nat, a moment later. "When I get home, I am going to try to wake dad up, too. It's going to be no easy task, but I'll do it. I know ma will be on my side—she was never after the money like dad was. I am going to prove to him that he has got to do something else besides get money."

"I wish you luck, Nat," replied Dave. He could not help but smile when he thought of the hard-fisted money-lender, and what he might say when his son went at the task of making him more

kind and benevolent.

"And, by the way, Dave, now I am going to turn over a new leaf, I want to tell you about a letter I received some time ago," went on Nat, after a pause, during which the train stopped at a station to take on some passengers.

"A letter?"

"Yes. You'd never guess who it was from."

"Gus Plum?"

"No, Link Merwell."

"Link Merwell!" exclaimed our hero, in surprise. "What did he write to you about, Nat? Not that diamond robbery?"

"Oh, no, he had precious little to say about that, for he must know I knew he and Jasniff were guilty. He wrote about you. It was a long letter—nearly eight pages—and he spoke about what you had done to get him and me into trouble."

"I never tried to get you into trouble, Nat."

"I know it. But I used to think you were trying to do it. Well, Link wrote about it, and he wanted to know if I would help him in a scheme to pay you back. He said he had a dandy scheme to pay you off."

"Oh, he did?" said Dave, with interest. "What was the scheme?"

"He didn't say."

"What did you answer?"

"I didn't answer the letter. I kept it to think about. Then, yesterday, after my last talk with Uncle Tom, I made up my mind to wash my hands of Link Merwell, and I burned the letter up."

CHAPTER X

DAVE AT HOME

"I'm glad you washed your hands of Merwell, Nat," replied Dave, with warmth. "He is not the sort for any respectable fellow to associate with. But about that letter. Have you any idea what he was going to do?"

"No. All he said was, 'If you will join with me we can pay Dave Porter off good and get him in the biggest kind of a hole.' I guess you had better keep your eyes open, Dave."

"I am doing that already."

"I—I made up my mind I'd tell you—when I got to Crumville," faltered the money-lender's son. "I didn't want you to suffer at his hands."

"I've got my eyes open already," was Dave's reply. "Let me tell you something, Nat." And then he related the particulars of the affair at Lake Sargola, and told about the burning of the garage.

"And to think Job Haskers is with him!" cried Nat. "Say, they'll make a team, won't they!"

"Yes, for I'm thinking that Haskers is about as bad as Merwell," answered Dave.

After that came a pause, neither youth knowing exactly what to say. Then Nat cleared his throat.

"I—I'd like you to do me a favor," he stammered.

"All right, Nat. What is it?" returned our hero, promptly.

"If you get the chance will you tell Ben Basswood and the other fellows how I'm going to be—er—different after this? And will you tell your sister and Jessie, too? I don't want them to—to—think I'm wanting to do anything more that's mean. I want to be—be, well, friendly—if they'll let me," and Nat's face grew very red as he made the admission.

"I'll tell them all—the first chance I get," promised Dave. "And I am sure they will be pleased. Why, Nat, I know you can turn over a new leaf, if you want to. Look at Gus Plum, how mean he used to be, and what a bully! And look at him now. He's a first-rate fellow. You can do it if Plum can, can't you?"

"I'm going to try, anyway."

"And I'll help you all I can—and there's my hand on it," answered Dave, and then the two lads shook hands.

A talk lasting all the way to Crumville followed. As they rolled into the station Nat left rather

hastily, going to the rear of the car, while Dave went forward. The money-lender's son knew Dave expected to meet his sister and friends and he did not, just then, wish to face the party.

"There's Dave!" cried Jessie Wadsworth, as she caught sight of him through a car window.

"Hello, everybody!" cried the youth, as he swung himself from the car steps. He gave Jessie's hand a tight squeeze and then kissed his sister. "How are you?"

"Oh, fine!" came from both girls.

"Hello, Davy!" cried a merry voice, and Dunston Porter, the lad's uncle, came striding forward from an automobile near by. "How did you leave Senator Morr and his family, and are you ready for that trip through Yellowstone Park?"

"I left the senator and his family well," was the answer. "And I am ready for the trip—that is—part of the trip," Dave added, hastily.

"Part of the trip?" cried Jessie. "Why, what do you mean?"

"I'll tell you later. Oh, I've got lots and lots to tell," went on Dave, with a smile. He caught Laura and Jessie by the arms. "See Nat Poole over yonder?" he whispered. "Well, you want to be nice to Nat after this, for he is going to reform."

"Reform?" queried his sister.

"Really?" added Jessie.

"That's what he told me. We had quite a talk on the train. I'll tell you about it later. And I've got a lot more to tell," Dave went on. "All about a lost gold mine that belongs to Mrs. Morr, Roger's mother."

"A lost gold mine!" exclaimed Dunston Porter. "Is this a joke, Dave?"

"No, sir, it's the truth. The strangest tale you ever heard. When we go out to Yellowstone Park we—that is, us boys—are going to look for the mine."

"Of all things!" burst out Laura. "Say, Dave, will you ever settle down? Here I thought you were going to take a nice little personally-conducted tour with us, and you talk of going land knows where to look for a lost gold mine!"

"Is it very far?" asked Jessie, and her face showed some disappointment.

"Oh, it's not very far from Yellowstone Park," answered the youth. "It's in Montana, and you know a corner of the Park is in that State."

All had walked toward the automobile, which Mr. Porter had been running. The girls got in the tonneau and Dave climbed into the front seat beside his uncle. Just as they were about to start, Nat Poole walked past, suit-case in hand, and tipped his hat politely. Both girls smiled and bowed and Mr. Porter nodded. Then the touring-car rolled off in the direction of the big Wadsworth mansion, where, as I have before stated, the Porters resided with the jeweler's family and old Caspar Potts.

As they passed through the main street of Crumville—now built up a great deal more than when Dave had first known it—many persons bowed and smiled to all in the car. Everybody knew the Porters and liked them, and the fact that Dave had once been an inmate of the local poor-house was almost forgotten.

To the youth himself the ride was full of interest. As he sat back in the comfortable seat of the automobile he could not help but think of the many changes that had taken place since he had been found wandering along the railroad tracks, alone and hungry. He had found a father, an uncle, and a sister, and he had made many warm friends, including Jessie Wadsworth, to him the dearest girl in all the world. Certainly he had much to be grateful for,—and he was grateful from the bottom of his heart.

A few minutes of riding, after leaving the center of the town, brought them within sight of the Wadsworth residence, a fine mansion set back from the roadway, with beautiful trees and shrubbery surrounding it. Down at the great gateway stood Professor Potts, now white-haired and somewhat bent, but with a kindly smile of welcome on his face. Dave waved his hat and the old gentleman bowed with old-fashioned courtesy. Then the touring-car swept up to the broad front piazza and Mrs. Wadsworth showed herself.

"Home again, are you, Dave," she said, pleasantly. "I am glad to see you." And then she allowed him to kiss her. There had been a time when Dave had been somewhat afraid of this stately lady of society, but that time was past now, and Mrs. Wadsworth looked on Dave almost as a son,—indeed, it had been this affection for the youth which had caused the two families to live under the same roof.

Dave was soon up in his room, putting away his things and getting ready for dinner, which would be served in half an hour. He was almost ready to go below when he saw Caspar Potts pass through the hallway.

"Well, Professor, how have you been?" he asked, pleasantly.

"Very well, David, very well," was the somewhat slow reply. "It is a very pleasant life here, very pleasant!" And the eyes of the old college professor glistened.

"Got the library in shape now, I suppose?" went on Dave, for he knew that was the old gentleman's hobby.

"Yes, David, we have every book and pamphlet catalogued. And I am adding something new," continued the professor. "I am getting the autographs of many of the writers and pasting them on the fly-leaves. And where a writer dies and I get a printed obituary notice I paste that in the back of the book. I think it adds something to a volume to know about the writer and to have his or her autograph."

"Fine, Professor!" cried Dave, and tapped him on the shoulder. "My, but it is nice here! Much better than the old farm, eh, and the poor-house that I came from!"

The old gentleman nodded several times, and the tears stood in his eyes.

"Yes! yes! It is very, very nice. I have found real friends, and I am thankful, very thankful!" And he continued on his way down the hall, wiping his eyes with his handkerchief.

On the stairs Dave met Jessie. She was in a fresh dress of white, and had a rose in her hair.

"How pretty you look!" he whispered, as he took her arm. "Just like a—a picture!" And then Jessie blushed and that made her look prettier than ever, if such a thing were possible.

Dave's father and Mr. Wadsworth had come in, and both were glad to see the boy back. Soon dinner was announced, and all sat down to the long table, Dave between his sister and Jessie. It was old Professor Potts who asked grace; and then some rapid-fire conversation followed, the girls and the others demanding to know all about what had happened at Senator Morr's home, and about the lost mine.

"It certainly sounds like a romance!" declared Dave's father, referring to the lost mine.

"But I have heard of such things before," answered his brother. "I know of several valuable mines in South America that were lost through earthquakes. Landslides have not only buried mines, they have buried cities as well."

"Oh, Dave, supposing you went to look for that mine and there was another landslide!" gasped Jessie, and turned pale.

"That's a risk we'd have to run," was his answer. "But I'd be very careful as to where I went, Jessie."

"I don't know about this," put in Mr. David Porter, with a grave shake of his head. "Better take the trip through Yellowstone Park, Dave, and let the Landslide Mine slide," and he smiled, faintly.

"Oh, I promised Roger that I'd go with him,—and Phil is going, too!" pleaded Dave. "We'll be very careful."

"I might go with you myself, only I think I ought to stay with the party to go through the Park," said Dunston Porter.

"Yes, we want you with us!" cried Laura.

"I don't like this at all!" pouted Jessie, and looked somewhat reproachfully at Dave.

"Oh, you mustn't take it that way!" cried the youth. "Why, we'll be with you on the trip to the Park, and then we'll join you on the tour a little later. You are to stay at least four weeks, remember. Well, if we spent two or even three weeks looking for that mine we'd still have a week in the Park—and one can go through in six days, so the circular says."

After that the talk became general, Dave learning more concerning the tour and who from Crumville and vicinity had signed to go, and the others asking for the details concerning the mine, and about the doings of Job Haskers and Link Merwell.

"You steer clear of that rascally teacher and young Merwell," advised Dave's father. "They are a bad lot."

"I'll steer clear if I can," answered Dave. "But if I catch them in any wrongdoing and I can manage it, I am going to have both of them arrested."

"I'd not blame you for that."

After the meal Dave spent a pleasant evening with Laura and Jessie. The three young folks went out on the porch and there, a little later, Ben Basswood joined them. All talked about the trip to Yellowstone Park, and about the Landslide Mine.

"I'd like to go after that mine myself," said Ben. "But I know I can't do it, for I promised mother and my Aunt Kate that I'd stay with them all through the trip."

"Then you'll have to stay with Laura and Jessie, too," returned Dave. "I'll leave them in your care while I am away."

"Oh, Dave, as if Uncle Dunston wasn't going along!" cried his sister.

"Well, you can't have too many protectors, in such a wild portion of our country," and Dave laughed, for he knew as well as did all of them that the trip through Yellowstone Park is a perfectly safe one.

By and by Ben walked around the garden with Laura, while Dave took Jessie. It was moonlight and perhaps some sentimental things were said. Anyway, when Dave and Jessie came back he held her arm and both looked very contented. Then Ben had to go, and Dave walked down to the gateway with him and spoke about Nat Poole.

"Well, if he reforms he's a good one," was all Ben said. He and Nat had been on the outs for a long while.

"He'll do it," answered Dave. "At least, I hope so."

CHAPTER XI

OVERHEARD IN THE SUMMER-HOUSE

"Dave, what do you think! I saw Link Merwell this morning!"

It was Laura who spoke, as she burst into her brother's room, where the youth was looking over the things he expected to take with him on his trip West.

"You saw Link Merwell!" cried Dave, dropping some collars he held in his hand. "Where?"

"Down on Main Street, near the post-office."

"Did he speak to you?"

"Oh, no, the minute he noticed that I saw him he hurried out of sight around the corner. I followed to the corner, but when I got there he had gone."

"Was Job Haskers with him?"

"I didn't see him."

"Humph! This is interesting, to say the least," mused Dave. He thought of what Nat Poole had told him, and of what Merwell and Haskers had attempted at the Morr homestead. "I'll have to look into this," he added, aloud.

"Oh, Dave, do you think he'll try to do something more round here—or at the jewelry works?"

"I'll warn Mr. Wadsworth, Laura, and he can notify the police. But it's queer Merwell should show himself, knowing there is a warrant out for his arrest. Weren't you mistaken?"

"I don't think so. Of course he had on a slouch hat, drawn down over his eyes, and an unusual suit of clothing, but I am pretty certain it was Merwell."

"Then Haskers must be here, too. They travel together." Dave heaved a sigh. "It's too bad! I wish they were in China, or at the North Pole!"

It was two days after Dave's arrival at Crumville and most of the time had been spent in getting ready for the trip to Montana. Roger and Phil were coming to the house that afternoon, and Dave had received a telegram from Shadow Hamilton that he would accompany the tourists as far as Yellowstone Park. The other lads were unable to make the necessary arrangements.

It was lunch time and Dave lost no time in going to Mr. Wadsworth, who had just come in from his jewelry works. Both of them, accompanied by Dave's father, went into the library to talk the matter over, so that Jessie and her mother might not be disturbed.

"I'll see the police about this," said Mr. Wadsworth, when he had heard about Merwell. "If possible, we must place this young scamp where that fellow Jasniff is, behind the bars."

"I wish they could arrest Haskers, too," sighed Dave.

"I don't see how we can—we have no charge against him," answered the manufacturer.

It was about three o'clock when Roger and Phil came in. As my old readers know, the senator's son and Dave's sister were on unusually good terms with each other, and the greeting between them was very cordial.

"But I don't like you for one thing, Roger," said Laura, half reproachfully. "I don't like this idea of Dave going off to look for that lost mine."

"Oh, we won't be away from you long, Laura."

"And the danger—not only to Dave but to—to you," went on the girl, and gave him a look that meant much.

"We'll be careful," answered the senator's son. "But I hate awfully to worry you," he added, in a lower tone.

For Phil, Laura had some good news, which was to the effect that Belle Endicott, the daughter of the owner of Star Ranch, where the young folks had spent such an enjoyable summer, had written that she would join the party at Livingston, for the trip through Yellowstone Park. Phil had always admired Belle, she was so dashing and so full of fun, and the news was just to his liking.

"We'll have the best times ever!" he cried. "That is, after Dave and Roger and Shadow and I get back from locating that lost mine!"

"You talk as if it was going to be the easiest thing in the world to locate the Landslide Mine!" laughed Roger. "I think it is going to be hard work—and we may not get a trace of it."

"Did you bring those papers and that map?" questioned Dave.

"I did."

"Let us go over them now," cried Phil. But this was not to be, for there were other things to attend to just then, and the girls demanded a good share of the boys' attention.

The following morning found the three youths in a summer-house attached to the Wadsworth estate. This was located down near a tiny brook and was overgrown with vines and bushes. It was a cozy retreat, especially on such a hot day in July, and the boys proceeded to make themselves at home by throwing off their coats and caps.

"Now let us get down to business on this thing," said Dave; whereupon the senator's son brought forth his papers, and the map of the mining district wherein the Landslide Mine was supposed to be located.

"That lost mine is supposed to be somewhere along this old trail," said Roger, pointing with his finger. "This trail is known as the Rodman Trail, because a fellow named Billy Rodman discovered it. As near as I can make out, the papers say the mine was on this Rodman Trail, half a mile north of Stony Cut and to the west of the Four Rocks."

"Huh! That ought to be dead easy to locate," was Phil's comment. "All we have to do is to walk along the trail half a mile beyond Stony Cut and then to the west of the Four Rocks,—and there you are."

"Exactly, except for two things," replied Roger. "The landslide wiped out Stony Cut and the Four Rocks, too."

"Oh!"

"But some one must have some idea where Stony Cut was located," said Dave.

"My idea is to hunt up that old miner, Abe Blower, and see if he can't locate Stony Cut for us, even approximately, and tell us something about Four Rocks—how it used to look before the great landslide. Then, after we've got that information, we'll start on the hunt."

"Do you think we'll find Abe Blower in Butte, Montana?" asked Phil.

"More than likely. He was there some time ago, mother heard. He and Uncle Maurice used to be great chums."

"And are you sure the mine is valuable?" queried Phil, after a pause.

"It must be, otherwise my uncle wouldn't have been so anxious about it."

Again the boys went over the papers and also the map, talking the proposed trip over from various points of view. They all agreed that locating the lost mine would be no easy task.

"Supposing somebody else locates it?" said Phil, presently. "Couldn't he lay claim to it?"

"I don't know about that—I suppose so, since the mine is now completely lost."

"I hope you can find this Abe Blower and get him to go with us," said Dave. "An old prospector like that ought to know that territory well."

"Blower does know it—so they say."

"Did you ever meet him?" questioned Phil.

"No, I never even heard of him until Uncle Maurice died and left his property to mother."

"Then you don't know what kind of a man he is?"

"Oh, he must be pretty nice, or my uncle wouldn't have had him for a friend. I've no doubt that he is rough—many of that sort are—but I feel certain—"

Roger stopped short, as a strange crashing in some bushes back of the summer-house reached his ears and the ears of the others.

"What's that?" cried Dave. "Some animal?"

"Hi, what are you doing there?" came, in the voice of the Wadsworth gardener. "Come here, I want to talk to you!"

"Somebody is in those bushes!" exclaimed Roger, and ran from the summer-house, followed by his chums.

They were just in time to find Joseph, the new gardener, running after a young fellow who was making his way through an apple orchard on the other side of the brook. Joseph was somewhat stout and not quick of foot, and the young fellow easily outdistanced him, leaped the orchard fence, and hurried down the back road.

"Who was it, Joseph?" demanded Dave, when the gardener came up, all out of breath.

"I—don't—know—sir!" gasped the man, puffing for breath. "He—was—hiding—in the bushes back of—the—summer-house."

"Hiding here!" cried Dave. He looked at his chums. "Can it have been Merwell?" he murmured.

"Would he dare come here?" asked Phil.

"He dared to come to Crumville, after he knew there was a warrant out for his arrest."

"How did that fellow look?" questioned Roger.

"I didn't see his face, sir," answered the gardener, who had now recovered somewhat. "He had on a soft hat and a brown, baggy suit."

"That's the way Merwell was togged out, so Laura said!" cried Dave. "Fellows, it must have been Link! Now what do you know about that!"

"Do you think he heard what we said?" asked Roger, much disturbed.

"He must have, if he was hiding in those bushes," answered Phil.

"Wonder how long he was there?"

None of the boys could answer that question, nor could the gardener enlighten them. Joseph had been coming along the side of the orchard when he had espied the fellow and had called to him, thinking it was some boy from Crumville who had sneaked up to steal some of the orchard fruit. He had been surprised when the fellow dashed away so quickly.

"Maybe he wasn't alone," suggested Roger. "Let us take a look around."

This was done, but nobody else seemed to be near. Much disturbed, the three lads walked all over the place, and even down the back road in the direction the intruder had fled.

"If it was Merwell he must have heard all that was said," remarked the senator's son, gravely.

"If he did, it won't do him any good," answered Phil. "I don't think he'll hunt for that mine."

"He may follow us and try to make trouble," returned Dave. "He is very bitter—and so is Job Haskers. They'd put themselves out a whole lot to give us a black eye, so to speak."

"Oh, I know that."

Much disturbed, the three youths returned to the house, where Roger put his map and papers in a safe place in his trunk—the one he was to take on the trip West. In the meantime Dave telephoned to the police, telling them that Merwell had been seen in the vicinity of the Wadsworth mansion. He was glad of the fact that Mrs. Wadsworth and the girls had gone out to do some shopping, for he did not wish to alarm them further.

In the meantime, down the hot and dusty road in the rear of the orchard ran the young fellow who had leaped the fence. It was indeed Link Merwell, sour-faced, and with that same cunning look as of old in his eyes.

He kept on for fully a quarter of a mile, then suddenly plunged into a strip of woodland. There, beside a large stream of water, were the ruins of an old stone house.

Link Merwell stopped running and after a stealthy look around, emitted a clear, short whistle. This he repeated twice.

From behind the ruins of the stone house a man appeared, with a soft hat drawn well down over his forehead. The man was Job Haskers.

"Back again, eh?" snapped the former teacher of Oak Hall. "Did you do it?" he questioned, curiously.

"No, I didn't get the chance," answered Link Merwell. He sank on a log and fanned himself with his hat.

"Humph! Better let it go then. If they see you, they'll be after you."

"They are after me, Haskers."

"They are! Then let us get out at once!" And the former teacher plainly showed his nervousness.

"I'm willing," returned Link Merwell. "I've changed my mind about doing something here," he went on. "We can do something somewhere else—something that will pay us both big."

"What do you mean?"

"We can go after a fortune that is coming to Roger Morr's mother. It's the Landslide Mine, and it's lost. Haskers, if we can locate that mine, our fortunes are made! Come on, and I'll tell you all about it while we are getting away from this place. We must go West just as fast as we can make it!"

CHAPTER XII

ON THE WAY WEST

"Off at last!"

"Hurrah for the West!"

"And the Landslide Mine, Roger, don't forget that!"

"What a splendid day for beginning the trip!"

"Say, we make quite a crowd, don't we?"

"Wonder if the train will be on time, Dave?"

"I suppose so. Special excursions are supposed to start on time. Is everybody here, and have we all our baggage?"

"I've got all of mine," returned Laura. "How about you, Jessie?"

"I've got my hand-bag. The trunk went with the other trunks."

"Say, seeing this crowd, puts me in mind of a story," burst out Shadow Hamilton. "Once some tourists—"

"Oh, Shadow!" came from several in concert.

"Better keep the story until after we are on the way," cried Dave, gayly. "We'll have plenty of time on the train. It's a four-days' trip to Yellowstone Park, remember."

"Here comes the train!" was the cry.

The scene was the Crumville station. The little platform was crowded with the folks who were going on the personally-conducted tour to that place of many wonders, Yellowstone Park. Mr. Basswood was on hand, wearing a blue and gold badge, and so was one of the local ministers, and these two had charge of the tour, these and a railroad official who had to look after connections and meals. In the crowd were the boys and girls, and also Mrs. Wadsworth, Mr. Dunston Porter, and about forty others from Crumville and vicinity. The tour was being run at a very reasonable rate, considering the accommodations afforded, and many were taking advantage of this fact to see Yellowstone Park, with its wonderful geysers, its curious boiling "paint pots," and its bears and buffaloes. The minister had once given a lecture on the Park and this had stimulated curiosity to go and see this land of such natural wonders. It is a great national reservation that every American ought to be glad to visit.

As the train rolled into the station the crowd got aboard and the porters showed the tourists to their seats. All of the "Porter tribe," as Phil dubbed them, were together. Mrs. Wadsworth and another lady had a stateroom, and next to this Laura and Jessie had a section, with Dave and Roger opposite. Then came the other boys, and Mr. and Mrs. Basswood and Dunston Porter. The Crumville contingent filled two cars, and there were three more cars from neighboring towns. To the front were a baggage and a dining-car and to the rear an observation car.

"All aboard!" was the cry.

"Good-by!"

"Don't forget to write!"

"Here, Tom, don't forget your valise!"

"Be sure to look for Brother Jack in Chicago!"

"Be sure to get some good pictures!"

"Don't forget some souvenirs!"

Then came more cries, and the waving of numerous handkerchiefs; and off rolled the excursion train, on its long western trip, Dave waving his cap to his father and Mr. Wadsworth, who had come down to the depot to see the party off.

It took some little time to settle down on the train. They had left Crumville at half-past ten and almost before the young folks knew it, it was time for lunch. Quite naturally Dave escorted Jessie to the dining-car, while Roger took Laura, and Mr. Dunston Porter looked after Mrs. Wadsworth.

"I hope the good weather continues," said Jessie, as she sat down with Dave. "It will add so much to the trip."

"Oh, I've ordered nothing but the best of weather," he replied, with a smile.

"Tell me, Dave," she whispered, "did you hear anything more about that Link Merwell?"

"Not a word, Jessie."

"You are sure it was he who was behind the summer-house that day?"

"Fairly sure. Of course, we might have been mistaken. But we know he was in Crumville—Laura was sure of that—and it would be just like him to sneak up to our place to see what he could do to annoy or injure us."

"Oh, if only they would leave you alone, Dave!" and the girl sighed deeply.

"Don't you worry, Jessie; I can take care of myself."

The lunch was a delightful one, and with so little to do, the young folks took their time over the repast. Then they drifted back to the observation car, and the boys saw to it that the girls and the ladies got good seats, where they might see all that they passed.

The afternoon found them rolling in the direction of Buffalo, which they were to reach before it was time to retire for the night. Then the train would pass through Cleveland while they slept, on its way to Chicago.

"I'll be glad to get a look at Chicago," said Ben Basswood, who had not done much traveling.

"We are to take a tour in a rubber-neck wagon," he added.

"A rubber-neck wagon!" cried his mother. "Benjamin, what language!"

"Well, that is what they usually call the touring automobiles," he answered, with a grin.

To some of the folks on the trip, going to bed on a train was much of a novelty, and they watched with interest while the porters made up the berths.

"Do you remember the time we had Billy Dill along, and what he thought of sleeping on a train?" remarked Dave, to Phil and Roger.

