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