"I sure do," answered the shipowner's son, with a chuckle. "When he saw the seats converted into beds he wanted to know if they didn't have a ballroom aboard, or a church, or a farm," and at the recollection of the old tar's questions all in the party had to laugh.

"Where is this Billy Dill now?" asked Shadow.

"Safe in an old sailors' home," answered Dave. "He took a trip or two to sea, but he couldn't stand it, so we had him put in the home."

"You've got him to thank for a good deal, Dave," remarked the senator's son, in low tones.

"Yes, and I'll never forget Billy Dill," answered our hero, as he remembered how the old tar had helped him to find his Uncle Dunston, as related in detail in "Dave Porter in the South Seas."

Mr. Dunston Porter had found some congenial spirits in the smoking-compartment of the car and spent a good deal of his time there. He met a man who had done considerable hunting in the West, and the two "swapped yarns," as Mr. Porter said afterwards.

Only a short stop was made at Buffalo, just long enough to allow the boys and some of the men to stretch their legs on the depot platform, and then the excursion train started on its trip along the shore of Lake Erie towards the great Windy City, as Chicago is sometimes called.

Morning found the party well on the way to Chicago, and that metropolis of the Great Lakes was reached about noon. Lunch had already been served, and at the depot all hands found a string of touring automobiles awaiting them, to take them around to various points of interest, including the business section, the finer residential district, and Lincoln Park, with its Zoölogical Garden. Some of the party went in a different direction, to visit the Stock Yards, that great place where hundreds of cattle are slaughtered daily.

"By the great tin dipper!" cried Phil, suddenly, when waiting for the automobile in which he and some others sat to start off. "Look who's here!"

"Jim Murphy!" cried Dave and Roger, in a breath.

"So it is!" came from Shadow. "Hi, Jim!" he called out. "Don't you know us any more?"

The young man they addressed, a tall fellow of Irish parentage, who stood on the sidewalk, turned swiftly. Then his face broke into a grin, and he rushed forward.

"Sure, an' what do you think of this now!" he exclaimed. "Dave Porter, an' Phil Lawrence, an' Roger Morr, and Shadow Hamilton, an', sure enough, Ben Basswood! Say, what is this, a tour o' Oak Hall boys!" and the former monitor of that institution of learning smiled more broadly than ever.

"We are on an excursion," explained Dave, and gave some details. "What are you doing in Chicago, Jim?" he went on.

"Sure I got a job here, after I left Oak Hall."

"What are you doing?" questioned Roger.

"I'm one of the gatemen in the train shed. But I expect to get a better job than that in a week or two—it's promised to me," added the former monitor. "An', by the way, lots of Oak Hall boys passing through Chicago now," he continued.

"What do you mean?" asked Phil, quickly. "Whom did you see?"

"Saw Teddy Fells about a week ago, and two days ago I saw Link Merwell."

"Merwell!" came from several of the youths.

"Was he alone?" questioned Dave.

"No, he had Mr. Haskers with him. Haskers lost his job at the Hall, didn't he?"

"Yes."

"I thought so, for the minute he and Merwell spotted me they got out of sight in a hurry."

"Where were they going?" asked Phil.

"I'm sure I don't know. They got off the Eastern Express, and left the depot in a hurry. They acted as if they didn't want anybody to notice 'em."

"All ready!" came the cry of the man in charge of the touring automobiles, and then one after another the turnouts rolled away from the depot.

"Shall we stay here and look into this?" asked Dave, of Roger and Phil.

"What's the use?" returned the shipowner's son. "It isn't likely they are here now." And then the boys waved a good-by to big Jim Murphy, and the automobile passed out of the former monitor's sight.

Laura and Jessie had heard what was said and they were as much disturbed as the boys themselves, if not more so.

"Oh, Dave, do you think Haskers and Merwell are following you?" asked his sister, anxiously.

"They can't be following us if they are ahead of us," he replied, with a faint smile.

"Well, you know what I mean."

"I don't know what to think, Laura. Merwell may be going West to join his folks. They are somewhere out there."

"But Haskers——"

"He may be sticking to Link because Link has money—he gets it from his parents, who don't want to see him caught and sent to prison, as was the case with Jasniff. I think Job Haskers was always a good sponge when it came to getting something out of other people."

"Maybe you are right. Oh, I hope we don't meet them on this trip!" And Laura shuddered; she could not exactly tell why.

The touring trip took the Crumville folks first to the business section of Chicago, and the man in front, with a megaphone, bawled out the various points of interest. Then the touring-cars, in a sort of procession, moved to a residential section, fronting Lake Michigan, with its palatial homes.

"Just as fine as Riverside Drive, New York," was Dave's comment.

"Every large city in the United States has its beautiful section," remarked Dunston Porter.

They were soon in Lincoln Park, and here a stop was made to look at the animals in the Zoo. The young people had a good deal of fun with the monkeys, and with a couple of bears that stood up to box each other.

Five o'clock found the party back to the depot, ready to board the train once more. As they stood near the car steps talking, a porter of the car touched Roger on the arm.

"Excuse me, Mr. Morr," he said, "but did you send a man here for your suit-case?"

"I certainly did not!" cried the senator's son.

"You didn't!" gasped the colored porter, and at once showed his excitement. "Well, one came here, with a written order for your suit-case, and I done gave it to him!"

CHAPTER XIII

DAVE SEES SOMETHING

"You gave somebody my suit-case!" cried the senator's son, while a number of tourists gathered around, to learn what was going on.

"Yes, sah!" returned the colored porter of the car. Plainly he was much distressed. "He had an order, sah," he added, and fumbled in one pocket after another, at last bringing out a crumbled bit of writing paper. "Here it is, sah!"

Roger took the slip and read it, with Dave and Phil looking over his shoulders. The sheet read as follows:

"Porter, Car Medora: Deliver to bearer my suit-case. Roger A. Morr."

"This is a forgery—I never wrote it!" cried the senator's son. "It's some swindler's trick!"

"I—I didn't know you didn't write it," faltered the porter. "I axed the man where you was and he said you was visitin' his house and wanted to show him something you had in the case."

"Do you know what I think?" exclaimed Dave. "I think this is the work of Link Merwell!"

"Yes, and Job Haskers," added Phil. "They are working together."

"But why did they steal my suit-case?" asked Roger. "Do you suppose——?" He stopped short, for strangers were about. He was on the point of mentioning the map and instructions he carried for locating the Landslide Mine. Dave and Phil, as well as Ben and Shadow, understood.

"Did you have anything in the case outside of your clothing?" whispered the shipowner's son.

"Only a few things of no importance," answered Roger. He tapped his breast pocket. "Those papers are here, and my money is here, too."

"Good!" murmured Dave. "Then Merwell and Haskers will be sold—outside of getting your clothing."

The porter was closely questioned, but could give no very good description of the man who had presented the order for the suit-case.

"I was busy—waitin' on an old lady wot was sick," he explained. "I jess read that order and got the suit-case, and he went off in a hurry. I'm mighty sorry I let him have the bag. But he had the order, all signed," and the porter rolled his eyes mournfully.

"I can't say that I blame you," answered Roger. "But after this——"

"I won't give away nuffin to nobody," cried the porter, quickly.

The matter was talked over for several minutes, and then it was time for the train to leave Chicago. The paper looked as if it might be in Link Merwell's handwriting and the boys concluded that he was the guilty party. Probably he had come to the train, knowing our friends were away on the sight-seeing tour, and possibly he had been disguised, maybe with a false mustache, or wig, or both. The porter was almost certain the man had worn a heavy black mustache.

"Well, all I lost was one suit of clothes, some shirts and collars, a few neckties and some underclothes, and a comb and brush, and toothbrush," remarked Roger, when the train was once more on its way. "It's a total loss of about sixty dollars."

"Maybe you can make the railroad pay it," suggested Shadow.

"Perhaps. But I am thankful that those rascals didn't get what they were after. They must have thought I carried those papers in the suit-case." Such was indeed the truth, and it was Merwell who had forged Roger's signature and gotten the traveling bag. It may be added here that, later on, the railroad company offered to pay for the loss of the suit-case and its contents, doing this very promptly when it was learned that the loser was the son of a United States senator.

On and on rolled the excursion train, and after the excitement attending the loss of the suit-case was over, the boys and girls settled down to enjoy themselves. Dave and the other lads loaned Roger such things as he needed, until he could get at his trunk in the baggage-car.

The next morning found the train in St. Paul, and there the tourists spent a day, riding around the city and visiting Minneapolis, which is but a short distance away. By nightfall they were on board once more and bound for Livingston, a small place, where a branch-line runs a distance of about fifty miles southward to Gardiner, the northern entrance to Yellowstone Park. At Livingston, Dave and his chums were to separate from the others and keep on westward to Butte, where they hoped to fall in with Abe Blower, the old miner and prospector.

"Oh, Dave, it won't be long now before we separate!" said Jessie with a sigh. It was the second day of the trip after leaving St. Paul, and the two were by themselves on the observation end of the train.

"Well, I don't think it will be for long," he said, as cheerfully as possible. "We'll soon join you in

the Park."

"I—I wouldn't mind it so much if it was not for that Link Merwell—and that old Haskers!" continued the girl. "Oh, Dave, you must be careful!" and she caught him by the arm.

"I'm going to keep my eyes open for them," Dave answered, and, as nobody was looking, he caught her hand and gave it a tight squeeze. "Will you miss me, Jessie, while I am gone?" he continued, in a low tone.

"Terribly!" she whispered.

"I'll miss you, too. But it sha'n't be for long that I'll be away—I promise you that."

"Oh, you must find the mine if you can, Dave. I rather think the Morr's are depending on it. Laura said Roger looked very much worried when he got that letter in St. Paul."

"Yes, matters are not going well with the senator's affairs—I know that, Jessie. If he gets out of politics he'll have to do something else. Finding this lost gold mine would be a big lift for the whole family."

Then Laura came out, in company with Roger, and soon the others followed. It was a perfect day, as clear as could be, and off in the distance could be seen the mountains.

"Going to shoot any bears out there in the Park?" asked Shadow, of Dunston Porter, with a grin.

"Hardly, Shadow, since outsiders are not allowed to carry firearms," replied Dave's uncle. "Only the United States soldiers are armed in the Park."

"Somebody told me the bears were tame enough to eat out of your hand," said Phil.

"Maybe they are, but I shouldn't advise anybody to feed them that way," answered Mr. Porter. "A bear isn't naturally a sociable creature."

It had been decided that Dunston Porter should go into the Park with the ladies and the girls, letting the boys shift for themselves in the search for Abe Blower and the lost Landslide Mine. An hour before the time for parting came Dunston Porter called Dave, Roger, and Phil to him, in a car that was practically vacated at the time.

"Now, I want to caution all of you to be careful," said the old hunter and traveler. "This isn't the East, remember. It's the West, and in some places it is as wild and woolly as can be. But I don't think you'll have any trouble if you mind your own business and keep your eyes open. Don't rely too much on strangers, and I think it will be wise for all of you to keep together as much as possible. Don't show any more cash than you have to. And remember, you can always reach us in the Park, by telegraph or long-distance telephone."

"We'll try to take care of ourselves," said Dave; and then his uncle continued to give the youths advice, on one subject or another, until it was time to get ready to leave the train.

"Livingston!" was the cry presently, and the excursion train rolled into the long depot. It was to stop there for fifteen minutes and then proceed to Gardiner.

"There is Belle!" cried Laura.

"I see her!" put in Phil, and was the first to reach the platform and shake the girl from Star Ranch by the hand. Belle Endicott looked the picture of health, and was glad to greet them all.

"Sorry we can't visit awhile," said Roger.

"We'll do that after we come back," added Phil.

"Well, good-by everybody!" cried Dave, shaking hands with many, an example followed by those who were to go with him.

"Wish I was going on that hunt for the mine with you," said Ben, who had to remain with his folks.

"So do I," added Shadow, who was to stay with Ben.

"Never mind, we'll rely on you to look after the girls," answered Dave.

"Oh, we can do that," said Ben, with a grin.

"Say, that puts me in mind of a story," cried Shadow. "No reflection on the girls here," he added, hastily. "Once on a time a young minister paid a visit to some relatives in the country. He got a letter stating they'd be glad to have him come and would he attend a picnic in the woods and help to take care of four girls. He wrote back that he would be delighted. When he arrived and started for the picnic he found the four girls waiting for him—four old maids from thirty to forty years of age!" And at this joke a smile went around, in which the girls joined.

Soon the last of the good-bys had been said. The girls were on the observation end of the last car, and as the train rolled onward towards Yellowstone Park they waved their handkerchiefs and the boys on the platform swung their caps. Then the train slowly disappeared from view.

"Well, here we are," said Phil, with something like a sigh.

"We've got an hour to wait before that train comes along for Butte," said Roger, consulting his watch.

"How far is Butte?" went on the shipowner's son.

"About a hundred miles, as the crow flies," answered Dave. "But I guess it is longer by the railroad, and we'll have some climbing to do—to get into the Rockies."

"Say, supposing we ask the men around here if they saw anything of Merwell and Haskers?" suggested the senator's son.

"It won't do any harm," answered Dave.

Inquiries were made of the baggage-master, a ticket-seller, and half a dozen other men around the depot. But none of them remembered having seen the pair mentioned.

"They probably kept out of sight," was Dave's comment. "They would be afraid we were on their trail, or that we had telegraphed ahead about them."

From the station-master they learned that their train was two hours behind time, and would not reach Butte until late that night. This being so, they left their baggage on check at the depot and took a stroll around, looking at the sights. Then they found a small restaurant and got what they called supper, although it was not a very good meal.

When the train came along it proved to be crowded, for there had been a sale of public and private lands not far away and many of the disappointed would-be buyers were on board.

"We can't take any through passengers," said the conductor, and waved the boys back.

"We only want to go to Butte," answered Roger.

"Oh, all right then. Take the forward car, next to the baggage-car. But I don't think you'll find any seats. We are swamped because of the land sale."

The boys ran forward, after making sure that their baggage was tumbled into a baggage-car. As the conductor had said, the cars were overcrowded, and they had to stand up in the aisle. A number of the men were smoking and they continued to do so, even though it was against the rules.

"Pretty rough-looking crowd," whispered Phil, after the train had started.

"Not all bad," was Dave's comment. "But some of them are certainly the limit," and he nodded towards one crowd that were talking loudly and using language that was anything but choice. In this crowd one fellow in particular, a tall, thin, leathery individual, called by the others Sol Blugg, seemed to be a leading spirit.

About half an hour had passed, and the conductor had just gone through collecting tickets, when the man called Blugg pushed up alongside another man who sat on the arm of a rear seat.

"Say, do you know what Staver jest told me?" he exclaimed.

"No, what?" demanded the other man.

"He says as how he is almost sure Abe Blower put this crimp in our land deal," responded the man called Blugg.

"Abe Blower!" exclaimed the other. "Say, maybe thet's right. Blower ain't got no use fer our crowd. Well, if he did it, he better look out!"

CHAPTER XIV

IN BUTTE

Dave overheard the conversation between the two rough-looking men in the crowded car, and so did Phil and Roger. All glanced at each other suggestively.

"Do you think they are talking about the Abe Blower we want to find?" asked Roger of Dave, in a whisper.

"More than likely, Roger," was the answer. "It is not likely that there are two Abe Blowers in this part of the country. It's not a common name, like Smith."

"Listen," whispered Phil, for the two men had begun to talk again.

"I lost a lot of money by havin' thet land deal fall through," growled the fellow called Blugg.

"So did I," responded the man on the arm of the car seat. "We all did."

"If Abe Blower knows we are on his trail he'll keep out o' sight."

"Maybe; although Blower wa'n't never the fellow to take backwater," responded the other,

doubtfully.

"We'll git him yet; see if we don't," was the savage response. And then followed some conversation in such a low tone that the boys could not hear what was said.

But it was easy to surmise one thing, which was that these men hated Abe Blower most cordially. And because of this, and because they had heard that Blower was a strictly upright, honest man, the chums concluded that these fellows in the car had been trying in some manner to put through some land deal that was not strictly fair, and that Abe Blower had foiled their designs.

Presently a third man, a fellow named Larry Jaley, joined the others. All were very bitter against Abe Blower, and each vowed that he would "git square" with the old prospector sooner or later. From their talk the boys learned that the men, along with some others of the crowd, were stopping in Butte at the Solid Comfort House, a place that, so they afterwards learned, bore a very shady reputation. Nothing was said about where Abe Blower was stopping, and the youths did not dare to inquire, for fear of making the men suspicious.

"They might think we were friends of Blower sent to spy on them," said Phil. "They must know we have heard some of their talk."

"If Abe Blower is so well known in Butte it ought to be an easy matter to find him," returned Dave. "We can look for him in the directory and the telephone book, and ask for him at the hotels and mining offices."

"And remember, I have one of his old addresses," said Roger. "Maybe the folks at that place know where he has gone."

It was dark when they rolled into the railroad station at Butte, a typical western mining city, with a population of about thirty-five thousand souls.

"No use in trying to do anything to-night," said Roger, who was tired and knew his chums must be the same. "We'll go to some first-class hotel and start on our hunt for Blower in the morning."

"Yes, I'm dead tired," answered Phil, who had been yawning for the last hour.

The boys had the address of a good hotel, and were soon on the way to the place. They saw the man called Sol Blugg start off down a side street with his companions.

"I wish we would run into Link Merwell and Job Haskers," remarked Dave, as they hurried towards the hotel.

"What good would that do?" demanded the senator's son.

"Then I'd know they hadn't left Butte to look for that lost mine."

"Humph! you don't suppose they are going to find it all in a minute, do you, Dave?" asked Phil.

"No, but an idea just struck me."

"What?" asked both of the others.

"Supposing Merwell and Haskers should hunt up Blower and see what he had to say about the lost mine."

"Phew!" cried Roger. "Do you think they'd dare?"

"They might. They have done some pretty bold things lately. Link is real reckless."

Roger came to a halt on the pavement.

"Maybe we had better hunt for Abe Blower right away," he declared.

"Oh, come on, and get to bed," yawned Phil. "Where are you going to look for him this time of night?"

"I don't know, exactly. But we could make some inquiries."

"Let us go to the hotel first," said Dave. "Then, after we have secured rooms, we can hunt around, if we want to."

A little later they found themselves at the hotel, where they secured two rooms with a bath. At the desk they asked the clerk if he knew an old miner and prospector named Abe Blower.

"Seems to me I've heard the name," replied the clerk. "But I can't just place it. You might ask Tom Dillon, over yonder. He knows all the old-timers in Butte," and the clerk pointed to a man who sat in a corner of the hotel lobby, reading a newspaper.

Tom Dillon, round-faced and white-haired, put down his paper and smiled as the boys came up and addressed him. He was an old-time miner, who had "struck it rich," and who had known how to take care of his wealth.

"Sure, I know most of the old-timers!" he exclaimed, genially, in reply to Roger's question. "Who are you looking for?"

"Let me introduce myself first," said Roger. He gave his name and also those of his chums. "I am

the nephew of the late Maurice Harrison, of this place."

"You don't tell me! Maurice's nevvv, eh? Then you must be the son o' Senator Morr, o' the East?"

"Yes."

"Glad to know ye! Put her there, young man!" And Tom Dillon shook hands cordially all around. "Yes, I knowed your uncle well—we did a bit of prospectin' together onct. It broke me all up to hear how he died—so many o' the old-timers droppin' off."

"It was a great shock to our family," replied Roger. "Perhaps you know what brought me to Butte," he continued, looking at the old miner, questioningly.

"To settle up the estate, I reckon."

"In a way, yes. I suppose you have heard about that lost mine?"

"What, the Landslide? Sure. An' she's gone fer good, lad; don't bank on ever findin' it ag'in, for if you do, well, I think ye'll be disapp'inted." And Tom Dillon shook his head slowly.

"You really think it can't be found?" asked Dave.

"I ain't sayin' that. But chances are all ag'in it. Whar that mine was located, the big landslide changed the hull face o' nature, an' all kinds o' landmarks have been teetotally lost."

"Well, I am going to do what I can," put in Roger. "And my two chums are going to help me. But I was going to ask you a question. The clerk suggested that we ask you. Do you know an old miner named Abe Blower?"

"Sure."

"Can you tell me where he is now?"

"He lives with an old lady named Carmody, on the other side o' town. She is some kind o' a relative of his, and came on from the South to keep house fer him. But he ain't home much. He spends most of his time prospectin'. Seems like he can't give it up."

"I wish you'd give me his address," said the senator's son, and, having received it, put it down in a note-book.

As late as it was, it was decided to walk across town to where Abe Blower resided, and the three boys set out without delay.

"I'd get a cab, if any was around," said Roger, who saw how tired Phil was.

"Maybe, Phil, you had better go to bed and let Roger and me go to Blower's home," suggested Dave.

"No, if you go, I'll go too," declared the shipowner's son, who never cared to be left behind when anything was going on.

The place where Abe Blower resided was down at the end of a side street, which, at this hour of the night, was dark and deserted. They had some little difficulty in finding the right number. The house stood back from the street, and not a single light shone within it.

"Everybody gone to bed," announced Dave. "It seems like a shame to wake them up."

"I'll wait till morning," announced the senator's son. "Now we know just where the place is, we can come here directly after breakfast." And so it was settled.

At the hotel Phil found himself so tired that he pitched into bed with scant ceremony. After the long trip on the train, Dave felt that he needed a bath and took it, followed by Roger. Then all went sound asleep, not to awaken until daylight. Then Phil took a good "soak," as he called a bath, and all dressed for an early breakfast. In the dining-room they met Mr. Dillon.

"Find Abe last night?" asked the old miner, with a smile.

"We located the house and are going over there right after we eat," answered the senator's son. "And by the way, Mr. Dillon," he continued. "Do you know any men named Blugg, Jaley, and Staver?"

"Do I!" cried Tom Dillon. "Sure I do, an' so do lots of other folks in these diggin's. What do you know about 'em?"

"We met them on the train."

"Don't ye have nothin' to do with that crowd, lads. They ain't the sort you want to train with, nohow."

"We are not going to train with them," said Dave.

"We thought they were pretty hard customers," added Phil.

"They mentioned Abe Blower and one of them said he thought Blower had queered some sort of a land deal they were trying to put through," continued Roger.

"Is that so! Well, if Abe did that I give him credit for it, I sure do. Those fellers are swindlers, pure an' simple. But they generally work in sech a way that the law can't tech 'em. I ain't got no use for 'em—and I reckon Abe ain't neither," went on the old miner, vigorously. And then he sat down to breakfast with the boys, telling them much about Butte, and the mining country around it, and about what dealings he had had with Roger's uncle.

"A square man he was," he said. "And a great pity the way he dropped off and had his mine lost by a landslide."

The meal over, the three boys lost no time in walking over to the other side of the city, where Abe Blower lived. They found the front windows of the house open and an elderly woman was sweeping off the front stoop with a broom.

"Good-morning," said Roger, politely. "Is this Mrs. Carmody?"

"Yes, I'm Mrs. Carmody," was the reply, and the old lady looked questioningly into Roger's face. "I don't seem to remember you," she went on.

"We never met before, Mrs. Carmody," answered Roger, and introduced himself and his chums. "I came to see Mr. Abe Blower."

The woman looked quite bewildered, so much so that the boys were astonished. She dropped her broom.

"Did you say you was Roger Morr?" she gasped, looking at the senator's son.

"Yes."

"Then what brought you here—lookin' fer Abe?"

It was now Roger's turn to be surprised.

"Why do you ask that?" he questioned. "I came because I want to have a talk with him, and maybe get him to help me look for a lost mine."

"Well, I never!" gasped Mrs. Carmody, and looked more bewildered than ever.

"Isn't Mr. Blower here?" asked Dave. A sudden idea had sprung into his mind.

"Of course he isn't here. I—I—don't understand this at all—really, I don't."

"Don't understand what?" asked Roger.

"Your bein' here, after the letter Abe sent yesterday afternoon. Didn't you say your name was Roger Morr?"

"Yes."

"Then you went off with Abe, didn't you?"

"Me?" cried Roger. "Why, I have never seen him as yet."

"Never seen him!" gasped Mrs. Carmody. "Well, I never! Of all the queer things! What can it mean?" And she walked to a chair on the stoop and sank down heavily.

CHAPTER XV

AT ABE BLOWER'S HOME

The boys saw at once that something was wrong. Mrs. Carmody was completely bewildered, and being old, had no easy time of it to collect her wits.

"Do you feel faint?" asked Dave, kindly. "Can I get you a glass of water?"

"No, I'll be all right in a minute. But this beats all, it sure does!" replied the old lady. "Abe wrote that he was going off with a Roger Morr to look for a lost mine, and here you are lookin' for Abe. It sure is a puzzle."

"He wrote that he was going off with me?" ejaculated the senator's son.

"He said Roger Morr. If that's your handle——"

"It certainly is."

"This must be Link Merwell's work!" cried Dave. "Perhaps he met Blower——"

"And impersonated Roger," finished Phil.

"Would he do that?" questioned the senator's son. "Would he dare?"

"He would, if he thought he could get away with the trick," replied Dave. He turned to Mrs. Carmody. "Would you mind letting us see the letter Mr. Blower sent you?"

"Sure. I'll get it. I left it on the table," was the answer, and, getting up, the old lady went into the house. "Come in," she invited. In her younger days she had been used to the rough life of a pioneer and she did not stand on ceremony.

The boys went in, and presently Mrs. Carmody brought forth a letter written in lead pencil on a half-sheet of note paper. It ran as follows:

"DEAR KATE:

"You remember I tole you about Maurice Harrisons sister, who was married to a seanatour of the government. Well, his son, Roger Morr has come on to look for that lost mine—wants for me to go on a hunt with him to onse—so as it is good money I am going—start to nite in a hour—you git Nell Davis to stay with you her an Ben I wont be gone morn a weak or to. ABE."

"That's the letter Abe sent me yesterday," announced Mrs. Carmody. "You see he says Roger Morr, the son of the senator. If that's you, what does it mean?" and she looked at Roger.

"I'll tell you what it means," answered Dave. "It means that somebody else has pretended he is Roger here—an enemy who wants to locate the lost mine first, if he can."

"O dear! Did you ever hear the like! Who was it, do you suppose?"

"We've got a pretty good idea," said Roger. "Nobody you know. But tell me, where did this letter come from?"

"You mean who brought it?"

"Yes."

"Billy Lane."

"Who is he?"

"Oh, a feller around town, who does all sort o' odd jobs."

"Then you don't know where Mr. Blower was when he sent it?"

"No, I don't. But I guess he wasn't very near, otherwise he would have come here hisself, instead o' writin'—for writin' comes hard to Abe—he never had no chanct for much education. And he would want some o' his clothes."

The boys read the letter a second time. All were convinced that Link Merwell had gotten ahead of them and had perpetrated the fraud by impersonating Roger.

"It was certainly a bold stroke," was Phil's comment.

"Yes, and a clever one too, in a way," replied Dave. "From our talk in the summer-house Link must have learned that Blower and the late Mr. Harrison were warm friends, and, that being so, Blower would be willing to do almost anything for Mr. Harrison's nephew. And Link rushed Blower away in a hurry, so that we wouldn't get at him."

"I wonder if Haskers is with him?" mused Roger.

"I shouldn't wonder. If the mine is found, Link can't claim it, for he would be arrested on sight. But he could let Haskers claim it, and then turn it over to somebody else and thus mix it up, so that you would be out of it," answered Dave.

"What do you think I had best do next?" asked the senator's son. The unexpected turn of affairs had bewildered him almost as much as it had bewildered Mrs. Carmody.

"I don't see what you can do, Roger, excepting to start on a hunt for the Landslide Mine without Blower."

"Yes, let us do that!" cried Phil. "Who knows but that we'll run across Blower and Merwell? And if we do, we can easily prove that Link is a fraud."

"Well, we'll have to get some sort of a guide," answered Roger. "It would be utterly useless for us to start out alone in such a country as this."

"We might ask Mr. Dillon to recommend somebody," said Dave. "He appeared to be a reliable man."

The boys talked to Mrs. Carmody for a few minutes longer. They were on the point of leaving the house when there came a loud rap on the front door.

"Perhaps Blower has come back!" cried Phil.

"I don't think he'd knock," answered Dave.

"No, it isn't Abe," said Mrs. Carmody. "I'll go and see who it is."

She went to the door and opened it,—to find herself confronted by a tall, leathery-looking individual whose breath smelt strongly of liquor.

"Is Abe Blower home?" demanded the man, in a thick voice.

"No, he isn't," replied Mrs. Carmody, stiffly. She did not like the appearance of the visitor.

"When will he be home?" went on the man, and tried to force his way into the house.

"I don't know. You can't come in here, Sol Blugg!" And Mrs. Carmody tried to shut the door in the man's face.

"I am a-comin' in," stormed the newcomer. "I'm a-comin' in to wait fer Abe Blower, an' when I meet him—well, we'll have an account to settle," and the man lurched heavily against the door-frame.

"It's one of the fellows we met on the train!" whispered Phil. "The fellow called Sol Blugg!"

"Yes, and that other man, Larry Jaley, is waiting on the sidewalk for him," announced Dave, after a glance through a window. "And neither of them seem to be very sober."

"You get right out of here, Sol Blugg!" cried Mrs. Carmody, with sudden energy. "Abe ain't home, an' I won't have you hangin' around. You get right out!" And she caught up her broom, which chanced to be behind the door.

"Drop the broom, old woman!" snarled Sol Blugg, and it was plain to see that he was befuddled by liquor. "I'm a-comin' in, and you sha'n't stop me!"

He made a sudden grab and caught Mrs. Carmody by the arm. But as he did this, Dave leaped into the little hallway and shoved him back.

"Let go of this lady!" he said, sternly. "Let go, or I'll knock you down!"

Surprised and bewildered, Sol Blugg dropped his hold on Mrs. Carmody's arm and glared uncertainly at our hero.

"Who—who are you?" he faltered.

"Never mind who I am," replied Dave. "You let this lady alone and go about your business."

"I want see Abe Blower."

"He has gone away."

"Say, where have I seen you?" demanded the leathery-looking man, suddenly. "Oh, I remember now, on the train, comin' from the land sale. Say, was you there?"

"No."

"I know better! I saw you on the train—you an' them other fellers, too!" And Sol Blugg pointed unsteadily at Phil and Roger. "I know how it is," he went on, ramblingly. "You went there in place o' Abe—queered the hull thing fer us, you did! I know! You're in with Abe, an' Abe's in with you! Thought you'd do us out o' our little game, eh? Say, Larry!" he called to the man on the sidewalk. "Look at these three fellers—same ones was on the train last night. They are in with Abe—and they queered us—put a crimp in the hull game. Now they say Abe ain't here. Wot are we going to do, tell me that now, what are we goin' to do?"

"Them fellers!" exclaimed Larry Jaley, catching sight of the boys. "I remember 'em. Say, maybe they heard us talkin'!"

"Sure—they must have," mumbled Sol Blugg.

"Do you know these men?" asked Mrs. Carmody.

"We saw them on the train last night, that is all," answered Roger. "They said something about Mr. Blower queering a land deal for them."

"Yes, he told me about that, too. They were going to swindle some folks, and Abe heard about it and gave the thing away. Abe won't stand for anything that ain't strictly honest."

"Say, I want you to know——" commenced Sol Blugg, and tried to catch hold of Mrs. Carmody again. But this time Dave was too quick for him. He pushed the man back, turned him around, and sent him flying down the steps to the street.

"Now, you go on!" he cried. "If you don't, you'll get into trouble!"

"That's what!" said Roger.

"Perhaps you'd like to be arrested," added Phil.

"Come on!" said Larry Jaley, in a low voice. "Come on, Sol. I told you it wouldn't do any good to come here."

"I didn't expect to see them young fellers," growled the leathery-looking man. "But I'm a-goin' to git square with Abe Blower, jest wait an' see," he added, thickly; and then he and his companion started up the street and around the first corner.

"The beasts!" murmured Mrs. Carmody, as she gazed after them. "I do wish I had used the broom over Sol Blugg's head! Maybe it would have done him good!"

"You know these men, then?" asked Dave.

"Oh, yes, and Abe knows 'em, too! It seems that, years ago, before I came here, Abe used to train with those men, in the mining camps. But they were a hard crowd, used to drinkin' and gamblin', and Abe gave 'em up and went with men like Mr. Harrison, and Tom Dillon. That made Sol Blugg and his crowd sore, and they often tried to do Abe harm. Now that Abe queered that land swindle for 'em I suppose they are more sore than ever. But I don't think they would have come here, only they have been drinkin'."

"You had better keep on the lookout—they may come back," said Dave.

"I'll keep on guard, don't fear. I've got one of Abe's pistols in the house, and a club, too. And I'll get that neighbor Abe spoke about to stay with me," returned Mrs. Carmody. "But, say," she added, suddenly. "You better keep on guard, too. 'Tain't no nice thing to run up against that bunch, I can tell you that!"

"Yes, we'll have to be on the watch from the very moment we leave this house," said Roger.

The boys talked for a few minutes longer with the old lady, getting what information they could, and then hurried back to their hotel. On the way they kept a sharp lookout for the leathery-looking man and his cronies, but they did not show themselves.

It was an easy matter for them to find old Mr. Dillon, who was reading a mining journal in the smoking-room. He listened with much interest to what they had to tell. As they felt they could trust such a man, they withheld nothing from him.

"It certainly is some game—this trying to locate that lost Landslide Mine," said the old miner. "I've been thinkin' it over again since you told me about it, and it interests me mightily. So you want somebody to go with you, and help you find the right trail, and find Abe Blower? Well, if you don't think I'm too old, I'll go myself!" And he smiled broadly at the boys.

CHAPTER XVI

ON TO BLACK CAT CAMP

"You go!" cried Dave.

"I thought you had given up prospecting," exclaimed Roger.

"Not but that we'd be glad to have you along," put in Phil, hastily.

"Well, I have given up prospecting," answered Mr. Dillon, with that broad smile still on his face. "But I like to go out once in a while, just for the sake of old times. Besides that, I was interested in the Landslide Mine myself in a way."

"How so?" asked the senator's son.

"Well, when Maurice Harrison staked the claim I came along and staked a claim a bit further up the trail. It wasn't near so good a prospect as was the Landslide, but it was pretty fair, and I was sorry to see that landslide come along an' knock us all out. So, if we find the lost Landslide Mine maybe we'll locate my mine, too."

"Come by all means, and welcome, Mr. Dillon!" cried Roger. "If you had that mine you speak about you must know as much about that district as Abe Blower—maybe more."

"I think I know as much, but not any more, lads. Abe is a good prospector, and he knows Montana from end to end, an' Idaho, too, as well as other gold fields. He has made money, too, but he allers spent the cash lookin' fer bigger things, while I salted a good bit o' mine away!" And Tom Dillon chuckled broadly.

The matter was talked over for the best part of an hour, and it was decided to begin the hunt for the Landslide Mine on the following morning.

"There ain't no ust bein' in too much o' a hurry," said Mr. Dillon. "That mine ain't goin' to walk away, and Abe Blower an' those with him ain't goin' to find it right plumb to onct, believe me! I guess the only reason those others hurried so was because they feared you would come along and queer their game with Abe."

"I think that myself," said Roger.

"Abe had a prospectin' outfit all ready—he allers has—up to Black Cat Camp. That's the startin'-point for the Rodman trail, on which the Landslide Mine an' my mine was located. Now we haven't any outfit, so we'll have to git one right here in Butte."

"We'll get whatever you say," answered Roger. "Of course, I don't want to make this too expensive," he added, thinking of something his father had told him—that just at present finances in the Morr family were not at their best.

"We can hire hosses—I know where to git just the right animals," said Tom Dillon. "And we won't pay no fortune for 'em either. And then you'll want some different clothes," and he looked

critically at the well-dressed youths.

"Oh, we know that—we have roughed it before," returned Dave. And he mentioned their trip to Star Ranch, to Cave Island, and to the South Sea Islands, Norway, and other out-of-the-way places.

"Well, you sure have traveled some!" exclaimed Tom Dillon. "You'll do for this trip. I'm glad you know how to rough it. I onct had a bunch of tenderfeet along—young fellers from the East, who had never roughed it before—and, believe me, what those chaps didn't know would fill a boomer's wagon twict over. Why, they couldn't wash less'n they had a basin to do it in an' a towel to dry on, an' it mixed 'em all up to try to sleep on the ground rolled in a blanket. An' when it come to grub, well, they was a-lookin' for napkins an' bread-an'-butter plates, an' finger bowls, an' I don't know what all! It jest made me plumb tired, it sure did!" And the old miner sighed deeply.

"We won't give you any trouble that way," said Dave, with a grin. "Regular camp food is good enough for us, and I can sleep almost anywhere if I am tired enough."

"And you can't beat Dave riding," broke in Roger. "When he was at Star Ranch he busted the wildest bronco you ever saw."

"Is that so! Well, I don't like no wild broncos. I like a good, steady hoss, one as can climb the mountain trails and is sure-footed on the edge o' a cliff. That's the kind we'll git," concluded Tom Dillon.

The remainder of the day proved a busy one. The boys went out with the old miner to secure the horses and such an outfit as he deemed necessary. Then they spent part of the evening in writing letters to the folks in Yellowstone Park and at home. Only one letter came in for them—one from Senator Morr to his son—and this made Roger look very sober.

"No bad news, I hope," said Dave, kindly.

"It's about dad's private affairs," was the reply. "Things have taken something of a turn for the worse financially." Roger gave a sigh. "Oh, I do hope we can locate that lost mine!"

"We all hope that!" said Dave.

"Indeed, we do!" cried Phil. "We've just got to do it," he added, enthusiastically.

Now that he had made up his mind to undertake the expedition, old Tom Dillon brightened up wonderfully, and to the boys he appeared ten years younger than when they had first met him. He was a fatherly kind of a man, and the more they saw of him the better they liked him. He selected the outfit with care, securing five good horses—one for each of them and an extra animal for the camp stuff, and other things they were to take along.

In a place like Butte, where Tom Dillon was so well known, it soon became noised around that he was going on a prospecting tour. Some asked him where he was going, but he merely replied that he was going along with his young friends to show them the mining districts.

"It won't do to let 'em know we are going to look for a mine," he explained, in private. "If we did that, we'd have a crowd at our heels in no time."

The news concerning the expedition reached the ears of Sol Blugg and his cronies, and this, coupled with the sudden departure of Abe Blower, set that crowd to wondering what was up.

"Maybe it's another gold strike," suggested Larry Jaley.

"It might be," said the fellow called Staver.

"If I thought it was a gold strike I'd follow 'em," announced Sol Blugg. "Tom Dillon allers was a good one at strikes, an' so was Abe Blower. They know enough to keep away from anything that looks like a wildcat. I'm a-goin' to look into this," he concluded. And after that the Blugg crowd kept close watch on Dave and his friends.

The departure was made from Butte about noon of the next day. It was clear and warm, with a gentle breeze blowing from the west.

"We might have taken a train for the first forty miles," remarked Tom Dillon. "But it wouldn't have helped us a great deal, for we'd have to side-track for ten miles. We'll go the old way—the way we went afore there was any railroads."

"There must be a lot of mines in Montana," remarked Phil, as they rode out of Butte.

"Somebody told me there had been over fifteen thousand minin' claims staked and recorded," answered the old miner. "O' course, lots of 'em ain't never been developed. But a good many of 'em have."

"They must produce a lot of gold," said Dave.

"Yes, lad, the output runs up into the millions every year. Oh, a good mine is a bonanza!" added Tom Dillon, emphatically.

"Then I trust we locate the Landslide Mine, and that it proves a bonanza," returned Roger,

eagerly.

On the way they passed mine after mine, and the boys were much interested in watching the process of getting out ore, and also in the work of the huge quartz-crushers. Whenever they passed a mine there would be sure to be somebody to wave a friendly hand to Tom Dillon.

"He certainly is well known," whispered Roger to Dave.

"Yes, and we were mighty lucky to fall in with him—after missing that Abe Blower," was the reply.

It was not until about five o'clock in the afternoon that they reached a small settlement known as Robby's. Here they rested and had supper. They inquired about Abe Blower and his party, but could find out nothing concerning them.

"They must have gone around by Tilton," said Tom Dillon. "That's just as good a trail and about as short. We'll hear from them at Black Cat Camp."

It had been decided to push on to Black Cat Camp after supper, the old miner stating they ought to make the distance in three hours. Soon they were on the way again, just as the sun was sinking behind the great mountains in the west.

"I hope Abe Blower stopped for the day at Black Cat Camp," said Roger to his chums. "I'd like to meet him and confront Link Merwell—and Job Haskers, too, if he is with them."

"So would I," added Dave and Phil, in a breath.

It was more agreeable riding, now that the heat of the day was over. At noon it had been very hot, but none of the boys had complained, although they had perspired freely.

As it became darker they could see the twinkling lights of many a mining town and camp shining out in the mountains and the valleys below.

"It didn't used to be so, when first I came to Montana," remarked Tom Dillon. "In them days you could ride out here all night an' not see a light. But the State has settled putty fast in the last twenty-five years. They are buildin' railroads everywhere, an' towns spring up over night, like toadstools."

"Are there any wild animals out here?" questioned Phil.

"Heaps of 'em, further away from the cities. Bears, an' mountain lions, an' wildcats, an' wolves. An' then we have plenty o' mule an' other deer, an' elk, as well as Rocky Mountain goats, an' mountain sheep."

"Perhaps we'll get a chance to do some hunting!" exclaimed Phil.

"Not much, this time o' year, lad. But you might hunt a bear—if he cornered you!" And Tom Dillon laughed at his little joke.

"Did a bear ever corner you?" asked Dave.

"Onct, just onct, and it was the wust experience I ever had with a wild beast," replied the old miner. "I was out prospectin' when I got on a narrow ledge o' rock. All to onct I discovered a grizzly on the tudder end o' the ledge. We was both sitoated, as the sayin' is, so I couldn't pass the bear an' he couldn't pass me. I had fired my gun an' missed him. When I tried to pass by he riz up an' growled an' when he tried to pass me I swung my gun a-tryin' to knock off his head. An' so we had it fer about an hour, nip an' tuck, an' nobuddy doin' nuthin."

"But you escaped," said Roger. "How did you do it?"

"I didn't do it—your uncle, Maurice Harrison, done it. It was a favor I owed him that I never got paid back," responded Tom Dillon, feelingly. "The bear got mad and all to onct sprung at me. I swung the gun an' he knocked it outer my hand. Then I heerd a report from another ledge above us, and over rolled Mr. Bear, shot through the heart. An' Maurice Harrison done it."

"Good for Uncle Maurice!" cried Roger.

"That shot came just in time," went on the old miner. "If it hadn't—well, I wouldn't be here, lookin' for the Landslide Mine," concluded Tom Dillon.

"I don't know that I want a bear to corner me," said Phil, with a shiver.

"No, we'll leave the bears alone, if they'll leave us alone," returned Dave.

It was a little before nine o'clock when they came in sight of Black Cat Camp, a typical mining community, perched on the side of one of the foothills leading to the mountains. There was one main street, stretched out for the best part of a quarter of a mile. All the buildings were of wood and none of them over two stories in height.

"We'll go to Dick Logan's place," said Mr. Dillon. "That is where Abe Blower used to keep his outfit."

The boys found Logan's place to consist of a general store, with a sort of boarding-house and stables attached. Dick Logan was behind the counter of the store, in his shirtsleeves. He greeted

the old miner with a smile, and shook hands cordially.

"Is Abe Blower around?" demanded Tom Dillon, without preliminaries of any kind.

"He was around, Tom, yesterday," was Dick Logan's answer. "But he left here about the middle of the afternoon."

CHAPTER XVII

ALONG THE MOUNTAIN TRAIL

The boys had expected some such answer as this, so they were not greatly surprised. They were introduced to the storekeeper by Tom Dillon, who then asked if Abe Blower had been alone.

"No, he had two others with him—strangers to me," answered Dick Logan.

"Was one of the strangers an elderly man and the other a young fellow like ourselves?" asked Roger.

"Yes, a tall, thin man. The young feller called him Haskers, I think."

"What name did the young man go by?" asked Dave.

"Morse, I think—or something like that."

"Morr?" put in Phil.

"Yes, I reckon that was it. Then you know 'em?" questioned the storekeeper, with interest.

"Yes, we know them, and we'd like to meet them," answered Roger, dryly.

"Well, I dunno where they went—Abe didn't say an' it wasn't my business to question 'em," returned Dick Logan. "Looked to me like the elderly gent was some kind o' a school sharp."

"He used to be," answered Dave. "And we all were under him."

"Oh, I see. Well, I dunno where they went, 'ceptin' they struck out along the Billy Rodman trail," said the storekeeper.

"Abe took his regular outfit, I reckon," remarked Tom Dillon.

"Sure—he never goes up in the mountains without it, Tom; you know that."

"And the three were alone?"

"I didn't see nobody else."

"Can you put us up for the night, Dick?"

"I can if the young fellers will sleep in one room. I got a little room fer you an' a big one I can put three cots in."

"That will do for us," answered Roger. "We have been out in such places as this before," he added, with a faint smile.

"We ain't got no bathrooms, nor electric elevators," returned Dick Logan, with a chuckle. "But we kin give you clean beds an' blankets, and good grub."

"You don't have to tell me that, Dick," put in Tom Dillon. He turned to the others. "It's all right, boys; just make yourselves at home. We'll get a good night's rest here, and follow Abe and the others fust thing in the mornin'."

The room the boys occupied was on the second story, at the corner of the building. Under the side window was a driveway leading back to the stables attached to the establishment. The apartment had two cots already in it and a third was speedily forthcoming, being put in place by a negro man-of-all-work.

"Well, that long ride to-day certainly made me tired," remarked Phil, as he started to undress. "I could sleep standing up, as the saying goes."

"I'm tired myself," answered Roger.

"Wonder how the folks are making out in the Park," came from Dave. "I hope they have better accommodations than this," and he glanced around at the bare walls and bare floor.

"Oh, Yellowstone Park has some fine hotels," declared Roger. "I read all about them in one of the tourists' guides. They have just erected a new one that they say is a dandy."

"Never mind those hotels now!" cried Dave, as he slipped off one shoe after another. "It's get to bed now and an early start in the morning to see if we can't catch Blower, Haskers, and—Morr!" and he grinned.

"The cheek of Link Merwell using my name!" murmured the senator's son. "I'll—I'll knock him down for that, if I get the chance!" And his eyes blazed for the moment.

Soon the boys were abed and it did not take them long to drop into profound slumber. In the next room was Tom Dillon, also sleeping peacefully.

Dave was the first to awaken and he slid off of his cot to look out of the window, to see what kind of weather it was. The window had been left wide open, to let in the fresh air, and as our hero stuck out his head and glanced down in the alleyway leading to the stables, he uttered an exclamation of surprise.

"What is it?" questioned Roger, rousing up, followed by Phil.

"Those men!" murmured Dave. "Look, fellows!"

The others came to his side and looked out of the window. Just emerging from the alleyway were three men on horseback, all equipped for camping out. The three men were Blugg, Jaley, and Staver.

"Well, I declare! What are those fellows doing here?" cried the senator's son.

"Can they be following us?" questioned Phil.

"I don't know. They came from the stables," answered our hero. "Most likely they had their horses there over night. We can find out when we go down."

"Where are they going?" asked the shipowner's son.

All watched for a minute or two and saw the Blugg crowd pass down the main street of the camp and around a warehouse corner. Then they were lost to view.

Tom Dillon had heard the boys rising and was now up himself and getting dressed. He listened with interest to what they had to relate.

"It's queer that crowd should be here, after what happened in Butte," he said. "I'll ask Dick Logan about 'em, when we go to breakfast."

When questioned, the proprietor of the place stated that Blugg and the others had come in late, after the Morr party were abed. As the place was full they had accepted a room in the building across the street, but had put up their horses in the Logan stable. They had paid in advance, stating they were going to leave at daybreak.

"Let us ask the stable man about this," suggested Dave, in a whisper, to his chums, and as soon as breakfast was over, they went out and hunted up that individual.

"Nobody teched your outfit, I dun see to that," said the colored man. "I slept right by your hosses an' things."

"Did you talk to those men who came in late last night?" asked Dave.

"They did most of the talkin', boss. They wanted to know all about your party—whar you was a-gwine, an' all that. But I didn't give 'em no satisfaction, I didn't. Boss Dillon tole me las' night to keep my trap-doah closed, an' when Boss Dillon sez a thing I dun know he means it,—so I didn't tell 'em nuffin'."

"Good for Mr. Dillon!" cried Roger. "They didn't say what brought them here?"

"No, sah. When they see I didn't have nuffin' to tell they jest closed up, too," and the negro grinned, broadly. He had been liberally tipped by Tom Dillon and, besides, he considered it an honor to serve such a well-known personage and one who had "made his pile," as it is often expressed in that part of our country.

The lads and the old miner were soon ready for the trail, and, bidding Dick Logan farewell, they set off through the main street of Black Cat Camp in the direction of the Rodman trail, called by a few old-timers Smoky Hill trail. As they rode along they kept a sharp lookout for Sol Blugg and his cohorts, but that gang did not show itself.

"But they must be watching us, I am almost certain of that," said Dave. And he was right. They were watching from behind one of the buildings of Black Cat Camp, and as soon as it seemed safe to do so, Sol Blugg ordered those with him to take up the trail.

"Abe Blower came this way, in a hurry, too," said Blugg, to his cronies. "Now Tom Dillon is going the same way, and also in a hurry. That means that something is in the wind. Maybe it's another big discovery of gold, like when they opened up Big Bear Camp, and Hitchley's, an' if it is, we want to be in on the ground floor."

"Right you air, Sol," said Larry Jaley. "And if we can cut Abe out o' anything, so much the better, fer the trick he played us in that land deal."

"The two crowds must be in with each other, otherwise wot was them young fellers as is now with Dillon doin' at Abe's house?"

"We'll find out their game, sooner or later," muttered Sol Blugg. "We'll keep on their trail—but we mustn't let 'em see us, or they'll take to some side-trail and put us in blind."

It was another clear day, but the breeze from the mountains was fresher, so that riding was not so tiresome as it had been on the first day out. The trail was wide, in fact often used by wagons and carts, so that our friends could ride two abreast.

"Not much of a farming country around here," remarked Dave, as he looked at the general barrenness of the aspect. Here and there were clumps of trees and patches of rough grass, and that was all.

"The farming country is further down, in the valleys," answered Tom Dillon. "Some pretty good soil, too. But up this way it's only good for mining. But that's good enough—if you've got a paying mine," and his kindly eyes twinkled.

"You bet!" replied Dave, slangily. "Oh, I do hope we find this mine," he added, in a lower tone. "The Morr family need it."

"I thought the senator was putty well fixed."

"He was, but he isn't now—and there is danger of his losing his office this fall. If he does lose it, and we don't find the mine, I am afraid it is going to go rather hard with the family."

"I see. Well, we'll do our best—nobuddy can do more."

"About how much further is that Landslide district from here?"

"Not over sixty miles as the crows fly. But by the trails it's every bit o' twice that distance. An' some putty stiff travelin', too, in some spots, believe me!" added the old miner.

"Do you think you can stand it?"

"Sure I can. And I like it, too, lad. I git tired o' sittin' around the hotel, doin' nuthin' but readin' the papers and trying to be what they call a gent of leisure. I was brought up on hard work, and outdoor life, and I just have to git back to it onct in a while. If you hadn't come along as you did, most likely I would have dug out for the diggin's alone afore long."

"It's a grand life to lead—this one in the open air," said Dave, filling his lungs with the ozone from the mountains.

"Best in the world, lad. It's the only life fer me, too. If I had to sit in an office all day, or around a hotel where I had to wear one of them biled shirts and a coat cut like a tack puller, I'd die, believe me! I'd rather wear a gray shirt, an' eat off a tin plate, any day!"

By noon they came to a little mountain stream of the freshest and purest of water and there they went into temporary camp. A tiny blaze was kindled, and they made some coffee, which they drank while eating some sandwiches Dick Logan had put up for them.

"See that ridge?" asked Tom Dillon, just before they were ready to start again, and he pointed to an elevation to the northwest. And as all three lads said they did, he continued: "Well, just back o' that is the deestrick where that big landslide took place and buried the Landslide Mine out o' sight."

"Why, that doesn't look to be very far away!" cried Roger.

"No, it don't look so, lad. But you must remember that the air up here is very clear an' you can see for a long distance. You'll find it a long, hard ride afore you reach that ridge, let alone the place behind it where the mine was."

"Are there any settlements on the way?" asked Phil.

"None that we will visit. Shaleyville is in that direction, and Tim Dixon's over yonder, with Big Tree back o' it. But we will give them all the go-by an' stick to this trail," concluded Tom Dillon.

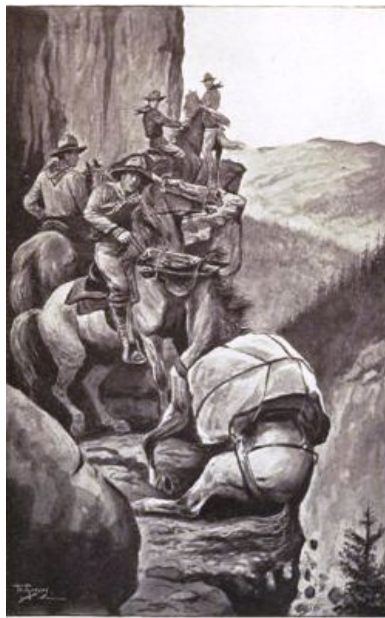
All through the long afternoon they rode forward, up and up, the horses panting for breath as the ascent grew more steep. Many times they had to stop to rest. As they mounted higher, the panorama of hills and mountains grew larger.

"What a beautiful spot!" cried Dave, when they were resting. "What a grand painting this would make!"

"You'll find a painting of it—at the capitol building," replied Tom Dillon. "A celebrated painter painted it and sold it to our State government."

Forward they went again. Phil was now in the rear, looking after the horse that was carrying their camping outfit. Just as those in front had turned a dangerous corner of the rocky trail they heard a sharp cry from the shipowner's son.

"Help! Quick, somebody help me! Stop that horse from falling over the cliff!"



"QUICK, SOMEBODY HELP ME! STOP THAT HORSE FROM FALLING OVER THE CLIFF!"

CHAPTER XVIII

THE STOLEN HORSES

"Oh, look!"

"That horse is going over the cliff!"

"Take care, Phil, or he'll drag you with him!"

Such were some of the cries which arose as the others looked back on the rocky trail and saw the situation.

The horse with the outfit had struck against a projecting rock and been thrown sideways, to where the trail crumbled away in some loose stones close to the edge of the dangerous cliff. The animal and the outfit were in danger of going down to the depths below. Phil, on his own horse, had caught hold of the other horse's halter and was trying to haul him to a safer footing. But the youth and his steed were losing ground instead of gaining it.

"Let go, or you'll go over!" screamed Roger, in increasing alarm. "Let the outfit go, Phil!"

The shipowner's son tried to do as bidden. But now a new difficulty presented itself. In his eagerness to hold the halter Phil had twisted it about his hand and wrist. Now it was caught in the very flesh and almost pulling one arm from its socket, as he tried to make his own horse hold back.

Dave turned swiftly and so did the others, and for the moment there was quite a mix-up on the narrow trail, and all were in danger of losing their footing. Then they crowded to Phil's side, and while Dave caught hold of the halter, Tom Dillon and Roger caught the falling horse with the outfit.

"Turn him around—this way!" yelled the old miner, and, old as he was, he showed a wonderful strength in shoving the falling horse back to a firmer footing. The loose stones went clattering over the cliff in a shower, and more than one horse snorted in fright.

It was a moment of dire peril and it looked as if somebody, or at least one of the animals, must go over into that yawning chasm below. A stone was flung up by a hoof, hitting Dave in the cheek. But he retained his hold on the halter and pulled for all he was worth. Then came another struggle, and at last the horse with the outfit stood on the safe portion of the dangerous trail; and the peril was at an end.

"Oh!" gasped Phil, and for the moment that was all he was able to say.

"Give me that halter," said Tom Dillon. "I'll lead him while we are on this narrow part of the trail."

"Are you hurt, Phil?" asked Dave.

"I—I guess not!" was the panting answer. "But I—I sure did think I was going over there!" And the shipowner's son shuddered.

"Your cheek is cut, Dave!" cried Roger. "How did that happen?"

"Oh, it's only a scratch—made by a flying stone," was the answer. "It doesn't amount to anything."

"I didn't dream that this trail would be so dangerous," went on the senator's son. "If I had known it, I wouldn't have asked you fellows to come along."

"Oh, it's not so bad," returned Phil, hastily. "That horse was awkward—he's the worst of the bunch."

"That's right, an' they had no right to hire me such a hoss," put in Tom Dillon. "When we git back I'll give that feller who did it a piece o' my mind. I tole him I wanted critters used to the mountain trails. The hosses we are ridin' are all right, but this one, he's a sure tenderfoot. He ought to be in the city, behind a truck."

Soon the narrow portion of the rocky trail was left behind and then all of the boys breathed easier.

"That trail back thar is bad enough," was Tom Dillon's comment. "But ye ought to see it in the winter time, with ice an' snow on it! Then it's some travelin', believe me!"

"None for mine!" answered Phil. "I want to see the ground when I travel in a spot like that."

As soon as the trail became better they went forward at the best possible speed, for they wished, if they could, to catch up with Abe Blower and those with him.

"You don't suppose Blower would turn off of this trail?" questioned Roger, of the old miner, as they rode along.

"He couldn't turn off until he reached wot we call Talpoll Crossin'," answered Tom Dillon. "And we won't git thar until some time to-morrow."

They were climbing up a steady grade and so had to stop again and again to rest the horses. The trail wound in and out among the hills, and before the party was the big mountain.

"Stop an' I'll show you something!" cried the old miner, presently, and as they halted he pointed toward the mountain with his hand. "See that knob a stickin' out ag'in the sky?" he questioned.

"The one with the yellowish spot on it?" asked Dave.

"Yes. Well, that is where the big landslide took place an' buried the Landslide Mine an' my claim out o' sight."

All of the boys gazed with interest at the spot which, of course, was many miles away. They saw they would have to work their way over two more hills and through several hollows to get to it. Ahead they could occasionally see the trail, but not a soul was in sight.

"Look!" exclaimed Dave, as he turned to gaze below them along the trail they had been pursuing. "I can see something moving!"

"Maybe cattle," suggested Roger, after a long look.

"No, I think it is a crowd on horseback," answered our hero, after another look.

Roger had with him a small pair of field-glasses, and he had brought them forth to gaze at the mountain where the Landslide Mine had been located. Now he turned them on the distant objects Dave had discovered.

"Horsemen true enough," he said, after a look. "Three of them."

"Oh, say, do you think they can be Sol Blugg and his two cronies?" burst out Phil.

"Maybe," answered Roger. "I can't make them out from this distance."

"Let me take a look," suggested Tom Dillon, and adjusted the glasses to his eyes. "You are right—they are three men on horses. But who they are I don't know. Plenty o' miners travel this trail at one time or another."

They looked at the distant horsemen for several minutes. Then the field-glasses were put away and they continued their journey.

Nightfall found them in a district that, to the boys, was desolation itself. Rocks were on every side, with little patches of the coarsest kind of growth, brushwood, stalk-like grass, and cacti. The air was so pure and thin that it fairly made one's nose tingle to breathe it.

All were tired out—indeed the boys were so stiff from the long ride that they could scarcely climb down from their saddles. But not for the world were they going to let Tom Dillon know this. They had told the old miner that they were used to roughing it and they wanted to "make good" in his eyes.

Some brushwood was gathered and a fire started, and the horses were tethered near by. The old miner knew where there was a spring of drinkable water—something occasionally hard to find in a district full of all sorts of minerals—and soon they had some boiling for coffee. Then their outfit was unstrapped, and they prepared supper and got ready to turn in for the night.

"I wonder if we can't see something of the campfire of Abe Blower, if he is ahead," remarked Dave.

"We might have a look for it," answered Roger.

There was a tall rock just behind their camp, and this the two youths climbed, Phil saying he was too tired to stir. It was harder work than Dave and Roger had anticipated, but, once they had started, they hated to give up. Up and up and still up they went, climbing from one elevation to another by means of the rocks themselves and bits of coarse grass and brushwood.

"There, I reckon we are high enough now!" cried the senator's son, after nearly half an hour's climbing. "Anyway, I am going to stop!" And he began to pant for breath.

The two boys looked around them. The sun had sunk to rest behind the mountain in the west, and the hollows between the hills were deep in the gloom of the oncoming night. Far back on the trail they had come they saw a small fire start up.

"That must be the campfire of those three horsemen," said Dave.

"More than likely," responded his chum. "Do you see anything ahead?"

Both looked, but for a long time could see nothing. Then they caught a faint gleam from a point apparently halfway up the mountain, in the direction where the Landslide Mine was supposed to be located.

"Maybe that's Abe Blower's camp!" cried Dave, who was the first to discover the light.

"I'd like to know if Link Merwell and Job Haskers are really with him," said Roger.

"We ought to be able to catch up to them by to-morrow, so Mr. Dillon said."

"Unless Merwell and Haskers fix it so that they throw us off their trail, Roger. You know Mr. Dillon said they could branch off at Talpoll Crossing. That is where a spur of the railroad cuts in, to reach the mines on the other side of the hills—the railroad I suppose the Landslide Mine would have to use in getting out ore."

The boys watched the distant light for a while longer, and then descended to the camping spot. The others listened with interest to what they had to report.

"We'll be after 'em at sun-up," said Tom Dillon. "An' now all o' yer had better turn in an' get what rest you can."

This was sensible advice, and the three youths lost no time in following it. They turned in around the fire, which was kept burning, so as to keep away any possible prowling beasts. Tom Dillon was the last to retire, he looking to it that all of the horses were tethered.

It was just growing daylight when Dave awoke with a start. Something had aroused him—what he could not tell. He sat bolt upright, and at the same moment the old miner, who was beside him, did the same.

"What's up?" asked Tom Dillon, instinctively feeling for the pistol he carried.

"Our horses!" cried Dave. "They are running back on the trail!"

"Somebody is stealin' 'em!" roared Tom Dillon, and was on his feet on the instant.

By this time the noise had awakened Phil and Roger, and all three boys followed the old miner in arising. In the gray light of the morning they could see that their four horses were moving along the back trail on a gallop. A single man seemed to be in charge of them, on a steed of his own.

"Halt!" yelled Tom Dillon. "Halt, or I'll fire on you!" And he raised his pistol.

At this sharp command the man with the horses turned slightly to look back. He crouched low, and wore a sombrero pulled down well over his face. On the instant he rode to the front of the galloping steeds, thus getting out of range of the old miner's weapon.

"Come on, we must get our hosses!" sang out Tom Dillon, and started forward on the run. Then he let out a shrill whistle, one he knew was used for calling the animal he had been riding.

The effect of the whistle was all that could have been desired. The horse dropped to a walk and then turned back. And as Tom Dillon continued to whistle, the intelligent steed came closer and closer, until the old miner was able to grasp it by the halter.

But all this had taken valuable time, and meanwhile the other horses continued to gallop on, led by the man in front, who was now riding like the wind. Who he was they could not make out, but they strongly suspected Sol Blugg or one of his cronies.

"I'd shoot if them hosses wasn't in the way!" cried Tom Dillon, wrathfully.

"Can't you go after them?" asked Dave and Roger, in a breath.

"I can and I will!" answered the old miner. "Stay right here till I get back!" And with those words he saddled his horse with all speed, and in less than a minute later was flying down the back trail after the stolen steeds and the rascal who was making off with them.

CHAPTER XIX

THE NEWSPAPER CLEW

"Do you think he'll catch that fellow?"

It was Phil who asked the question, as he and Dave and Roger watched the old miner disappear around a bend of the back trail.

"I don't know about that," returned Dave. "But if he gets the horses back it will be something."

"I should say yes!" cried the senator's son. "Why, we won't be able to go on unless we get them back!" he added, his face showing his worry.

"Listen!" exclaimed Roger a minute later. "Somebody is shooting!"

It was true—a shot had sounded out on the morning air. Soon it was followed by another, at a greater distance—showing that pursued and pursuer were drawing farther from the boys.

The boys walked slowly back to the campfire and commenced to stir it up, and then they finished their morning toilet. Dave heaved a deep sigh.

"I must say I don't feel much like eating," he observed.

"Oh, we might as well fix breakfast," came from Phil. "It will help to pass the time. It won't do any good to just sit around."

Fortunately their provisions were at hand, so it was an easy matter to prepare the morning meal. Before eating, however, Roger and Dave climbed the tall rock behind the camp and looked for some sign of Tom Dillon and the man he was pursuing.

"I can't see a thing," announced Roger, after a long look through the field-glasses. "Here, you try," and he handed the glasses to our hero.

For several minutes Dave surveyed the distant landscape in vain. Then he uttered a cry.

"I see them, Roger! There they go!" And he pointed excitedly with his finger.

At a distance they could not calculate they saw Tom Dillon and the rascal he was after, and also the flying horses. They were all bounding along a rocky trail, the would-be horse thief well in advance. Suddenly they saw this individual make a turn and disappear around some rocks. The free horses kept on, with the old miner after them.

"That rascal has gotten away!" announced Dave. "He has given Mr. Dillon the slip."

"Dave, do you think Mr. Dillon will catch our horses?"

"Yes—sooner or later. They are bound to stop running, to feed or to drink, and then he'll round them up. I guess all we can do is to go down and wait for him to get back."

"But those shots! What if he is wounded!"

"I hope he isn't, Roger."

They climbed down to the camp and told Phil about what they had witnessed. Then all ate breakfast slowly, meanwhile discussing the adventure from all possible standpoints.

"It was one of the Blugg crowd, I feel certain of that," said Dave. "Perhaps it was Sol Blugg himself."

Slowly the morning wore away. When the sun came up it was very hot and the youths were glad enough to draw into the shade of the rocks. Just before noon all three climbed the tall rock again, to look not only for Tom Dillon and the horses, but also for Abe Blower and those with him.

But not a soul was in sight, nor did any horses show themselves. At a distance they made out some mule deer and several goats, but that was all.

"Do you think we ought to walk along the back trail?" asked Roger, when they were getting lunch. "Mr. Dillon may need our services."

"I'll go if you want me to, Roger," answered our hero. "But he was a good distance away when we saw him through the glasses."

"Let us wait awhile—until the awful heat of the midday sun is over," suggested Phil. "The sunshine just now is enough to give one a sun-stroke."

It was a little after three o'clock when the three lads prepared to walk along the back trail, on the lookout for the old miner. But just as they started Dave put up his hand.

"Listen!"

All did so, and from a distance heard the clatter of horses' hoofs on the rocky trail. Then came a cheery call.

"It's Mr. Dillon!" cried Roger, and let out a call in return, and the others did likewise.

Soon the old miner appeared around a bend of the trail. He was seated on his own steed and driving the others in front of him. He looked tired out, and the horses looked the same.

"Are you all right, Mr. Dillon?" sang out Dave, as he ran forward to stop the nearest horse.

"All right, boys!" was the answer. "That is, I will be as soon as I've rested a bit. I've had some ride, believe me!"

Roger and Phil helped Dave to secure the free horses and tether them, and our hero held the old miner's steed while he fairly tumbled to the ground. The horse was in a heavy lather, and Mr. Dillon was covered with dust.

"You weren't shot, were you?" questioned the senator's son, anxiously.

"No, although I come putty nigh to it," was the answer, and the old miner pointed to a hole through the brim of the hat he wore. "The skunk fired twict at me!"

"We heard two shots," said Dave. "We were afraid you might be in trouble. If we had had horses we would have followed you."

"I did better nor he did," went on the old miner, with a satisfied ring in his voice. "I plugged him in the arm."

"You did!" exclaimed Phil. "We heard only two shots!"

"I fired later on, after he left the trail. He was just gittin' ready to aim his gun ag'in when I caught him. His arm went down like lead, an' the gun dropped to the ground; so I know I winged him. He didn't shoot no more, only got into the timber quick as he could. Then I rounded up the hosses an' started back."

"Who was it, do you know?" questioned Dave.

"It was Ham Staver. I suppose Sol Blugg and Larry Jaley sent him ahead to steal the hosses. They thought it would be easy, with us asleep."

"It came pretty near being so," answered Dave, gravely.

Tom Dillon was glad enough to rest, and to partake of the hearty meal the boys prepared for him. The horses were cared for, and the boys were pleased to learn that they had not suffered through the wild run along the rocky trail.

"If that Staver shows himself around Butte I'll settle accounts with him," said the old miner, while eating. "But I reckon he'll stay away for a while."

After an hour's rest the old miner announced that he was ready to go forward once more. The sun was now well in the west, and it was not near so hot as it had been in the middle of the day.

"I wish we could catch up to the Blower party by to-night," said Roger, earnestly. "Mr. Dillon, do you think we can do it?"

"We can try, lad. But you must remember, we'll have to favor the hosses a leetle. They have had a mighty hard run on't."

"I know. Well, don't go any further than you deem wise."

For the distance of half a mile the trail was comparatively good. But then they came to an uneven locality, filled with dangerous holes and pitfalls.

"Careful here, boys!" cried Tom Dillon. "We don't want none o' the hosses to break a leg."

He was in the lead, and under his guidance they advanced slowly. At the top of a short rise of ground he came to a halt.

"Here is where part o' that landslide occurred," he announced, pointing with his hand. "I think myself it was somethin' of an earthquake, although the scientific sharps say not. But if it wasn't an earthquake it was mighty queer that it hit this spot and the other at the same time—both bein' miles apart."

"Perhaps the shock of the falling rocks at one place shook the other," suggested Dave.

"Perhaps, lad. It's a mystery—an' I suppose it will remain a mystery. We know some things about Nater, but there's others she keeps putty well hid."

They went down on the other side of the rise, and then commenced to mount an even larger hill—the last but one, so the old miner told the boys. Far in the distance they could make out the railroad tracks, winding along through the mountains. The sun was setting, and the western sky was aflame with varied colors of most gorgeous hues.

"What a beautiful sunset!" murmured Dave.

Soon the gloom of evening commenced to settle about them. All had their eyes ahead, but so far they had seen no trace of the Blower party.

"Wait a minute!" cried Dave, presently. He had seen something white fluttering among the rocks on the side of the trail.

"What do you see?" asked Phil.

"A newspaper."

"Oh, let it go, Dave. We have all the old newspapers we want."

"I want to see how recent it is," was our hero's reply.

He got down, walked to where the paper rested in a crevice, and drew it forth.

"It's a copy of a mining journal," he announced, as he looked the sheet over. "The issue for last week," he added, gazing at the date. "It's full of grease, too,—that's why they threw it away."

"Do you suppose it belonged to Abe Blower?" questioned Roger, coming up.

"It did!" cried Dave. He had turned to the front page of the paper. "See, here is Abe Blower's name and address, stamped on for mailing purposes. He got it through the mail just before he left and took it along to wrap something in."

"Then that proves we are on the right trail!" cried Roger, joyfully. "I wonder how long ago it was when he threw the paper away?"

"I'm not detective enough to tell you that, Roger," answered Dave, with a grin. "But it's something to know we are on the right trail. They might have taken to that cross trail, you know. We'll catch up to them sooner or later."

Once more our friends went forward, this time along the very edge of the new ridge that had shown itself after the great landslide. They had to advance with caution, for loose stones were numerous and so were dangerous holes.

"We can't go much further to-night," announced Tom Dillon; presently. "This trail ain't safe in the dark."

"All right, Mr. Dillon, we'll stop when you say so," returned Roger, with a bit of a sigh. "How much further to where the Landslide Mine was located?"

"Not over two miles, as the crows fly, lad; but four to five miles by the trail."

They went into camp in the very midst of the rocks. Strange as it may seem, there was water there, coming from a tiny spring under a huge boulder. It had a somewhat unpleasant odor, and the horses at first refused it, but the old miner said it was drinkable.

"Only you don't want to live on it all the year around," he added, with a grin. "A doctor onct tole me if you did that you might turn into stone!"

"I know what I am going to do, as soon as it gets dark enough," said Dave to his chums, while they were preparing supper.

"What?" asked the other boys.

"I am going to look for the campfire of that crowd ahead."

"Of course!" cried Roger. "And, Dave, if it isn't too far off, maybe we can walk to it!" he added, quickly.

"So I was thinking."

Eagerly the three boys waited for the darkness of night to fall, in the meanwhile getting supper and tidying up the camp. Then they climbed to the top of the highest rock that was at hand and looked around them.

"I see a fire!" cried Dave, and pointed it out.

"Yes, and it looks to be less than a mile away!" returned Roger.

"Let's walk to it!" put in Phil.

And on this plan the three chums quickly agreed.

CHAPTER XX

THE EXPOSURE

When Tom Dillon heard about the light that had been seen and the determination to walk to it, he wanted to know how far off it was.

"If it's that close we had better all go," he announced, after being told. "If it's Abe Blower's camp it must be in a good spot, for Abe knows this locality as good as I do and maybe better. A mile

isn't so far. We can walk an' lead the hosses, if we have to."

Less than quarter of an hour later found them on the way. The old miner was in front, with Roger beside him, and Dave and Phil bringing up the rear. All were on foot, for they had to pick their way in the darkness, which seemed more intense than it had been on previous nights.

"The sky is overcast," observed Dave, as they trudged along the uncertain, rocky trail. "Looks to me like rain."

"We'll catch it sooner or later," announced Tom Dillon. "And maybe we'll have a big blow in the bargain."

"Then it blows up here?" queried Roger.

"Does it? I should say yes, lad! I've been in such a wind up here one could hardly keep his feet. And the rain comes so thick an' fast it nigh drowns you!"

As they advanced, they kept their eyes on the alert for the distant campfire. Twice they found and lost it, but, as they came around another spur of rocks they beheld it quite plainly and saw several figures moving around it.

"Wait!" called Dave, to the others. "If that is Abe Blower's camp, and Merwell and Haskers are with him, I've got an idea."

"What is that?" asked Roger.

"Why not let Mr. Dillon go ahead alone, and find out what Merwell and Haskers have to say? We can sneak up in the darkness and show ourselves later."

This was considered a good plan, and, after a short discussion, it was adopted. The old miner mounted his horse and rode onward, the three boys coming after him on foot and keeping in the shadow of the rocks to one side of the uneven trail.

The clatter of the horse's hoofs on the rocks soon attracted the attention of those around the distant campfire. The three persons came forward, to see who was coming.

"Why, if it ain't Tom Dillon, of all men!" cried one of the three, and his face, that had shown anxiety, broke into a smile. "How are you, Tom, and what brings you up here?"

"I came to find you, Abe," was the old miner's reply. "They told me down in Butte you were off to have another search for the lost Landslide Mine."

"Saw Kate Carmody, I reckon," went on Abe Blower. "Yes, I'm goin' on another hunt fer the mine—account o' these two gents," and Abe Blower pointed to his companions.

"Who is this man?" asked one of the others, who had come from the campfire.

"This is Tom Dillon, one o' the best old-time miners and prospectors in Montany," answered Abe Blower, with a broad smile. "He used to know yer uncle well," he added.

"Is that so? Then—er—perhaps he can help us to locate the lost mine."

"Mebbe—if he wants to spare the time. Ye see, Tom ain't so poor as I be," explained Abe Blower. "He made his pile an' saved it, he did," he added, admiringly.

"Who are your companions, Abe?" asked Tom Dillon, rather abruptly.

"Oh, sure, excuse me fer not introducin' you," cried the other miner. "This here is Mr. Morr, son o' Senator Morr an' nevvly of Maurice Harrison, an' this is his friend, Prefesser Haskers, o' the colledge Morr ust to go to. Gents, this is Mr. Thomas Dillon, a miner an' prospector, an' one o' the richest an' best men in Butte."

"Ah, glad to know you, sir!" exclaimed Job Haskers, and held out his thin hand. But, somehow, Tom Dillon did not seem to see it and he merely bowed.

"And you are Senator Morr's son, eh?" said the old miner, turning to Link Merwell.

"I am," was the bold answer, but when the old miner looked him squarely in the eyes, Merwell had to turn his gaze away.

"I understood that Maurice Harrison, when he died, willed the Landslide Mine to your family," went on Tom Dillon.

"He did, and I and my friend are here to look for it," answered Link Merwell.

"Think you'll find it?"

"Blower here says he will do what he can to discover it," broke in Job Haskers. "He has a great reputation as a prospector."

"I will surely do my best for Maurice Harrison's nevvly," said Abe Blower. "Maurice Harrison was mighty good to me, an' I ain't the one to forgit that."

"Have you a brother?" asked Tom Dillon, turning again to Merwell.

"A brother? Why—er—no," answered the imposter, and then turned suddenly pale. "Why—er—do

you ask that question?" he faltered.

"I met another young fellow in Butte named Morr."

"I—I don't know him."

"He was with two other young fellows named Porter and Lawrence."

At this unexpected announcement Link Merwell's face grew paler than ever. Job Haskers, too, showed that he was much disturbed.

"Did this—this Morr say where he was from, or where he was going?" asked the former teacher of Oak Hall.

"Oh, the whole crowd was from the East. I reckon they are coming up here," answered Tom Dillon, dryly. "They want to find you, Abe," he added, with a wink at the other miner.

"Me? What fer?"

"They want you to locate this same Landslide Mine for them."

"The same mine? Say, Tom, what are you drivin' at?" demanded Abe Blower, in astonishment.

"What I'm drivin' at is just this, Abe," answered Tom Dillon, and his voice grew suddenly stern. "This ain't Roger Morr at all. The real fellow you ain't met yet. This chap is a fraud!"

"Say—look here——" began Link Merwell.

"Is the—er—the other Morr—er—coming here?" faltered Job Haskers.

"I am not coming—I am here!" cried a voice, and Roger stepped from the shadow of a near-by rock.

The senator's son faced Link Merwell and Job Haskers, and both stared at him as if they were looking at a ghost, and backed away.

"Roger Morr!" faltered Merwell.

"Yes, Link. You didn't expect I'd follow you so soon, did you?" cried Roger. "Now, I've got a nice account to settle with you. I want to know what you did with my suit-case, and I want to know what you mean by impersonating me."

"I—I——" began Merwell, and then stopped, not knowing how to proceed.

"This is—er—very unfortunate," murmured Job Haskers. He would have retired had there been any place to retire to, which there was not.

"Say, are you Roger Morr?" gasped Abe Blower, gazing fixedly at the senator's son.

"I am. And you are Abe Blower?"

"I sure am. But see here——"

"We'll explain everything in a few minutes, Mr. Blower. These fellows are swindlers! They robbed me of my suit-case and then got ahead of me, and that fellow impersonated me," and Roger pointed to Merwell. "We hired Mr. Dillon to bring us to you—or at least he offered to come. He knows that I am the real Roger Morr, and Maurice Harrison was my mother's brother."

"Well, I never! But wot did they think to gain——"

"They wanted to locate the lost mine before I got here, that was their game. What they intended to do later I don't know, but probably Job Haskers was going to cook up some deal whereby our family could be kept out of the property. He is a rascal——"

"See here, Morr, I won't—er—have you—ahem!—talk about me in this——" commenced the former teacher.

"But I will talk about you!" interrupted Roger. "You are a rascal, almost as bad as Merwell here, and you know it."

"Yes, and we know it, don't we, Phil?" cried another voice, and Dave and Phil stepped into view.

"Porter—and Lawrence!" faltered the former teacher of Oak Hall, and he looked almost ready to drop. "I—I——" He did not know how to finish.

"Say, I want to git the straight o' this!" burst out Abe Blower.

"This young man is givin' it to you straight, Abe," replied Tom Dillon, pointing to Roger. "And these are his friends—all true blue to the core. These other fellers are first-class swindlers. They took you in good an' proper."

"If they did, they shall suffer fer it!" roared the other miner. "Do you know, I kinder suspected somethin' was wrong. They didn't act as open as honest folks should. An' they was in an all-fired hurry to git away from Butte and from Black Cat Camp."

"Because they knew we were following them," explained Dave. "Link, I guess you had better

admit that the game is up," he went on, turning to his former schoolmate.

"Is it up?" sneered Link Merwell. "Well, I don't know, Dave Porter. We have as much right to hunt for that lost mine as you have."

"Oh, so that's the game, eh?" burst out Roger.

"You had no right to impersonate Roger," asserted our hero. "He can have you arrested for that."

"Huh, that was—er—only done for—er—fun," faltered Link Merwell. "And as for your old suit-case, it's on check at the Glenrose Hotel in Butte, and there's the check for it," and he drew the brass disc from his pocket and passed it over to the senator's son.

"Why did you take my suit-case?"

"Oh, for fun."

"He took it thinking he was going to get your map!" cried Dave. "Link, what makes you act as you do?" went on our hero, earnestly. "When I helped you on Cave Island you promised that you were going to reform."

"What's the use of reforming?" burst out the other. "Everybody in this world is down on me! I don't dare to show my face wherever I am known! There is a warrant out for my arrest!" And Link Merwell's face showed his bitterness.

While the boys were talking Abe Blower and Tom Dillon had been conversing together. Job Haskers was left in the cold, and he looked much disturbed. Evidently he was thinking how foolish he had been to come to Montana with Merwell.

"So this is the trick yer played on me, consarn ye!" cried Abe Blower, coming from the other miner to Haskers. "I've a good mind to take it out of yer hide!" And he shook his fist in the former teacher's face.

"Don't you touch me—don't you dare!" howled Job Haskers, in new alarm, and he backed away so hastily that he tripped over some of the camp outfit and went flat on his back.

The accident was such a comical one that Dave and his chums laughed outright, and Tom Dillon and Abe Blower grinned broadly. Link Merwell reached down and assisted the former teacher to his feet. Job Haskers's face was sourness itself.

"Stop that! Don't you dare to laugh at me!" he roared. "Don't you dare!"

"We'll laugh as much as we please," answered Dave, boldly.

"I—I guess we had better get out of here," whispered Link Merwell, nervously. "They—they might take it into their heads to harm us."

"Do you think so?" asked Job Haskers. "All right, I—I am ready to go. But how are we to find our way back to the town?" he asked, helplessly.

"We'll have to follow the back trail," answered Link Merwell. Being used to ranch life, this being in the open did not daunt him as it did the former teacher. "Come on, let us get our horses and be off!" the youth added. "It is getting too hot for us here!"

CHAPTER XXI

ON THE BACK TRAIL

"Just you two wait a minute!"

It was Tom Dillon who uttered the words, as he saw Link Merwell and Job Haskers turn to where their horses were tethered.

"You bet they'll wait!" exploded Abe Blower, wrathfully. He stepped forward and seized Merwell by the arm. "What do you mean by playing such a trick as this on me?"

"Le—let go of me!" cried the youth, in fear. "Let go. I—I—didn't I say it was only done in fun?"

"Fun? You won't think it's fun when I git through with you!"

"I—ahem! I think this whole matter can be settled amicably," put in Job Haskers, with an effort. "I am satisfied now that we made a—er—a mistake. But, as Merwell states, it was all done in a—er—a spirit of fun."

"And now you want to sneak off—without even paying me for my trouble!" cried Abe Blower.

"You said you'd come with me for nothing," returned Link Merwell, and his voice had almost a whine in it.

"So I did, thinkin' you was Maurice Harrison's nevvie. If I had known you was an outsider I wouldn't have come at all. I've got my own affairs to 'tend to. But bein' as I did come, you're goin'

to pay me for my time and trouble," went on the miner, sharply.

"Don't you want 'em arrested, Abe?" put in Tom Dillon. "As I understand it, this here Merwell feller is wanted by the police as it is."

"Oh, don't arrest me! Please don't do that!" cried Link Merwell. He turned to Dave and his chums. "Let me go, won't you? I—I didn't do anything. I didn't take a thing out of your suit-case," he added, to Roger.

His manner was so humble and he seemed so full of terror, that the boys could not help feeling sorry for him, even though they realized that he was a criminal and should be in the hands of the law.

"What do you think we ought to do, Dave?" whispered the senator's son, pulling our hero to one side.

"That is up to you, Roger."

"If we make them prisoners what can we do with them? They will only bother us in the search for the lost mine."

"I think I'd make them pay Abe Blower for his trouble and then let them go."

"Yes, but they have got to promise not to bother us in the future," put in Phil, who had followed Dave and Roger to a distance.

"They'll promise that, Phil. But you know what their promises are worth," answered our hero.

A hot war of words followed, Abe Blower and Tom Dillon telling the two rascals just what they thought of their conduct. Link Merwell was badly scared, and the former teacher of Oak Hall looked very much disturbed.

"Well, I'll let you go, if the young gents say so," said Abe Blower, finally. "But you have got to pay me fer my services in bringin' you out here, an' you've got to put up fer them hosses you're to ride, so I'll know they'll git back to town all right."

"We'll return the horses, never fear," said Link Merwell.

"Maybe—but I won't take no chances. You put up the price o' them, an' I'll give yer a written order fer your money, to be paid to you by Hank Davis, when he gits the hosses," said Abe Blower.

More words followed, but the miner was obdurate, and in the end Link Merwell and Job Haskers had to put up nearly all the cash they had with them. Then they were allowed to take the two horses they had ridden and a small portion of the camping outfit—just enough to see them safely back to the nearest town.

"Now remember, Link," said Dave, on parting with the youth, "you have promised to leave us alone in the future. See that you keep that promise."

"If you don't, we'll be down on you like a ton of bricks," added Phil.

"I won't bother you again," said Link Merwell, with downcast eyes. "I—I guess I was a fool to go into this."

Job Haskers said little. But when he looked at our friends it was with an expression as if he wanted to eat them up. He was in a great rage, but he did not dare to show it. In utter silence he and Merwell mounted their steeds and rode out of the camp, on the back trail. Not once did they look behind. Soon the gloom of the night swallowed them up.

"A 'good riddance to bad rubbish,'" quoted Phil. "My, what a fool Link is!"

"And Haskers is just as bad," said Roger.

"Link has the making of a fine fellow in him," said Dave, with a sigh. "But he evidently prefers to be bad rather than good."

"Thet's the way with some fellers," remarked Abe Blower. "I've seen it in minin' camps many times. A feller would slide in, an' he could make money diggin' fer gold. But instead o' doin' it, he would jest fool away his time gamblin' an' drinkin'. It's awful—the way some folks act."

"They won't have any easy time of it, getting back to Butte," said Dave. "Perhaps they'll meet that Sol Blugg crowd on the way."

"Oh, don't say that!" cried Roger. "Why, they might side right in with Blugg!"

"So they might," added Phil. "A case of 'birds of a feather,' you know."

"And so you are the real Roger Morr," said Abe Blower, catching Roger by the shoulder and looking him squarely in the eyes. "Wall, I must say I like yer looks a heap better nor I did the bogus one!" And he chuckled, broadly.

"I am glad you do, Mr. Blower. I——"

"Now, stop right thar, lad, stop right thar! Ef you're goin' to be my friend call me plain Blower, or

Abe."

"As you will, Abe. I'm real glad to meet you, and I am sure we are going to get along first-rate together," said Roger, and then the pair shook hands once more.

"You must tell me all about yourself, and your friends, an' about them two skunks as was wantin' to git in ahead o' you."

"I'll do that gladly," returned the senator's son. And then all in the camp gathered around the fire, to talk the situation over and arrange their plans for the morrow.

In the meantime Link Merwell and Job Haskers rode along the rocky trail leading in the direction of Black Cat Camp. As long as they were within hearing of those left behind neither said a word, but once at a distance Job Haskers fairly exploded.

"Now you see what a plight you have brought us into!" he snarled. "Here we are miles and miles from anywhere, and with hardly a dollar in our pockets! It's a shame! If I had remained in the East, selling mining stock, or something like that, instead of going on this wild-goose chase——"

"I didn't know they were so close behind us," whined Link Merwell. "I thought we would get off the regular trail before they came to this locality."

"We were off the trail—it's the campfire told them where," went on the former teacher. "Now, what are we going to do when we get back to town, tell me that?"

"We'll get our money for the horses first," replied Link Merwell. He grated his teeth. "I wish I could get back at them!" he cried.

"So do I, Merwell. But it can't be done—at least, I am not coming back to this forlorn district, once I get to town again. And it looks dangerous to me, with all these loose rocks ready to slide down into the valley," added Job Haskers.

Full of bitterness, and trying to plan out what to do later on, the pair continued on the back trail, moving slowly and with caution. At last, completely tired out, they reached the spot where Dave and his chums had stopped for supper. The campfire still smoldered among some rocks, for in such a barren district it was not necessary to be careful for fear of a conflagration.

"We'll rest here," declared Job Haskers, sliding from his saddle. He was not used to riding and was so sore and stiff he could hardly move.

"All right," responded Merwell, and alighted also. They found the spring and drank eagerly of the somewhat bitter water. Then they stirred up the fire and proceeded to make themselves as much at home as possible.

But human nature can stand only so much, and soon, instead of talking over their affairs, each sought forgetfulness in slumber. Exhausted, they slept soundly until the sun came up. Then, eating a frugal breakfast—for their stores were scanty—they continued on the way in the direction of Black Cat Camp.

It was less than two hours later, when, coming around a turn in the trail, they came in sight of another camp. They found three men seated in the shadow of some rocks, for the day was becoming warm, all talking earnestly. One man had his right arm in a sling.

"I wonder who they are?" remarked Link Merwell, as he and his companion came to a halt.

"Wait, don't let them see us until you are sure they will be friendly," cautioned Job Haskers. "For all you know they may be some of those dreaded road-agents one reads about in the newspapers. We don't want to be robbed, or have our horses stolen."

"They certainly look like a hard crowd," whispered Merwell. "But I don't think you'll find road-agents here,—not enough folks to rob."

The men were talking earnestly and had not noticed the approach of the pair. As quietly as possible, Merwell and Haskers drew to one side and dismounted. Then the boy who had spent so much time on his father's ranch, motioned for the former teacher of Oak Hall to follow him.

"We'll crawl up and listen to a little of their talk," he whispered. "That will soon tell us if we can trust them. If we can't, we'll go around them—although I don't see any other trail among the rocks."

Job Haskers nodded, and slowly and cautiously the pair crawled over the rocks until they gained a position close to the three men. Then they settled back, to listen to whatever might be said.

Inside of half an hour Link Merwell and Job Haskers gained all the information they desired. They learned that the three men were Sol Blugg and his cohorts. The wounded man was Staver, and he had been shot through the hand by Tom Dillon. He was very angry and willing to do almost anything to square accounts. The men were sure that the Dillon party and the Blower party were on the trail of a new find of gold and wanted to get in "on the ground floor," as they expressed it.

"They can't do nuthin' to me about tryin' to git the hosses," said Staver. "It's only Dillon's word against mine—an' you all know I got shot in the hand by accident," and he winked suggestively.

"Sure, I done that myself," said Blugg, and laughed. "Nobody took their hosses—so far as we

know."

"I guess the new strike o' gold must be near the old Landslide Mine," said Larry Jaley. "Maybe it's the old mine itself."

"We'll soon know, if we watch 'em close enough," returned Sol Blugg. And then they continued to talk, while Staver dressed his wounded hand, which, fortunately for him, was not very badly hurt.

Link Merwell caught Job Haskers by the arm and pulled him back.

"I've got an idea!" he whispered, his eyes brightening with sudden expectation. "Why can't we join these men and go after the Morr crowd with them? It will give us a chance to get back at those fellows."

"No, I've had enough of this business," replied the former teacher of Oak Hall. "I am going back to town as fast as I can, and then to the East."

"Yes, but——" began Link, when he stopped short. Haskers's foot had shoved a round stone and now this rattled over the rocks, creating considerable noise.

"Who's that!" roared Sol Blugg, and leaped to his feet, drawing his pistol as he did so. "Ho, look there! Hands up, or I'll fire!" he yelled, as he discovered those who had been in hiding.

CHAPTER XXII

DAVE AND THE MOUNTAIN LION

"Don't fire, I beg of you! We—we are friends! Don't fire! Please put down that pistol, do!"

It was Job Haskers who called out in this fashion, as he raised his hands high in the air. He was seized with a chill, and shook from head to foot.

Link Merwell was also agitated, and for the instant tried to back away. Perhaps, now that Sol Blugg had spoken so harshly, the youth realized that he was not such a kind-hearted fellow as Abe Blower had proved to be.

"Come out here, where we can see you!" cried Blugg. "Larry, got yer pistol?"

"I sure have," responded Larry Jaley, with a wicked grin.

"There is no need to do any shooting," said Link Merwell.

"You were spyin' on us," growled Staver.

"Who are you? Come here and give an account o' yourselves," ordered Sol Blugg.

There was no help for it now, and, rather awkwardly, with their hands still upraised, Job Haskers and Link Merwell stumbled over the rocks to where the three men had been resting and talking.

"Humph, a tenderfoot!" muttered the leader of the trio, as he inspected the former teacher of Oak Hall. "I don't reckon he's goin' to do us any harm." He turned to Merwell. "Who are you, sonny?"

Link told him and also mentioned Haskers's name. "I was just coming forward to introduce myself," he added.

"How kind," sneered Larry Jaley, with a mock bow.

"I was. We stepped behind the rocks to find out what sort of men you were. And I guess you are just our kind," added Merwell, with a sickly grin.

"How so?" demanded Sol Blugg, sharply. "No game, now."

"I'll give it to you straight," answered Link Merwell. "Can I put down my hands? It's not comfortable to talk with them up in the air."

"All right,—and fire away," answered the leader of the men.

"We overheard what you said about the Abe Blower party and the Tom Dillon party," pursued Merwell. "We were with Abe Blower, but the other crowd came up and made it hot for us, and we got out. You said something about their being here to locate gold. So they are, and now that we are on the outs with those other people, if you say the word, we'll go in with you. Isn't that right, Haskers?" asked Link, coolly.

"I—I presume so," answered the former teacher, nervously. He had dropped his hands, but Sol Blugg still had his weapon handy, and the sight of it was far from comforting.

"Had a row, did ye?" asked Blugg, curiously.

"Yes. You see, Blower wanted to run things to suit himself and we—er—we didn't see things quite that way. Then Dillon came up with his crowd, and they made matters worse than ever. We had

some information that we didn't want the others to have, so we got out," went on Link Merwell, glibly. He was now recovering from his fright.

"Got information, have ye?" cried Larry Jaley. "About wot fer instance?"

"About what those fellows are after," answered Merwell. "Isn't that so?" he asked, of Haskers.

"It is," answered the former teacher.

"Is it another gold strike?" burst out Sol Blugg, eagerly.

"Not exactly a strike," answered Merwell. "All of us came out to relocate the lost Landslide Mine."

"What! That mine!" yelled Staver, and the tone of his voice showed his deep disgust. "Nuthin' to it—nuthin' at all. If you're arfter that mine ye might as well go right back home. It's buried deep an' fer good."

"Let us hear what they have to tell," said Sol Blugg. "They may have news worth listenin' to, Ham."

"I ain't goin' to waste no time lookin' fer that lost mine," growled the rascal who had been shot. "I'm goin' back to town an' let a doctor look at this hand o' mine."

"And I will go with you!" put in Job Haskers, eagerly. "I have had enough of the mountains! The others can locate that lost mine if they wish."

"See here, you fellers sit down an' we'll talk this thing over," said Sol Blugg. "If you've got Blower an' Dillon interested in lookin' fer the lost mine there must be somethin' in it wuth knowin'. Might be as you've got a new lead, or somethin'."

"I'll tell you what I know," answered Link Merwell.

He and Haskers, after bringing in their horses, sat down, and a talk lasting the best part of an hour followed. The men from Butte asked many questions, and wanted to know about the map and papers Roger was carrying. Blugg and Jaley were evidently much impressed.

"You are right about one thing, Merwell," he said. "That mine is now teetotally lost—the claim was shifted by the landslide. If we could relocate the mine I think we could make our claim to it good at the land office."

"Let us try it!" cried Merwell, eagerly. "We have as much chance to do it as the Morr crowd."

"But he has that map, and the directions."

"We overheard all their talk, so I know as much as Roger Morr does. As for Blower and Dillon, they don't know this district any better than you men do, do they?"

"Not much better," answered Larry Jaley. "We've been here a good many years." He turned to Staver. "What do you say, now?"

"Wall, wot this young feller says puts a different look on the situation," replied the man who had been shot. "I'd like to have an interest in that mine myself—thet or the one Tom Dillon onct said he had near it. An' as Sol says, if we relocated the claim, maybe we could hold it at the land office—anyway, we could claim a fat slice o' the wuth o' it."

"We'd claim it all!" cried Merwell.

"So we would!" came from Sol Blugg. "Say, sonny, you're the right kind, I reckon, an' we'll call ourselves friends," he added, and put out his hand to Link.

"Then we are—ahem!—not going back to town?" queried Job Haskers, in disappointed tones.

"No, we'll watch those other fellers an' try to locate the lost mine," answered Sol Blugg; and this was finally agreed to, after a discussion lasting another half-hour. Job Haskers was plainly disappointed, and his face showed it, and Link Merwell had much difficulty in cheering up the former teacher.

"We came out to locate that gold mine and we'll do it," said Merwell. "And I want you to be on hand, when the time comes, to attend to the legal end of it, so that we get our share. Of course, as I am wanted by the police, I can't appear, but you can, and you can, secretly, represent me."

"All provided the lost mine is found," responded Job Haskers. He had plainly lost heart in the undertaking.

"Oh, we are bound to locate it—sooner or later," said Link Merwell, enthusiastically.

While this plotting was going on, Roger and those with him were picking their way with care over the loose stones that covered the ridge of rocks where the great landslide had taken place. Here traveling was exceedingly dangerous and often they had to proceed on foot, for fear of going down into some hollow. None of the footing seemed to be safe, and more than once Tom Dillon shook his head doubtfully.

"This land ain't got settled yet," he said to Abe Blower. "I shouldn't be surprised if there was another landslide before long."

"Mebbe you're right, Tom," was Blower's reply. "But if it's to come, I hope it comes arter we're away."

"I was thinkin' that maybe we had better go over to the second ridge. It might be safer."

"I was thinkin' that myself."

"Then we'll git over as soon as we hit a good crossin-over place," replied Tom Dillon.

As they were now close to the spot where the Landslide Mine was supposed to have been located, Roger became very eager to do some real searching for the mine. And Dave and Phil were equally anxious to aid their chum.

Coming to something of a plateau of rocks, the party spread out, searching for certain landmarks which Abe Blower had mentioned. This search was by no means easy, for some of the loose rocks were very large in size—one being as big as a house—and it was difficult to find one's way along among them.

Dave was riding along slowly, letting his horse find the best footing possible, when he came to a narrow defile. The rocks were on both sides, and most of them sticking up from five to ten feet above his head.

"It wouldn't be any fun if some of those loose rocks came down on a fellow's head, or on his horse," mused our hero, as he moved along. "I wonder where this way leads to?"

At a distance he could hear the others talking, so he knew they were not far off. They, too, were now among the big rocks, and each hidden from the others. Then the talking gradually ceased, giving way to an occasional call or whistle.

"Oh, if only I could just stumble into the entrance to that mine!" thought Dave. "What a fine thing it would be for Roger and his family! I know they need the money!"

He kept his eyes on the alert, but none of the signs for which he was searching appeared, nor did anything that looked like a mine entrance show itself.

It was growing towards sunset when Dave, who had just met Phil and separated from him, came to another rocky defile, this time leading to something of a hollow. Here the air was damp and cool and our hero paused for a moment, for he felt tired and hot after the hard riding of the day.

"Wonder where we will camp for to-night," he mused, as he gazed around him. "I hope we find some nicer spot than this. This looks so lonely and spookish. Well, I suppose I've got to go on, or they'll get ahead of me, and it would be no fun to get lost. A fellow——"

Dave came to a stop in his musings and also drew up his horse. He had taken but a few steps farther, and now saw, to one side of the rocky defile, a small opening, leading into a sort of hill.

"Looks as if it might be a kind of cave," he told himself. "I guess I'd better dismount and take a look inside. It might be the entrance to the lost mine!"

Suiting the action to the word, Dave leaped from his horse, and letting the steed stand, approached the cave. The entrance was comparatively small and he had to stoop down to peer inside.

As he did this there came a sudden ominous growl from the interior of the cave. It was the growl of a wild beast and caused the youth to leap back in alarm. Then a slinking body came into view and a full-sized mountain lion showed himself!

Dave ran toward his horse. But as the mountain lion gave another growl, the horse snorted and plunged, in sudden fright. Then the steed took to his heels and went clattering along the rocky defile.

"Stop!" yelled the youth. "Stop!" And then he set up a call for assistance.

At the sound of his voice, the mountain lion paused, just outside the entrance of the cave. Evidently he did not wish to become trapped in such narrow quarters. He eyed Dave with glaring eyeballs, and showed his gleaming teeth. His tail began to switch from side to side, and he crouched low, as if contemplating a spring at the boy.

CHAPTER XXIII

IN THE MOUNTAIN CAVE

Dave had been in perilous situations before, and had learned the important lesson that if he lost his wits all would be lost. The mountain lion was large and powerful and evidently in full fighting humor.

The youth was armed, carrying a pistol by Tom Dillon's orders. Now, as he backed against the nearest rock, he drew the weapon and pointed it at the beast.

The mountain lion crouched still lower and the tail of the creature moved from side to side with greater swiftness. Dave felt that in another second or two the beast would make a leap for him.

In the semi-darkness of the rocky defile he could see the lion but indistinctly. But the two eyes were glaring at him and on one of these he centered his aim as best he could.

As he pulled the trigger of the pistol the mountain lion jumped at him. Crack! went the weapon, echoing loudly in that confined space. The bullet missed the beast's head and buried itself in the shoulder. As Dave fired he leaped to one side.

It was well that our hero made that move, otherwise the mountain lion must have come down directly on top of him. As it was the beast fell at his side, snarling and snapping fiercely, and turning in an effort to ascertain what that thing was which was burning him in the shoulder.

Crack! the pistol sounded out again, and this time the mountain lion was hit in the neck. Over and over he rolled, but got quickly to his feet, and, wounded as he was, prepared for another spring at our hero.

Again Dave fired, but this time his aim was not so true, and the bullet, grazing the lion's tail, struck a rock with a sharp click. Then the savage creature hurled himself straight for Dave's breast.

Bang! bang! It was the double report from a huge, old-fashioned horse-pistol that Tom Dillon carried. The old miner had come clattering to the spot on horseback and with a single glance had taken in the situation. The leap of the mountain lion was stayed, and with a final snarl the beast rolled over and over, disappearing of a sudden into the opening of the cave Dave had discovered.

"Are you hurt, lad?" asked the old miner, after he had waited anxiously for several seconds for the mountain lion to reappear.

"Not in the—the least," was our hero's panting answer. "But it—it was a close call!" and he shuddered. "Do you think he's dead?"

"I shouldn't wonder. You hit him, didn't you?"

"Yes, twice. But they couldn't have been very good shots, or he wouldn't have come for me again."

"Mountain lions is mighty tough, lad. I've seen one with six bullets in him still show fight. Load up, as quick as you can. His mate may be around."

This advice was, however, unnecessary for Dave was already recharging the empty chambers of the pistol. From his Uncle Dunston he had learned years before the advisability of keeping one's weapon ready for use at all times.

The sound of the shots had called the others of the party to the scene, and numerous were the questions asked.

"Wow! a mountain lion!" cried Phil. "And did you kill him, Dave?"

"I don't know whether he is dead. Mr. Dillon and I both hit him, and he flopped around here until he slid down into that hole yonder."

"Maybe he isn't dead yet," suggested Roger.

"Even so, being badly wounded, he'll stick to his shelter," said Abe Blower. "Say," he went on, "thet looks like a putty good sized cave!"

"Just what I was thinking," returned Dave. "I was going to have a look inside, when that mountain lion growled and sprang out at me."

"We'll light some torches, and take a look at the place," suggested old Tom Dillon.

"Oh, supposing it's an entrance to that lost mine!" cried Phil.

"It would be great!" added the senator's son, enthusiastically.

"I hardly think it could be thet," put in Abe Blower. "But if the cave is long enough, it might lead to one o' the shafts as was sunk fer the mine; eh, Tom?"

"That's true," responded the old miner.

"I've got my electric torch with me," said Roger, bringing that useful article from his pocket. "We can use that in the cave."

"The light wouldn't be strong enough, an' steady enough," answered Abe Blower. "We'll have to have regular torches, and plenty of 'em, too. Caves like thet are often full o' holes, an' ye might step into one an' fall down to Chiny, or somewhere else," and he smiled, grimly.

The old miners had picked up some sticks for torches on the way, thinking they might come in useful for firewood if for nothing else, and several of these were now lit and swung into a lively blaze.

"No use of all of us goin' in there," said Abe Blower.

"No, somebody has got to stay here an' watch the hosses," answered Tom Dillon.

A brief discussion followed, and it was agreed that Abe Blower and Roger and Dave should go down into the opening, leaving Tom Dillon and Phil to guard the animals and the camping outfit. Possibly the shipowner's son was disappointed by this arrangement, but if so he did not show it.

"It might not take more'n a few minutes to look into the cave," said Abe Blower. "An' then ag'in, it might take some hours. But, no matter how big the hole is, we won't be gone more'n two hours, Tom;" and so it was decided.

As they entered the cave—for such it really proved to be—they held their torches over their heads and looked anxiously for the mountain lion.

"I don't see anything of his majesty," said Roger, in almost a whisper, for the strange adventure had set his nerves on an edge.

"Oh, I suppose he had life enough left to crawl quite a distance," answered Dave.

The cave was irregular in shape, forming something of an underground split in the rocks. The flooring led steadily downward, with here and there an opening of unknown depth.

"A good place to prospect," said Abe Blower, as he flashed his torch over the rocky walls.

"Do you imagine there is gold in those rocks?" asked Dave.

"Might be, lad, an' silver, too. But there might not be enough to make it pay to git it out."

"I see the mountain lion!" cried Roger, a minute later. "There he is, in yonder corner, in his den. And look, it's his mate!"

All gazed and not far distant beheld a scene that touched their hearts. On the rocks lay the dead lion and over him stood his mate, licking his face with her rough tongue.

"Look out!" cried Abe Blower, and drew his horse-pistol—a companion weapon to that carried by Tom Dillon. "She'll come fer us, sure!"

The old miner was right. Swiftly the lioness turned, and set up a savage roar that echoed and reechoed throughout the cavern. Then, in spite of the torches—for all savage beasts are afraid of fire—she prepared to fight those she felt had slain the one she loved.

It was Abe Blower who fired first, and scarcely had the sound of the shot died away when Roger and Dave pulled trigger. Over and over whirled the lioness, and then of a sudden struck one of the wide cracks in the flooring of the cave and disappeared from view. They heard the body strike on some rocks far below; and then all became silent.

"Oh, wasn't that awful!" gasped Roger, and felt of his forehead, where the cold perspiration had gathered.

"I—I kind of hated to do it," answered Dave. "She was mourning over her mate!"

"Shall we send the other body down, too?" went on the senator's son.

"Might as well," was the quick answer, and soon the other lion was dragged to the opening and dropped down. Abe Blower looked on at the work and smiled grimly.

"I suppose ye are sorry for the lioness, but I ain't," he said. "They are wicked critters, I can tell ye, an' they do a whole lot o' damage."

"I suppose they live according to their nature," replied Dave, softly. In his mind's eye he could still see the tawny lioness licking the face of her dead mate.

On they went again. The cave was narrow here but presently broadened out. The roof was, for the most part, less than ten feet high, so the boys felt just as if they were "walking between big pie crusts," as Roger quaintly expressed it. The cave seemed to be dry, although when they stopped once more to look around, they heard the distant gurgle of a stream of water.

"Wall, I can't see as it looks anythin' like a mine," announced Abe Blower, presently. "Nothin' like a shaft around here."

"I wonder how long the cave is?" came from Dave. "It must end somewhere."

"Say, wouldn't this make a good place to camp out in?" asked Roger, of the old miner.

"Not much!" was the quick answer.

"Why not? It would be cool in the daytime and warm at night, with a little campfire."

"Maybe, lad. But wot if some o' these rocks should shift? They'd squash ye as flat as a flapjack!"

"I didn't think of that."

"I don't believe it is very safe in here," said Dave. "This cave must have been formed by that landslide, and, if so, perhaps the dirt and rocks haven't finished settling yet. I don't want any rocks to come down on my head!"

"Nor on any of us!" added the senator's son.

"I've got an idee thet we are a-comin' to another openin'," remarked Abe Blower, a few minutes later, after they had made a sharp turn to the right.

"Why so?" asked Roger.

"I kin feel some fresh air from somewhere."

"I feel it too," returned Dave. "Doesn't it come from overhead?"

"Mebbe, lad; although I thought it was ahead."

"Here is that stream of water!" cried Roger, as they made another turn. "But we can't get at it," he added, somewhat disappointedly.

"Why?"

"It's down below the split in the rocks. Look!"

He held up his torch so they could look down into something of a sharp-edged basin of rocks. A dozen feet below they could see the water pouring from one hole in the rocks and disappearing farther on.

Nearly an hour had been spent in walking and crawling around the big cave. They had had several narrow escapes from pitfalls and were moving with caution.

"Maybe we had better go back," suggested Roger.

"I was thinkin' thet myself," answered Abe Blower. "Nothin' much in here, so far as I kin see. We might come back later an' have another look—if we don't discover thet lost mine elsewhere," he added.

"You are sure this is the right district?" asked Dave.

"Oh, yes, the lost Landslide Mine can't be very far away," was the old miner's reply.

They turned back, heading, as they thought, for the opening by which they had entered. On and on they walked, occasionally slipping and sliding where the rocks sloped. Then they came to a spot where there was a wide crevice to cross.

"My gracious, did we jump over that when we came this way?" queried the senator's son, as all gazed at the wide opening, which was of unknown depth.

"We certainly did not!" declared Abe Blower.

"Then we have come the wrong way!" put in Dave, quickly.

"It sure looks like it, lad."

"If that's the case, we'll have to go back!" came from Roger. He looked around them and his face paled a trifle. "Oh, do you think we are lost?"

"If we are not, we are next door to it," was Abe Blower's serious answer.

CHAPTER XXIV

SEARCHING FOR THE LANDSLIDE MINE

Lost underground!

It was a terrible condition of affairs to contemplate, and for an instant Dave's heart almost stopped beating and something like a chill swept down his backbone. What if they should be unable to find their way out of the rocky cave?

"We'll have to go back," said Abe Blower, in a low voice, after a pause, in which the three of the party had gazed around at the walls of the cavern and at each other. "An' we don't want to lose no time nuther," added the old miner.

"No, for the others will be wondering what has become of us," put in Roger.

"It ain't thet so much, lad, it's the torches—they won't last forever."

All gazed at the lights and saw that the old miner was right. The first ones they had lit had burnt out and the remaining lot were more than half consumed.

Without further words they turned around, in an endeavor to retrace their steps to the point where they had made a false turn. Abe Blower led the way and the boys followed, all keeping their eyes wide open, to make certain that nothing of importance might escape them.

On and on they went, seeing one spot after another that looked familiar. They even passed the spot where Dave had thrown away the end of his first torch. The bit of wood was still smoking.

"Here's the split in the cave, I think," said the old miner, at last.

They had reached a spot where the cavern widened out into a large, circular opening. From this point could be seen several other openings. Evidently they had taken the wrong passageway.

"But which is the right one?" questioned Roger. "They all look alike to me."

"Look putty much alike to me, too," returned Abe Blower. "If only I had thought to put down a few chalk marks!" he sighed.

Dave said nothing but went around to the various openings, examining all with care by the light of his torch.

"I believe this is the one we came in by," he announced, a few minutes later.

"What makes you think so?" asked his chum.

"Do you see that curiously-shaped rock over there? Well, I remember seeing that as we came along—it reminded me of a giant's face. Now, you can't see that rock that way only from here."

"Perhaps you are right, Dave. I must confess I am all mixed up," and Roger sighed.

"We can try it for a little distance," said Abe Blower. "Then, if we won't see anything we remember seem' before, we can come back to this place."

"But our torches——" began the senator's son.

"We'll use one at a time—that will make 'em last," said Dave.

This was considered a good suggestion, and all but one of the flaming lights were extinguished. Then they walked down the passageway as quickly as safety permitted.

"I—I don't see anything that looks like what I saw before," said Roger, after a bit. "The rocks look all alike to me."

"An' to me," returned the old miner, and there was something of hopelessness in his tones.

But they kept on. Dave had the torch and was ahead, with the others close at his heels. The single torch gave but an uncertain light and cast grotesque shadows on all sides.

"Look!" cried our hero, a little later.

He pointed to a series of small stones resting on the floor of the cavern. They were somewhat in the form of a circle, with a large stone in the center.

"Oh, I remember those stones!" cried Roger, joyfully.

"So do I!" put in Abe Blower. "I reckon as how we are in the right passageway now, lads!" he continued, in a more hopeful tone.

"I am sure we are!" came from our hero. "But we have a pretty good distance to go yet."

"Yes, an' be careful thet ye don't go down in none o' them pesky holes," cautioned the old miner.

Quarter of an hour later they reached the spot where they had shot the lioness. Looking ahead, they saw a torch waving in the air.

"Hullo! hullo!" came in the voice of Phil. "Where are you?"

"Here we are!" answered Dave and Roger.

"You've been a long time in here," went on the shipowner's son.

"We got lost," announced Roger.

"And we shot the mate of that mountain lion," added Dave.

They soon reached Phil, and then the whole party quickly made their way out of the cave. Those who had been left outside listened with interest to what Dave and the others had to relate.

"Well, that sure must be some cave!" exclaimed Tom Dillon. "An' as Abe says, we must come back and examine it more closely some time. There may be a lot of gold an' silver in it, an' maybe other metals."

"Perhaps radium!" cried Phil. "Say, wouldn't it be great to find a radium mine!"

"I don't think ye'll find any o' thet new-fangled stuff here," answered Tom Dillon. "An' anyway, gold an' silver is good enough for me," and he smiled broadly.

Nightfall found the party still among the loose rocks that overspread the mountainside where the great landslide had taken place. Looking at the forsaken and desolate region, the boys could well understand why the search for the lost mine had been given up. There was nothing to be seen that looked in the least promising. Rocks and dirt rested on all sides, and that was all.

"We looked over the rocks and the dirt putty well, too," explained Tom Dillon. "But there wasn't nary a sight o' gold; eh, Abe?"

"Not enough fer to buy a plug o' tobaccer with," answered the other miner.

As one spot was no better than another apparently, they did not spend much time in looking for a place to camp. In one place was a little rough brush and here the horses were tethered. Then a tiny fire was kindled in a hollow of the rocks, and over this they prepared their supper,—a rather slim affair, considering that every one was tremendously hungry.

"Not a seven-course dinner," said Phil, with a sickly grin.

"Never mind," returned Dave, cheerfully. "Just wait till after we have found that lost mine and get into Yellowstone Park. I'm sure the hotels there serve the best of meals."

"O dear! now I am here, it doesn't look so easy—I mean to locate that mine," sighed Roger.

"What, you're not going to give up so soon, are you, lad!" cried Tom Dillon.

"Why, we ain't begun no search yit," added Abe Blower. "Time to git kind o' tired arfter ye have been here a week or two an' nuthin' doin'."

To this none of the boys replied. But they could not help but think what a dreary time it would be, searching among those rocks and that loose dirt day after day, if the lost mine were not brought to light.

The day's exertions had tired all hands, and they slept soundly throughout the night, with nothing coming to disturb them. When the boys got up they found Abe Blower already at the campfire, preparing a breakfast of his favorite flapjacks and bacon. He fried his big flapjacks one at a time in a pan, and it was simply wonderful to the boys how he would throw a cake in the air and catch it in the pan bottom side up.

"It's the knack on't," said Tom Dillon, as he saw the lads watching the feat performed. "I know some old miners kin keep two pans a-goin' that way, and never miss a cake."

"I'd like to try it," said Phil.

"Not now—we ain't got no batter to waste," replied Abe Blower, with a chuckle.

The morning meal at an end, the hunt for traces of the lost Landslide Mine commenced in earnest. Dave and his chums had come dressed for the work, and the whole party were provided with picks, shovels, crowbars, axes, and a couple of gold-pans.

The whole of that day was spent on the mountainside, the various members of the party separating from time to time and then coming together, to relate their various experiences. The old miners had told the boys how to search and what landmarks to look for, so that they did not seek altogether blindly.

It was hard, hot work, for the sun poured down all the long day. And added to that, water was scarce, for the nearest spring was well down the mountainside, and even this had a bitter taste which rendered it far from palatable.

"Well, nothing doing so far," said Roger, as they came together in the evening.

"Never mind, we may have better luck to-morrow," returned Dave, as cheerfully as he could.

Several days went by, including Sunday, and still they found nothing that looked like a trace of the lost Landslide Mine. They had covered a tract of rocks and dirt several hundred feet in width and all of half a mile long. The only spot they had avoided was one where some loose rocks looked to be positively dangerous.

"We might tackle that, but we'd be taking a big risk," said Dave.

"Right you are," said Phil. "If those rocks tumbled on us, it would be good-by to this world!"

"But the entrance to the lost mine may be under those very rocks!" sighed Roger. "And if so, just see what we'd miss by not searching there."

"I've got an idee fer tacklin' thet place," said Abe Blower. "It will be hard work, but putty safe—if we are careful."

"You mean to get above the rocks and roll 'em down the mountainside, one after another?" questioned Tom Dillon.

"Exactly, Tom. We could do it with the wust o' the rocks that are loose—an' the rest wouldn't matter so much."

"But we'd have to take care that we didn't roll the rocks on somebody's head," remarked Dave.

"To be sure."

The task of getting at the dangerous rocks was begun the next day. Stone after stone was sent crashing down the mountainside, into a desolate waste below. It was hard work, and the boys were exhausted by the time night fell around them. They had found a number of openings under the rocks, but none of these had proved to be the entrance to the lost mine.

"And yet, somehow, I'm almost certain this is the spot where the mine was located," said Abe Blower, after another look around. "The scenery yonder looks jest like it."

"So it does," answered Tom Dillon. "I feel that the Landslide Mine was just about here, an' my

claim was over there," and he pointed to some rocks in the distance.

Twice during the time that they were sending the big stones down the mountainside they had caught sight of another party among the rocks, once on horseback and again on foot. But the party had been too far away for any one to be recognized, even with the field-glass.

"Maybe it's the Sol Blugg crowd," said Dave.

"Yes, and maybe Merwell and Haskers are with them," added Phil.

The wind had begun to blow strongly and the sun went down in a heavy mass of angry-looking clouds.

"Up against a storm, I reckon," said Tom Dillon, after a careful survey of the sky.

"Yes, an' when she comes like as not she'll be a rip-snorter," returned Abe Blower.

Supper was hurried, because of the wind and the heavy clouds, and then the whole party withdrew to the shelter of some rocks, taking their horses with them.

"Do you think it will be very bad?" asked Dave, of old Tom Dillon.

"Perhaps, lad; some storms up here on the mountain are about as bad as they make 'em," was the grave reply.

CHAPTER XXV

CAUGHT IN A STORM

"Say, but this is sure going to be a corker!"

Dave shouted out the words—to make himself heard above the whistling of the wind as it blew across the little plateau on the mountainside, where the party had gone into camp.

It was half an hour later, and during that time the oncoming storm had approached steadily. At first the wind had come in fitful gusts, bending the scant brushwood among the rocks first in one direction and then another. This had been followed by a sudden dash of rain, and for a few minutes they had hoped that the worst of the downpour would pass to the south of them. But then had come a sudden turn, and now the rain was descending on them in torrents, driven in a slanting direction by the wind, which showed no signs of abating.

"I should say it was a corker!" returned Roger, as he brushed the water from his face and peered beyond the rocks. To get out of that driving downfall was impossible.

"I wish we were in that cave," cried Phil. "We'd be as dry as a bone in there."

"Not if the roof leaked," returned the senator's son, grimly. "Besides, somehow I don't think it would be safe."

"Why not?"

"The rain might wash down some of the rocks forming the roof."

"Pooh! they have stayed up so long, I guess they would stay up a little longer," grumbled Phil.

"No sech cave for me," broke in Abe Blower. "The rain makes 'em too dangerous. I was in a mine onct when it rained like this, an', fust thing we knew, about a hundred tons o' rocks slid down, almost buryin' us alive!"

"We'll stay where we are," said Tom Dillon. "The storm won't last forever."

As the night came on, and the storm continued, the boys felt anything but comfortable. Building a campfire was out of the question, for the rain made a dense smoke which the wind swirled all around them, setting them to coughing and the horses to snorting. The animals were as much alarmed as their masters.

"Might as well save your firewood, boys," said Abe Blower. "You'll need it, to dry out by, arfter the rain stops."

"If it ever does stop," grumbled Phil. Rain was Phil's great bugbear when he was on any kind of an outing.

At midnight the rain was coming down as steadily as ever. But the strong wind had died down somewhat, so by remaining close to some overhanging rocks they were more or less protected from the elements. But they could not lie down, and sleep was out of the question.

"Dave, do you think Merwell and Haskers went back to Butte?" asked the senator's son, as the three boys sat close together under a big rock.

"I am sure I don't know, Roger. They'd have to go back unless they fell in with somebody who knew something of this district."

"What do you think of that other party we saw at a distance?"

"They might be the Sol Blugg gang, or they might be almost anybody, Roger. Anybody can come here and try to locate a paying claim."

"Somehow I feel it in my bones that that is the Blugg gang and that Link and old Haskers are with 'em," said Phil. "To my mind, all those fellows are tarred with the same brush, and they would like nothing better than to relocate the lost Landslide Mine first."

"Perhaps you are right," returned Dave. "Well, I don't see how we are going to stop them from going ahead—I mean Blugg and Haskers. Of course we can have Merwell arrested on sight, and Mr. Dillon can have that Staver locked up for trying to steal the horses."

A rush of wind made further conversation just then impossible. So far there had been little thunder and lightning, but now came a flash and a crack that caused the boys to leap to their feet, while the horses plunged and acted as if they wanted to bolt.

"Some stroke, eh?" cried Abe Blower, when the alarm was over. "It must have struck near here."

"It was a little too close for comfort," returned Dave, grimly. "I don't think a spot like this is particularly safe in a storm."

"Oh, ye might git struck down in the valley jest as quick," answered the old miner.

"The rivers will be pretty high after this flood," said Roger.

"Might be as how it will start another landslide, although I hope not," said Tom Dillon, musingly.

"It wouldn't be so bad if the landslide opened up the lost mine," said Dave.

"Oh, that would be all right, lad,—if we wasn't caught in the fallin' rocks."

Slowly the night wore away, and when daylight came it was still raining. But the wind had gone down and the sky looked as if the rainfall might cease at any moment.

"Wall, we'll try fer breakfast," observed Abe Blower. "Nothin' like a hot cup o' coffee an' some flapjacks to cheer a man up."

The driest of the wood was selected, and they built a new fire with care, in the shelter of the largest of the overhanging rocks. Soon the appetizing odor of freshly made coffee filled the air and all drew close, to have a cup, and to partake of some fried bacon and some of Abe Blower's famous flapjacks.

"Them flapjacks made Abe a good friend," observed Tom Dillon, while eating. "They was the means o' introducing Maurice Harrison to him. Ain't that so, Abe?" And the old miner grinned broadly.

"Right you are!" was the ready reply. "We was in the mountains together, and Maurice didn't have nuthin' to eat. I made him some o' my flapjacks an' then we became pardners fer nigh on to a year. That was up at tudder end o' the State," explained Abe Blower.

By the time breakfast was over and the horses had been cared for, the rain had stopped and the sun was breaking through the eastern sky. All in the camp lost no time in changing their wet garments for dry. The soaked clothing was then hung up around the fire and on the rocks in the sun.

"You want to be careful how you climb around this mornin'," warned Tom Dillon. "Some o' the places is mighty slippery. You don't want to slide over no rocks into a hollow an' git killed!"

"No, indeed!" replied Roger, earnestly.

It was not until the middle of the afternoon that they took up the hunt for the lost mine once more. This time the three boys went off together, Abe Blower advising them not to separate while the rocky slopes were so wet.

"You keep together an' me an' Tom will do the same thing," he said. "Then, if anything happens to anybody, the others can help."

For over two hours the boys hunted around, making their way along a ledge of rocks below the point where they had hunted before.

"From the description left by Uncle Maurice, that mine was pretty deep," said Roger. "And if it was, maybe we'll be more apt to find an opening to it from below rather than from above."

"Well, it won't do any harm to look around here, anyway," returned Dave.

They had to proceed with great care, for in spots the water was still running over the rocks and the footing was very slippery. They had a rope with them and all took hold of this, Dave being in front, Phil coming next, and Roger bringing up the rear.

"It's not such an easy job as I thought it would be," panted Phil, after they had made an unusually difficult turn of the ledge. "It kind of takes the wind out of a fellow!"

"Let us rest a bit," suggested Dave. "We can't go much further along the ledge anyway," he added, looking ahead.

They had reached a point where the outcropping of rocks had split in twain, forming the ledge they were on and another ledge twenty or thirty feet away. Between the two ledges was a hollow with jagged rocks far below. The other ledge wound around another hill, leading to the northwest.

"This certainly is a wild country," said Roger, as the boys seated themselves on the inner side of the ledge. "Hunting for gold and silver in a place like this is certainly not easy. Think of spending month after month among rocks like these, looking for 'pay dirt' or 'pay rock,' as they call it!"

"And yet it just suited your uncle," returned Dave, "and it suits Abe Blower and Mr. Dillon."

The boys relapsed into silence, glad of the rest. Dave was thinking of his father, and of the folks who had gone into Yellowstone Park, when suddenly he felt his sleeve pulled by Roger.

"Look!" whispered the senator's son. "Don't make any noise, either of you!"

He had pulled Phil's sleeve also, and now he motioned for his chums to crouch down behind the rocks on which they had been sitting, stones that lay loosely on the ledge, close to the towering cliff.

As the three lads slipped down behind the loose stones on which they had been resting, all gazed in the direction Roger pointed out. On the other ledge several persons had appeared.

"Link Merwell!" gasped Phil. "And see, that Sol Blugg is with him!"

"And here comes Job Haskers and the man called Larry Jaley!" said Dave, in reply.

"Wonder where that other fellow, Staver, is?" murmured Roger.

"Maybe he was too badly hurt to come with them and had to go back," returned Dave.

"Say, I don't see much use of coming along this trail," called out Link Merwell, to those with him.

"It certainly is beastly walking here," said Job Haskers. "I've nearly sprained my ankle several times."

"Well, if we want to find that lost mine we got to hunt fer it," growled Sol Blugg. "It ain't comin' to you, you know."

"I agree thet this trail ain't none too safe," came from Larry Jaley. "If a feller slipped off he'd have some fall, so he would!" he added, looking down into the hollow with its jagged rocks.

Roger nudged Dave in the side.

"They are after the Landslide Mine, just as I supposed!" he murmured.

"Well, they seem to be no nearer finding it than we are," was our hero's reply.

"But they haven't any right to the mine!" burst out Phil. "It belongs to Roger's mother!"

"Listen to what they have to say," warned the senator's son.

The party on the opposite ledge were now so close, and the air was so clear, that all which was said could be heard distinctly.

"I thought sure we'd be able to locate some landmarks before this," growled Link Merwell. "Are you sure this is the right district, Blugg?"

"This is where the Landslide Mine was supposed to be located. You had the description of those landmarks, I didn't," added the Westerner.

Just then Larry Jaley let out a quick cry.

"Look over yonder!" he called. "Sumbuddy behind the rocks!"

He pointed at Dave and the others, and a second later the three youths knew that they had been discovered.

"Come out o' thet, whoever you are!" cried Sol Blugg.

"We might as well get up," said Dave, and arose to his feet. His chums did likewise and then those on one ledge of rocks faced those on the other.

CHAPTER XXVI

PROWLERS IN CAMP

"Huh! so it's you, is it!" cried Link Merwell, in surly tones.

"So you are after my mine!" cried Roger, sharply. "Well, I'll tell you right now, if you locate it, it won't do you any good."

"Bah! We know what we are doing," retorted the youth who in the past had caused Dave and his chums so much trouble. "You can't scare us."

"Link, you ought to be in jail!" burst out Phil.

"You'll never put me there," was the quick retort.

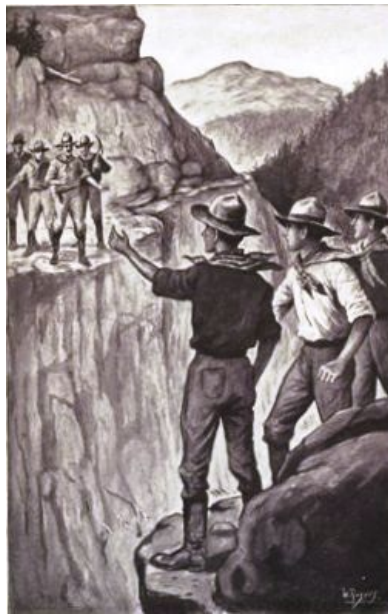
"We have as much right to look for a mine up here as you have," put in Sol Blugg. "If you own a mine, where are your stakes or other landmarks?"

"You know very well that they were carried away by that landslide," answered the senator's son.

"We don't know nuthin' of the kind," came from Larry Jaley. "Your uncle claimed to have a mine up here, but I never seen no proof of it—nor did anybuddy else see any proof. Any of us kin locate a claim, an' you can't stop us."

"This is free land, so far as locatin' a claim is concerned," added Sol Blugg.

"Well, if you locate that mine before we do, don't you dare to remove any of my uncle's landmarks," returned Roger.



"IF YOU LOCATE THAT MINE BEFORE WE DO, DON'T YOU DARE TO REMOVE ANY OF MY UNCLE'S LANDMARKS."

"Ha! wot kind o' talk is thet!" burst out Larry Jaley.

"Oh, we know you," put in Dave. "We know just what sort of a bunch you are."

"Porter, do you include me in that remark?" demanded Job Haskers, drawing himself up as had been his fashion when an instructor at Oak Hall.

"I certainly do," replied Dave.

"You are impertinent!"

"It won't do you any good to act in that way, Job Haskers," returned our hero. "We know you for the rascal that you are. You committed a crime at Oak Hall, and you did what you could to swindle Mr. Fordham. It's useless for you to deny it. Now, let me say this: If you and those with you try to do the Morr's out of their property here, we'll do all we can to put you and Link Merwell in prison for your crimes. And more than that, we'll do what we can to have those men arrested, for that land swindle they tried to pull off when Abe Blower blocked them, and for stealing our horses."

"You—you——" stammered the former teacher, and for the moment knew not what to say.

"Don't you call us hoss-thieves!" burst out Sol Blugg, savagely.

"I can and I will," replied Dave, firmly. "Your crowd tried to take our horses, and the fellow called Staver got shot doing it. I guess that is why he isn't with you now."

"Bah! I won't talk with you," growled Sol Blugg. He knew not what else to say.

"I—I will—will settle with you for this another time," came tartly from Job Haskers.

"Oh, come on, what's the use of talking to them?" growled Link Merwell. "Some day I'll show them what I can do!" And he moved on along the ledge.

"Some day I shall square up for this gross insult!" stormed Job Haskers, and then he followed Merwell, and Blugg and Jaley came behind them. Soon a turn in the ledge hid them from view of our friends.

"What nerve!" burst out Phil.

"That proves they are after the mine," came from Dave.

"Yes, and if they locate it they will try to prove that it wasn't my uncle's mine at all!" burst out Roger, bitterly. "I suppose they'll destroy all the landmarks—that is, if the landslide left any of them standing—and then what will I be able to do?"

"I think we had better go back and tell the others of this," said Dave. "After this, it may pay us to keep an eye on that other crowd."

"That's so," returned the senator's son.

With care the three chums retraced their steps, and half an hour later found them with Tom Dillon and Abe Blower. The two old miners listened with close attention to the tale of their encounter with the other party.

"You are right; we must watch 'em," said Tom Dillon. "They are a bad lot and will do what they can to make trouble for us, and keep us from locating the lost mine."

"I wonder where they are camping?" said Phil.

"It can't be very far from here," replied Dave. "We can look for their campfire to-night, if you wish."

"If they don't hide it," remarked Abe Blower. "And by that same token, wouldn't it be a good idee to hide our own fire?" he continued, turning to Tom Dillon.

"Sure!" was the prompt answer.

That night the three boys climbed several tall rocks in the vicinity of their camp and looked around with care. But the only lights that they could make out were miles away, and those Abe Blower stated were on the distant railroad. Nothing like a campfire came to view.

"They are foxy and have put it in a hollow," said the old miner. "Wall, we've done the same thing," he added, chuckling.

"Oh, if only we could locate that lost mine and put up our stakes!" sighed Roger. "But it looks like next to a hopeless task, doesn't it, Dave."

"Oh, I don't know, Roger," answered our hero, as cheerfully as possible, for he saw that his chum was much downcast. "We haven't covered the whole of the ground yet. I wouldn't give up hope, if I were you."

"I didn't think it was going to be such a job when we started," went on the senator's son. "My, what rocks we have climbed over!" And he rubbed a shin from which some skin had been scraped that afternoon.

"I knew it would be a hard hunt," answered our hero. "And why not? If it was an easy matter to locate that lost mine, Abe Blower or some of those old prospectors would have done it long ago. If we do the trick I think it will be a great feather in our cap—in fact, I think it will be more of a lucky accident than anything else."

"Just my way of looking at it," agreed Phil. "It's a regular hide-and-seek game, this locating a mine among these rocks."

For a long time the three boys sat by themselves, talking about days at Oak Hall, and about the folks left at home and about those now traveling through Yellowstone Park. It seemed a long time since they had received letters.

"I suppose there are letters at the hotel in Butte," said Dave, with a little sigh.

"I'd give something to have them here," added Phil.

"If only I knew how dad was making out," murmured the senator's son. "I suppose he is waiting every day to hear from me!"

"I hope the folks in the Park are having a good time," said Dave, after a pause. "I suppose the main body of tourists have started for home by now."

"Yes, they went yesterday, according to the advertised plan," answered Phil.

"I've got an idea," said our hero, after another pause. "Do you see that hollow just below here? Well, we haven't looked around that much. Why not try it to-morrow?"

"Abe Blower and Mr. Dillon both seem to think the opening to the mine was above that, Dave," said Roger.

"True, but the landslide changed things, remember. We may now find an opening down there,—not the opening your uncle made, but another, made by the slide."

"It won't do any harm to look down there. While we are here I am going to look in every spot I can reach."

"Sure thing!" cried Phil. "But say, if we are going to climb around these rocks all day to-morrow I am going to bed and get a good night's rest."

"I guess we all need a rest, so we'll turn in at once," answered Roger.

Their camp was located between the rocks and not far from the trail by which they had come to the vicinity. The horses were tethered at a point where a patch of coarse undergrowth gave them something to nibble at. The animals were of no use to them, now they were in the district where the lost mine was supposed to be located.

It was a little after nine o'clock when the boys turned in, and a few minutes later the two old miners followed them. So far they had not deemed it necessary to have a guard, for none of their enemies nor wild beasts had come to annoy them.

Roger and Phil were soon sound asleep, and it was not long before their snoring told that Abe Blower and Tom Dillon were likewise in the land of dreams. But Dave, for some reason he could not explain, was restless, and he turned over several times, sighing heavily.

"If I were at home I should say I had eaten too much supper," he told himself. "But here rations are too scarce. I don't know what keeps me awake, unless it is that I'm too tired to go to sleep."

The campfire had burned so low that the spot was almost in total darkness. There was no moon and only a few stars shone in the sky, which was partly obscured by clouds. A gentle breeze was stirring, but otherwise all was quiet.

At last Dave thought that if he had a drink he might go to sleep with more ease, and he turned over to sit up and get to his feet. A bucket of water was close at hand, so he would not have to go far for what he wanted.

Just as Dave sat up he saw something that startled him. A dark figure was moving at a distance from the camp, coming closer slowly.

At first the youth could not make out if the figure was a man or an animal. He strained his eyes and then made out the form of a person.

At once our hero thought of Link Merwell and those with him. It must be one of their enemies, and if so, what had brought him to this spot at such an hour of the night?

"Maybe he is after our horses," reasoned the youth, and then he dropped down again and rolled over to where Roger was lying. He shook his chum and at the same time placed a hand over the other's mouth.

"Roger! Don't make any noise!" he whispered. "Somebody is coming here in the dark."

The senator's son awoke and heard what was said. Then, as Dave took away his hand, he whispered:

"Where is he? Who is it?"

"There he is," and Dave pointed with his hand. "I don't know who it is, but I guess it is one of Link's crowd."

"I'll wake up Phil, and we can watch the rascal," said Roger, and this was done, although not without difficulty, for the shipowner's son was inclined to give a yell when aroused from such a sound slumber.

"Who—who is it?" he stammered. "Say, maybe we had better get our pistols ready!" And he felt for his weapon.

"I've got mine all ready," answered Dave.

"And here is mine," whispered Roger. "If that fellow thinks he is coming here unseen, won't he be surprised!"

"Hush!" came softly from Dave. "Look behind him! There is a second fellow coming!"

Our hero was right, a second figure had emerged from the shadow of some rocks. The two persons were coming along slowly, as if to make certain that they were not being observed.

"I know that second fellow!" whispered Dave, a moment later. "See how tall and thin he is. It's old Haskers!"

"Yes, and the other fellow is Link Merwell," replied Roger, a second later.

CHAPTER XXVII

THE TWO PRISONERS

The three chums were right; the two persons who were approaching the camp on the mountainside so stealthily were Link Merwell and Job Haskers.

They came on step by step, looking ahead and to either side, as if on the alert to flee at the first sign of danger.

"What do you suppose they are after?" asked Phil, in a low voice.

"Hush! We'll watch them and see," returned Dave.

"Let us pretend to be asleep," advised Roger. "But lie so you can keep an eye on them."

The boys had been crouching low, but now all followed the advice of the senator's son and fell back, as if in slumber. Then they rolled over and, with their hands on their weapons, watched the approach of the others.

At last Merwell and Haskers were within fifty feet of those around the dying campfire. They had been talking in a low voice, but now both were silent, as if this had been agreed upon. Merwell was slightly in advance and he pointed to the outfit of the Morr crowd. This lay between some rocks and covered with a rubber cloth, so that the eatables might not be spoiled by the weather.

Job Haskers nodded, to show that he understood, and both of the intruders tiptoed their way towards the stores. Noiselessly they raised the rubber cover and placed it on the ground. Then both commenced to pack the stores in the cloth.

It was plainly to be seen now what the rascals meant to do. They were going to make off with our friends' stores, thereby perhaps making it necessary for them to give up the hunt for the mine and go back to the nearest place where more stores could be procured. For among those barren rocks but little could be found for the mine-hunters to eat. They might get a shot at some wild beast, but that was all.

"What shall we do?" whispered Phil, who was growing impatient watching proceedings.

"When I give the signal, jump up and cover them with your pistols," replied Roger.

"Oh, I wouldn't shoot them," urged Dave, who dreaded to think of bloodshed under any circumstances.

"Well, we'll scare 'em," returned the senator's son. "We'll teach 'em that they can't come near this camp."

He waited until Merwell and Haskers were on the point of lifting the rubber cloth with the stores tied within it. Then he leaped up, and Dave and Phil did the same.

"Hands up, you rascals!" cried Roger. "Hands up, or we'll fire at you!"

"Oh!" cried Link Merwell, in consternation, and up went his hands.

"Don't shoot me! I beg of you, don't shoot!" screamed Job Haskers, and he, too, dropped his hold of the bundle and sent his hands in the air. Then, catching sight of the pistols, he dropped on his knees. "Oh, Morr, please don't shoot! Porter, I beg of you, have mercy! And you, Lawrence, please point that weapon away! It—it might go off!"

"This is a fine piece of business to be engaged in," said Roger, sternly. "Trying to steal our stores."

"It—is—was—er—all a mistake," whined the former teacher of Oak Hall.

"You won't dare to shoot," put in Link Merwell. "You won't dare!" He tried to be brave but his voice was shaky.

"What's the row here?" burst in another voice, and Abe Blower sprang up, followed by Tom Dillon.

"Hello, them two skunks!" cried Tom Dillon. "What do they want?"

"They wanted to make off with our stores," answered Dave, and pointed to the goods tied up in the rubber cloth.

"So that's the trick, eh?" bellowed Abe Blower.

"First the hosses an' now the stores!" roared Tom Dillon. "Humph! Ye deserve to be shot full o' holes!" he went on, for he had lived in the times when the stealing of a horse, or of a miner's food, was considered by everybody a capital offense.

"I—I beg of you, have mercy!" cried Job Haskers, as he got unsteadily to his feet. "I—I—this was not my plan at all—Merwell suggested it. We—we were not going to—er—to steal anything."

"No? Then wot was ye goin' ter do?" demanded Abe Blower, sarcastically.

"We were—er—only going to hide the stuff," stammered Link Merwell, and he glared at Job Haskers savagely for having tried to place the responsibility of the raid on his shoulders.

"I don't believe a word of it!" came sternly from Tom Dillon. "You wanted to leave us to starve here, or compel us to go back to town—so you could hunt for that lost mine alone. I see through the trick. We ought to shoot you down like dogs!"

"It's jest wot they deserve, consarn 'em," muttered Abe Blower.

"We don't want anybody shot!" said Dave, to his chums. He saw that the two old miners were angry enough to do almost anything.

"Let us—er—go this time and we'll never bother you again," pleaded Job Haskers. He was so scared he could scarcely speak.

"Step over here, by this rock, and keep your hands up," said Tom Dillon. "We'll talk this over a bit further."

There was no help for it, for Merwell and Haskers were now virtually prisoners. They stepped to the position mentioned, with their hands still upraised.

"Go through 'em, Abe," went on Tom Dillon. "Take their shootin' irons away from 'em."

"See here——" commenced Merwell, when a stern look from the old miner stopped him. Haskers said nothing, for he was still fearful of being shot.

In a few minutes the two intruders were disarmed by Abe Blower. While this was being done Roger whispered to Dave.

"Don't you think we ought to search 'em thoroughly?" he asked. "They may have something belonging to me—some map of the lost mine, or something like that? I don't exactly remember what I had in that suit-case Merwell got from the porter on the train."

"Certainly, we'll have them well searched," declared Dave, and spoke to Tom Dillon about it. As a consequence, despite their protests, Abe Blower turned out every pocket of the prisoners.

"There is one of my letters!" cried Roger. "It tells about the Landslide Mine. I had forgotten it," and he put the communication in his pocket.

But little else of value belonging to Roger was found, and their own things the prisoners were allowed to retain, all but their weapons. Those, even to their pocket-knives, Tom Dillon confiscated.

"What are you going to do with us?" asked Link Merwell, surlily, after the search was at an end.

"We'll tie 'em up for the night," said Tom Dillon. "Boys, get a couple of ropes."

"Tie us up!" exclaimed Job Haskers, in new alarm.

"Exactly."

"And in the—er—morning——?" faltered the former teacher of Oak Hall.

"We'll see what we'll do with you after breakfast," answered the old miner, briefly.

"Say, wot did ye do with them other fellers?" demanded Abe Blower, while Dave and Phil were getting the ropes.

"We left them in camp."

"Is Staver with 'em?" asked Tom Dillon.

"No, his hand hurt him so he went back to town to have a doctor look after it," replied Merwell.

"Is he coming back here?"

"He said he thought not—at least, not for the present."

"Do you think those others will come here to-night?" asked Dave, as he came with a rope, followed by Phil with another rope.

"We'll stand guard, lad, and see," answered Tom Dillon.

Much against their will, Link Merwell and Job Haskers were bound, hands and feet. Then each was made fast to a rock not far from the campfire.

"We'll take turns at guarding the camp," said Tom Dillon. "Two hours each every night after this;" and so it was arranged.

Now that he was sure he was not to be shot, Job Haskers was very indignant over being bound.

"It isn't a bit gentlemanly," he said, to Dave.

"We won't argue the point," returned our hero, briefly. He was disgusted with both Merwell and Haskers, and he wished they might both go away and that he would never see them again.

As he was so restless, Dave said he would be the first one of the party to stand guard, and, accordingly, the others turned in as before, dropping off to sleep one after another. Merwell was inclined to talk and argue, but Dave would not listen.

"I am done with you, Link," he said. "And I am done with Haskers, too. All I want you to do is to leave me alone in the future."

"You let us go, or it will be the worse for you," growled Link Merwell.

When his two hours' guard duty came to an end, Dave called Roger, who in turn called Phil. The shipowner's son was still very sleepy, and he yawned deeply as he arose.

"As soon as two hours are up you call Abe Blower," said Roger.

"I sure will!" declared Phil. "I'm not half slept out yet!"

Roger was tired himself and was soon in the land of dreams. Phil walked around the camp several times, to keep himself awake, and then sat down on a rock to rest.

Alas! that rest was an ill-advised one for the son of the rich shipowner. As he sat there, Phil's chin sank lower and lower on his breast and presently his eyes closed and he fell asleep! And thus over two hours passed.

"Hello!"

The cry came from Abe Blower, as he turned and sat up. It was growing light in the east and the old miner thought it was time to get up.

He directed his cry at Phil, who was huddled up on the rock. Phil did not budge, and the old miner leaped up and shook him.

"I say——" commenced the youth, and then stared around him in astonishment. "Why I—I must have dropped asleep!" he faltered.

"You sure did!" cried Abe Blower. He gazed around swiftly. "Was you on guard?"

"Yes, and the prisoners——"

"Are gone!"

"Oh!"

Phil's cry awoke all the others in the camp. One after another looked at the youth and then at the spot where Merwell and Haskers had been tied to the rocks. The ropes lay there, but the two former prisoners had vanished!

CHAPTER XXVIII

THE LOST LANDSLIDE MINE

"They cut the ropes! See, here is where it was done, on this jagged rock!"

As Dave spoke he pointed to a sharp edge of stone. Beneath it were bits of rope, showing how the fetters had been sawed in twain.

"One of 'em must have got loose and then freed the other," remarked Roger.

"But who was on guard?" demanded Tom Dillon, sharply. He looked at the boys and then at Abe Blower.

"I was, but I—I guess I fell asleep," faltered Phil, sheepishly, and grew red in the face.

"Fell asleep!" cried Abe Blower. "I guess you did!" And his tone of voice showed his disgust.

"I—I am awfully sorry," continued the shipowner's son. "I—I really don't know how it happened. It wasn't the thing to do."

"Never mind, it's done and that's the end of it," put in Roger, quickly, for he could see how badly his chum felt over the occurrence. "I guess you were pretty tired."

"I was, Roger. Just the same, I had no business to fall asleep. I'm mad enough to kick myself full of holes," went on Phil, grimly.

"Let us see if they took anything with 'em," came from Tom Dillon, as he turned to where their things and the animals were, but they had not been disturbed.

"I guess they were too scared to touch anything," declared Dave. "They were glad enough to save themselves. I imagine they ran away as soon as they were free." And in this surmise our hero was correct. Link had been the one to sever his bonds and he had untied Job Haskers, and then both of them had lost not an instant in quitting the locality, being afraid that some of the others might awaken before they could make good their escape.

"Well, I am just as well satisfied," whispered Roger to Dave and Phil. "I didn't want to hold them, anyway. All I want them to do is to leave us alone."

"But you don't want them to discover the lost mine, Roger," returned our hero.

"Oh, certainly not! We'll have to keep on the watch for them as well as look for the mine," answered the senator's son.

A search was made, and it was soon ascertained that their enemies were nowhere in that vicinity. Then breakfast was had, and a little later the search for the lost Landslide Mine was continued.

As before, the different members of the party separated, and thus the day went by. Several times one or another of the boys or the men thought he had found some landmark, but each time the clew proved a false one.

"It looks as if we were going to be stumped,—just as those other searching parties were stumped," remarked Roger, dismally. "Maybe the lost mine will remain lost forever!" and he sighed deeply.

"Oh, I wouldn't give up yet!" cried Dave, cheerfully. "We have still some more ground to cover."

"Of course, we have," said Phil. "Oh, we are going to find that mine, no two ways about it!"

"I hope so," and Roger sighed again. He felt that if the mine was not found, matters would look pretty blue at home for all concerned.

The following morning dawned bright and clear, with no warning at all of what was in store. An early breakfast was had, and once more all hands separated in the hunt for landmarks which might guide them to the lost mine.

Dave was working his way along a small ridge of outcropping rocks, when he came to one rock that stood out much higher than the rest. From this point he gazed around, to see if he could locate any of the others of the party.

As a distance he made out Roger and Phil, who had just come together. Then, turning around, he glanced below him and made out several other persons on a lower ridge of the mountainside.

"Link Merwell and Job Haskers, and that Sol Blugg is with them," he murmured. "Evidently they are not going to give up the hunt."

Dave watched the party of three for several minutes and then continued his own hunt. Roger and Phil had now disappeared from view, and Abe Blower and Tom Dillon were far away,—almost to the top of the mountain.

A quarter of an hour passed and Dave discovered something which he considered worth investigating. Just above his head was an opening between the rocks,—an irregular slit fifteen or twenty feet high and two to four feet wide.

He had seen many openings before, but this was peculiar for the reason that one edge of the rocks looked as if it had been drilled and blasted away. More than this, within the split lay the broken-off handle of a shovel.

"Oh, what if I have found the lost mine!" he thought. "That shovel-handle proves that somebody has been here, and, yes, that is where somebody bored into the rocks and set off a blast! I must investigate this, and if it looks promising I'll call the others. No use in exciting Roger unless it's worth while."

Dave climbed up to the split and peered within. All was so dark that he could see but little. Yet he made out what looked to be a fairly level bit of flooring and he swung himself to this, first, however, placing his handkerchief on a rock outside, for it had been agreed that if anybody went into any sort of opening he should leave something behind, so that the others, coming that way, might know where he was.

Each of the party had provided himself with a dry stick of wood, to use for a torch if one was required, and Dave now lit the stick he carried and swung it into a blaze. With this in hand he commenced an inspection of the opening he had discovered.

The cave, if such it can be called, proved to be long and narrow,—little more than a split in the rocks. At some points the roofing was out of sight. The flooring, too, was irregular, and our hero had to proceed with care, for pitfalls were numerous and he had no desire to tumble into one of these.

"This mountainside is a good deal like Cave Island," he muttered, as he advanced. "That was honeycombed with caves and so is this. No wonder they have landslides here. The ground and rocks are bound to settle, with so many openings to fill up."

He had gone forward about a hundred and fifty feet when he found the opening leading upward. Then of a sudden he gave a cry of wonder and delight.

Just ahead of him were a number of heavy timbers, such as are used for shoring in mines. And among the timbers lay a pick and a crowbar and the remains of a smashed lantern.

At that instant Dave remembered one thing that Roger had told him, which was that Maurice Harrison had always branded all of his tools with his initials. Eagerly, our hero caught up the pick and held the handle in the light of his torch. There, on the broad part of the pick's handle, were the initials:

M. H.

"It's the lost mine!" shouted the youth. "The lost mine as sure as fate! Oh, I must get out and tell Roger and the others of this!"

But then he hesitated. What if this should prove to be only some abandoned "prospect" and not the real mine at all?

"I'd better look around a little first and make sure," he reasoned. "If I can only find some of the gold Mr. Harrison spoke about, I'd be sure."

He looked at the lantern and the crowbar and saw that both contained the initials found on the pick. He placed the three articles in a heap, and then climbed over the broken timbers to the opening beyond. As he did this a current of pure, cold air struck him.

"There must be other openings to this cave or mine," he reasoned. "Otherwise it wouldn't be so well ventilated. Well, I'm glad to have the fresh air. Where is that gold? If this is really the mine I ought to see some of it in the rocks."

He walked along, throwing the light of his torch on the rocks as he did so. For several minutes he saw nothing that looked like gold, and his heart sank. But suddenly he gave a low whistle and in his excitement almost dropped his torch.

For in a crack of the rocks he had come across a small "pocket," as it is termed by miners. In the pocket lay a quantity of sand, and on top of this an irregular object about as large as a small hen's egg.

"A nugget! A nugget of gold!" cried Dave, as he rubbed it off and inspected it by the light of the torch. "A nugget of gold just as sure as sure can be! Oh, this must be the lost mine!"

In feverish haste he set his torch up in a crack of the rocks and commenced to scoop the sand from the pocket with his hands. Out came another nugget and then another, and then half a dozen, all about the size of hickory nuts. Then the pocket grew so deep and narrow he could not reach down into it. He took up the crowbar, and with it ascertained that the opening with the sand and nuggets was of unknown depth.

"It's the lost Landslide Mine!" said Dave to himself. "The lost mine beyond a doubt, and all this gold belongs to Mrs. Morr! Oh, won't Roger be glad when I tell him the glorious news!"

Gathering up the nuggets he had found, Dave placed them in his pocket to show to the others, and then started to leave the place.

As he did this, he heard a peculiar rumbling sound, coming from a distance. He stopped to listen, and the rumble grew louder and louder.

"What in the world can that be?" he asked himself. "Sounds like a train of cars rushing through a tunnel. I wonder—Oh!"

Dave stopped short, and it is no wonder that a sudden chill passed over him. The very rocks on which he was standing had begun to quake. Then from overhead several stones fell, one so close that it brushed his shoulder.

"It's an earthquake, or another landslide!" he gasped. "I must get out of this, or I'll be buried alive!"

And then, torch in hand, he started for the opening to the mine.

He had hardly covered half the distance to the outer air when there came another quaking, and more rocks fell, one hitting him on the arm. The torch was knocked from his hand and he tripped and fell. Then came a crash and a roar, and to Dave it seemed as if the end of the world had come. He was more than half-stunned, and he fell against a wall of rocks, wondering what would happen next.

CHAPTER XXIX

ANOTHER LANDSLIDE

It was another landslide, crashing and roaring down the side of the mountain, carrying rocks, dirt, and brushwood before it. The earth roared and shook, and it was said afterwards that the slide could be heard many miles away.

Down in the mine that he had but just discovered, Dave remained crouching against a wall of rock, murmuring a prayer for his safe deliverance from the peril that encompassed him. Every moment he expected would be his last—that those rocky walls would crash in on him and become his tomb. Roar followed roar, as the landslide continued and more rocks fell. Then the air around him seemed to be compressed, until he could scarcely breathe.

"Oh, if I were only out of this!" he thought, and at that moment he would have gladly given all he

was worth to have been in the outer air once more.

Gradually the roaring and the quaking ceased, and Dave breathed a little more freely. He groped around in the darkness and managed to locate the fallen torch, which still glowed faintly. He swung it into a blaze with nervous energy.

Was the landslide at an end? Fervidly he prayed that it was. Torch in hand, he tried to make his way to the spot where he had entered the mine.

He soon found this impossible, for the reason that the passageway had shifted, and huge rocks blocked his way. Several times he tried to climb over the rocks, only to fall back helplessly. He cut his hands and broke his finger-nails, but this availed him nothing.

"But I've got to get out! I've got to!" he told himself, over and over again. "I can't stay here!" And then he tried to climb the rocks in front of him once more.

It was hard work, especially with the torch in hand. Once Dave tried to carry the torch between his teeth, but it was too short, and his face was scorched, while the smoke almost strangled him.

Suddenly he slipped on some wet rocks and went down and down, he knew not whither. He was stunned by the fall, and the precious light slid from his grasp and rolled several yards away.

"Oh!" he murmured as he gathered his scattered senses and arose slowly to his feet. Then he saw that the torch was on the point of going out and he made a dash for it, and swung it once again into a faint blaze.

As he stepped around he noticed something else that added to his dismay. In his fall he had twisted his left ankle, which gave a twitch that made him shut his teeth hard, to keep from crying out with pain.

"Oh, I hope I haven't broken it!" he muttered. "However am I going to walk on it, even if it is broken?"

In sheer desperation he commenced to climb up the wet rocks down which he had tumbled. The ankle hurt not a little, yet in his excitement the youth scarcely noticed the pain. His one thought was to get out of the cave before another landslide or earthquake occurred.

A few minutes later found Dave on the level from which he had fallen. As he scrambled over the rocks something caught the glare of the torchlight. The youth picked up the object.

"Another nugget!" he told himself. "The place must be full of them!"

But what good would these nuggets be to him or his friends if he could not get out of the mine-cave? He was deep underground and this new landslide or earthquake might bury him and the contents of the mine forever!

"I've got to get out!" he repeated over and over again. "I've got to get out somehow!"

Trying to pierce the gloom ahead, Dave swung his torch behind him. Was he mistaken, or was that a glimmer of daylight in the distance? He stumbled forward, over some loose stones, and presently came to a split in the narrow passageway.

From overhead came a faint ray of daylight! He almost felt like giving a shout of joy, so welcome was the sight. But then his heart sank once more as he realized that the thin shaft of light came from a split in some rocks which were fifty or sixty feet above his head. The walls were so steep and slippery that to scale them was utterly out of the question.

In front of Dave was now a solid wall of rock, so the youth knew that he could not get out in that direction. With a heavy heart he retraced his steps, trying to locate the opening by which he had entered the cave. But the landslide, or earthquake, had changed the surroundings to such an extent that he hardly knew how to turn to make the next move.

A youth less stout of heart than Dave might have sat down and given up the case as hopeless. But our hero was not made of such stuff. He moved on slowly, in one direction and then another, trying out what looked as if they might be passages to the outer air.

And then came another distant rumble, showing that the earthquake, or landslide, was not yet at an end. The boy held his breath, wondering if it would come closer and annihilate him. But the rumble remained at a distance, and in less than a minute passed away completely.

"Thank fortune, that didn't come here!" he murmured, and passed his hand over his forehead, upon which the thick beads of cold perspiration had gathered. He strained his ears for several seconds longer, but all around him was now as silent as a tomb.

"Oh, I must get out!" he muttered, despairingly. "I must! There must be some kind of an opening somewhere!"

Again he stumbled onward, into one passageway after another. Once the place was so narrow that he became fairly wedged fast and had all he could do to draw back. Then a sudden chill swept through his body, making his teeth chatter.

Must he give up? Was that cave to become his tomb?

The thought forced itself upon Dave in spite of his effort to take a more cheerful view of the situation. He was hemmed in—not an avenue of escape seemed open.

"I won't give up! I won't! I won't!" he muttered, half savagely, and got up from the rock on which he had sunk down to rest. Climbing around in that place where the footing was so uncertain had taken both his wind and his strength, and he was panting, and his knees shook beneath him. Only a short time had elapsed since that dreadful first shock had come, yet to the youth it seemed an age.

He looked at the torch. It had burned well down and would not last much longer. And when it was gone he would be left in total darkness!

This was a new cause for fear, and it made Dave move around faster than ever.

Suddenly he stopped short. A new sound had reached his ears—a strange, weird sound that made his flesh creep and his hair stand on end.

It was the cry of a wildcat—shrill and uncanny in that pent-up space. Slowly it came nearer, although from what direction our hero could not at first make out.

He waited behind a spur of rocks and the cry—it was more a whine of fright than anything else—came closer. Then, on a shelf of rocks but a short distance away, Dave caught sight of the beast.

It was limping along on three feet, dragging a bleeding hind leg and a bleeding tail behind it. Evidently it had been caught between the falling stones as in a trap and had pulled itself loose in a mad effort to save its life.

For the moment Dave forgot his other perils as he faced the beast. Evidently the wildcat had scented the youth, for it gave a savage cry as of defiance. Perhaps it thought that Dave was responsible in some way for the pain it was suffering.

The youth's hand was on the rocks and almost unconsciously it closed on a sharp stone about as big as his fist. Raising the stone, he took quick aim and threw it at the wildcat.

As my old readers know, Dave was a good baseball player and, at Oak Hall, had often filled the pitcher's box with credit. He threw the stone with accuracy and vigor, and it landed fairly and squarely on the head of the wildcat.

There was a weird screech, and the beast whirled around and around on the rocks, coming closer and closer to our hero. Once it clawed savagely at Dave, but he shoved the creature off before any damage was done. Then it fell down in a cleft of some rocks, where it snapped and snarled until Dave sent down a heavy boulder on top of it, thus ending its misery.

"Phew!" gasped the youth, after the excitement was over. "That was almost as bad as when we shot the mountain lioness!"

He had dropped the end of his torch, but now picked it up once more and commenced to move around as before. He proceeded blindly, not knowing in what direction to turn to reach the outer air.

"Where can the others be?" was a question he asked himself more than once. Were they, too, caught underground, or had the awful landslide carried them down into the valley and buried them?

In the course of his climbings Dave presently came to a new turn, one which had before escaped his attention. This turn led upward and gave him fresh hope. But, just as he fancied that he was getting close to the outer air, he reached a flat wall, and further progress in that direction was out of the question.

His heart sank like lead in his bosom, and he walked slowly back to the point from which he had started. How to turn next he did not know.

Half an hour passed, and Dave was almost in despair. His torch had reached its end and was on the point of going out. Then, not knowing what else to do, he set up a cry for help.

There came no reply, and he cried again. Then he pulled out his pistol and fired a shot.

The discharge of the weapon echoed and reechoed throughout the cave and brought down several small stones. Then, to Dave's intense surprise and joy, an answering shot came back.

"Who is it?" he yelled. "I am here! This way! *This way!*"

"Hello!" was the long-drawn-out answer, coming from some point that appeared to be over his head. "Where—are—you?"

And then, as Dave's torch gave a final flicker and went out, our hero saw a shaft of light move over the rocks above his head.

"It's Roger's flashlight!" he told himself, and then he set up another cry.

The rays of the flashlight became stronger and of a sudden they shot downward, directly in Dave's face.

"It's Dave!" came in Roger's voice. "Are you all right?"

"Yes," was the ready reply. "That you, Roger?"

"Yes. Phil is with me."

"Were you hurt?"

"Shaken up a bit, that's all," replied Phil, and now Dave saw his chums standing in an opening that was about eight feet above his head.

"We had better get out of here," went on Roger, quickly. "Another landslide may bury us alive!"

"I've found the mine!" cried Dave. "I've got some nuggets from it—and a pick, a crowbar, and a broken lantern, all with your uncle's initials on them!"

"Good for you!" cried the senator's son. "Phil and I found some evidences of the mine up here—an old coat of my uncle's and some of his stakes. But we had better get out now—we can talk this thing over later."

"I can't get out down here—the passageway is blocked with rocks."

"Did you get in from below?" cried Phil. "We got in from up here."

A few words more passed, and the two boys on the upper ledge of rocks passed down a length of rope they carried, and by that means Dave was soon enabled to climb up and join them. There were no more quakes, so all began to breathe more freely. Yet they felt that it would be advisable to leave the cave-mine without delay.

"It certainly is the lost Landslide Mine!" exclaimed Roger. "Oh, how glad I am that it has been found! And how glad my folks will be to get the welcome news!" Even the peril of the present situation could not rob him of his joy over the discovery that had been made.

He and Phil had picked up several small nuggets, so that all were sure they had really discovered the lost mine.

"But they will have to be careful how they work this mine," said Dave, as he walked along with his chums. "They can't work it from below—it will be too dangerous."

"Oh, they'll find some way, don't fear," answered Roger. "As long as they know the gold is there, they'll find a way to get it."

"Where are the others?" went on Dave, as he saw daylight ahead, much to his satisfaction.

"That we don't know," answered Phil. "But we are hoping they are safe."

"By the way, did you see Merwell and Haskers?" cried Dave, suddenly.

"Why, no—not since they ran away from our camp," returned Roger.

"I saw them—just before I found this opening. They were below me, the two of them and Sol Blugg."

"Maybe they got caught," muttered Phil.

No more was said just then, for the boys had to do some climbing over several big rocks, and needed their breath. Then they made a turn, and a moment later came out into the sunlight.

"Oh, how good it seems to be out in the air once more!" murmured Dave.

"Thank heaven, none of us were killed," added Roger.

"No more underground exploring for me," avowed Phil. "More than once I thought we would be buried alive!"

"That is what I was afraid would happen to me," said Dave, seriously. "Yes, we can all thank heaven we are out of it."

"And now to hunt up Blower and Mr. Dillon," came from the senator's son.

"If only they are safe!" murmured Dave. For the time being those who had been on the mountainside below them were forgotten.

It was hard work to make their way from rock to rock. All the trails were gone, and they had to proceed with extreme care, for fear of dislodging some rock and rolling down into the valley with it.

"There they are!"

It was Dave who gave utterance to the cry, about half an hour later. He pointed to a distant spur, and there, sure enough, they beheld Abe Blower and Tom Dillon. The old miners had the horses with them.

"I wonder if they were hurt?" queried Phil.

"They seem to be all right," returned Roger. "I wish they would look this way."

"We'll have to signal to them," said Dave.

"How are you going to do it?" asked the shipowner's son. "You can't call to them at such a distance. They wouldn't hear you."

"We can give 'em a pistol shot, Phil."

"Why, to be sure! How foolish I was, not to think of it!"

"I'll fire a shot," said Roger, and brought out his weapon.

To the first shot there was no reply, but when a second was discharged both Abe Blower and Tom Dillon were seen to turn around. Then the boys commenced to wave their hands vigorously.

"They see us!" exclaimed Dave, half a minute later. They saw the two old miners wave their hands in return, and Abe Blower discharged his pistol.

"See, they are doing some kind of signalling!" cried Phil, a little later.

All watched with interest. They saw that Abe Blower had taken up a long bit of brushwood and was waving it in a circle to the northwestward.

"They want us to come around in that direction!" said Roger. "Don't you think so, Dave?"

"That's the way it strikes me," was our hero's reply. "See, what is left of the trail is in that direction. But, my! how the whole face of the mountain is changed!"

"Not much trail left!" grumbled Phil. "If we are not careful we'll break our necks reaching them!"

"We'll have to take it slowly," answered Dave.

The three youths set out, and they were glad to see the two miners do the same. The men were on horseback, and the other steeds came behind them.

As the boys had surmised, progress was difficult, and often they had to halt, not knowing how to proceed. Here and there they could see a small portion of a trail, but for the most part the way was new and exceedingly rough.

"If they ever do any mining here they'll have to spend a lot of time first building a roadway," was Phil's comment.

"If the mining pays it won't take long to get a roadway—and bridges, too," answered Roger. "Money can do almost anything, you know."

"Oh, I know that."

"The main thing will be to guard against the landslides," said Dave, grimly. "But I guess they'll know how to do that, too."

On went the boys, over the rough rocks and across patches of freshly turned up dirt. All were utterly worn out, yet not one of them complained.

"There they are!" cried Dave, some time after noon, as they made a turn around some rocks; and in a few minutes the friends were together once more.

"All safe?" asked Abe Blower, anxiously, and then, when assured that no harm had come to the boys, he added: "Mighty glad to know it!"

"So am I glad!" put in Tom Dillon, heartily. "It was sure some landslide! Almost as bad as the one that wiped out the mine!"

"We've got good news!" cried Roger. "We have relocated the lost mine! Dave did it!"

"You and Phil did it, too," said our hero, modestly.

"Wot! Have ye located the Landslide Mine?" roared Abe Blower.

"We sure have," returned Phil. "Look here!" And he brought out some of the nuggets he carried. And then Roger and Dave did the same.

"This is grand!" exclaimed Tom Dillon. "Nuggets, an' pretty big ones, too. But how do you know it's the mine?"

"We found some landmarks," answered Roger. "And my uncle's coat and a note-book——"

"And his pick, crowbar, and lantern," added Dave. And then the three boys told their story in detail.

"It must be the lost mine," said Abe Blower. "An' if it is, I congratulate ye!" And he shook hands all around. "Tom, they got ahead o' us," he added, with a grin.

"So they did," was the answer. "Well, I'd rather have it that way than have those other fellers locate the mine. By the way, I wonder how they fared in the landslide?" the old miner continued.

"Three of them, Merwell, Haskers, and Blugg, were below me," answered Dave. "They were over yonder," and he pointed with his hand.

"Wot! Down on thet ledge?" cried Abe Blower.

"Yes."

"Humph! Then I reckon it's all up with 'em," went on the old miner.

"What do you mean?" asked Roger.

"I mean it's likely they was wiped out," was the reply. "When the fust quake an' slide came I was lookin' down towards thet ledge. I saw some heavy rocks go down, and a big mass o' dirt, too, an' the ledge was buried out o' sight. If they was down thar, it's more'n likely they was buried alive!"

"Oh, I'd hate to think that!" cried Dave, with a shudder.

"Do you think the landslide is at an end?" asked Phil, anxiously.

"There is no tellin' about that, lad. We'll go up on the mountain, and to the safest place we can find, and then wait," said Tom Dillon.

This was done, and an hour later, worn out completely, all sat down to rest and to partake of lunch. They could look far along the mountainside and see just where the avalanche of rocks and dirt had swept downward, a portion halting here and there, and the remainder going clear to the valley far below.

They had been resting about an hour when they saw a figure approaching on foot. It was a man, hatless, and with half his clothes torn from his back. As he came closer they recognized Larry Jaley.

"Jaley, where are you going?" demanded Tom Dillon.

At the sound of the miner's voice the man halted and then threw up his hands. Then he staggered forward once more.

"Save me!" he yelled, wildly. "Save me! Don't shoot me! Save me from the landslide!" And then stumbling, he fell at the feet of Dave and his friends.

"Are you alone?" asked Abe Blower.

"Ye—yes! Save me! Oh, save me!" whined Jaley, and he turned a face full of fear on those before him.

"Where are Merwell and Haskers and Blugg?" asked Dave.

"All gone—swept away by the landslide!" was the whining reply. "Oh, it was awful! It smashed them all up—and smashed up the horses, too! Oh, save me! Save me!" And then Larry Jaley gave a gasp and fell in a heap, unable to say another word.

CHAPTER XXX

THE NEW CLAIM—CONCLUSION

"Poor fellow, he is scared stiff!" said Dave, as he bent over the shrinking man.

"I reckon the landslide made him about loony—thet an' seein' them others carried off to death," murmured Abe Blower.

"I wonder if they really were killed?" said Roger. "If it's true, what an awful death to die!"

"Men before now have been killed by landslides," said Tom Dillon. "And just remember, we ain't out of it ourselves, yet," he added, gravely.

Larry Jaley was cared for and given something to eat and to drink, and then he told his story. The landslide had come upon his whole crowd without warning and he had escaped by what was little short of a miracle. The sight had so weakened and sickened him that he had rushed away, not knowing in what direction, until he had come to our friends' camp.

"Jest help me to git off o' this mountain an' I won't never follow ye ag'in," he whined, to the miners and the boys. "Jest help me to git away, thet's all!"

"You can take your chances with the rest of us, Jaley," answered Tom Dillon, somewhat sternly. "And you mind how you behave yourself, too!" he added, by way of a warning.

By the following morning the scare was over, and the boys took Abe Blower and Tom Dillon into the upper entrance to the mine. Just a brief examination was made, but it was sufficient to prove to the old prospectors that the lads had really rediscovered the lost Landslide Mine. Then the old miners put up the proper stakes, as a new claim for Mrs. Morr.

In the meantime, Larry Jaley had been given some stores and told to go about his business. Abe Blower had directed him to a trail to the southward. This was a long way around, but the trail seemed to be perfectly safe, and Jaley was only too glad to take to it. It was the last the boys saw of the man.

"And now to get back to town and establish this claim," said Roger, some time later. "Won't my folks be pleased!" And his face showed his satisfaction.

"And then to get to Yellowstone Park for a good time!" returned Dave. "We'll have to wire the folks that we are coming."

The journey down the mountainside was by no means easy, and it took the party two days to get to a point where traveling on horseback was safe. When they came down they kept their eyes open for some sign of Merwell, Haskers, and Blugg, but all they found was a portion of the latter's camping outfit and the body of one of their horses.

"Poor chaps! They must be buried under tons and tons of earth and rocks!" murmured Dave.

"It certainly looks like it," answered Phil.

"What a fearful end!" said Roger, with a shudder.

The coming of our friends into Black Cat Camp created quite a stir, and many wanted to learn the particulars of the landslide. These were told in detail, but not a word was said about relocating the lost mine.

"The news will leak out soon enough," said Tom Dillon. "We want the cream of the chancet up there." It may be as well to state that he had located a claim for himself on one side of the Morr claim, and Abe Blower had located a claim on the other side.

As soon as the boys got back to Butte the claims were properly filed, and the lads lost no time in sending off half a dozen telegrams and letters. Then they took a good wash and changed their rough mining clothing for more presentable suits.

"And now for a first-class, six-course dinner!" cried Phil. "I say, doesn't it feel good to get back to civilization again!"

"It certainly does," answered Dave. "But I'll feel more at home when we join the folks in the Park."

"Huh! you're thinking of Jessie!" cried the shipowner's son, slyly, and at this "knock" Dave blushed deeply.

The boys had hardly eaten their dinner when there came a telegram from Senator Morr.

"Listen to this, boys!" cried Roger, and read the following:

"Good news received and we are much delighted. You boys are certainly wonders. Will await letter with interest."

"I wish I could have seen mother's face when dad read my message to her," went on the senator's son, wistfully. Later on he received a letter written by both his parents in which they told of the joy the news had brought. Later still, the newly-located mine was opened, under the directions of Abe Blower and Tom Dillon, and the three claims were thrown into one, a stock-company being formed for that purpose, with Senator Morr as president. Both Dave and Phil were given stock in the mining company, and it paid very well.

"Now, if only your father can hold his position," said Dave, to Roger, one day, "your folks will be well fixed."

"He is going to try to hold it, in spite of his political enemies," answered Roger. And this Senator Morr eventually did, being elected to another term at Washington.

It was a happy day for the three boys when they bade good-by to Abe Blower and Tom Dillon and left Butte to go to Yellowstone Park. The old miners were sorry to part with the lads.

"Never mind, we'll be back here some day!" cried Roger.

"Surest thing you know!" added Dave.

They had already sent word ahead as to what train they were taking, and when they arrived at Livingston they found Dunston Porter on hand to greet them. Then a quick run was made to Gardiner, and there all took a stage into the Park to the Mammoth Hot Springs Hotel.

"There they are! I see them!" cried Laura.

"Oh, look how sunburnt they are!" exclaimed Jessie, and then both girls made a wild dash from the hotel veranda to where the stage was stopping. In the meantime, Dave had jumped from the seat and soon he was shaking hands with Jessie and had kissed his sister. Then the others came up, and there was general rejoicing.

"We have been around the Park once, on a stage," said Laura.

"But we are going again, on horseback and to camp out!" declared Jessie.

"Fine!" cried Dave. "Couldn't be better!"

"And to think you found that mine!" cried Laura, to Roger. "Oh, how glad I was to hear it!"

"We were all glad!" put in Mrs. Wadsworth.

"And you shot a mountain lion!" cried Jessie. "Oh, Dave!" And she fairly beamed on the youth.

"I suppose you'll be after fresh adventures before long," said Dunston Porter, with a twinkle in his eyes.

"Maybe," answered Dave. "But I think I'll be content to stay here for a bit and take it easy," and he smiled openly at Jessie, who had to turn away to hide her blushes.

What next befell our hero will be related in another volume, to be entitled "Dave Porter at Bear Camp; or, The Wild Man of Mirror Lake." In that we shall learn the particulars of a queer mystery and what Dave did towards solving it.

It was certainly a happy gathering, and the boys were sorry that Ben and Shadow and some of the others were not there to enjoy it. But they had departed for the East with the others on the personally-conducted tour.

"You'll have to tell us the whole story from beginning to end," said Laura to her brother. "Jessie and Belle and I are just dying to hear every word of it."

"Poor Link Merwell!" sighed Belle Endicott. "I feel sorry for his folks!"

"Yes, what a fearful ending for Merwell and for Haskers, too!" murmured Laura.

"And so you will be rich after all, Roger!" cried Laura.

"Yes, and I am very thankful," returned the senator's son, and then he took a long walk with Laura, while Dave paired off with Jessie, and Phil went with Belle. The young friends had a great deal to tell each other, and nobody thought of disturbing them.

"Well, it certainly was some trip," said Phil, to Dunston Porter, Mrs. Wadsworth, and Belle. "And that landslide! Excuse me from falling in with one of those again!" And he shook his head gravely.

"You can be thankful you were not buried alive," said Mrs. Wadsworth. Belle said nothing, but she looked at Phil in a manner that warmed his heart.

That evening all of the party had a grand celebration at the hotel. Every one was in the best of spirits, and the boys fairly outdid themselves telling jokes and funny stories.

"I can tell you, it was a trip well worth taking," said Roger, when about to retire.

"So it was," declared our hero. And here we will leave Dave Porter and say good-by.

THE END

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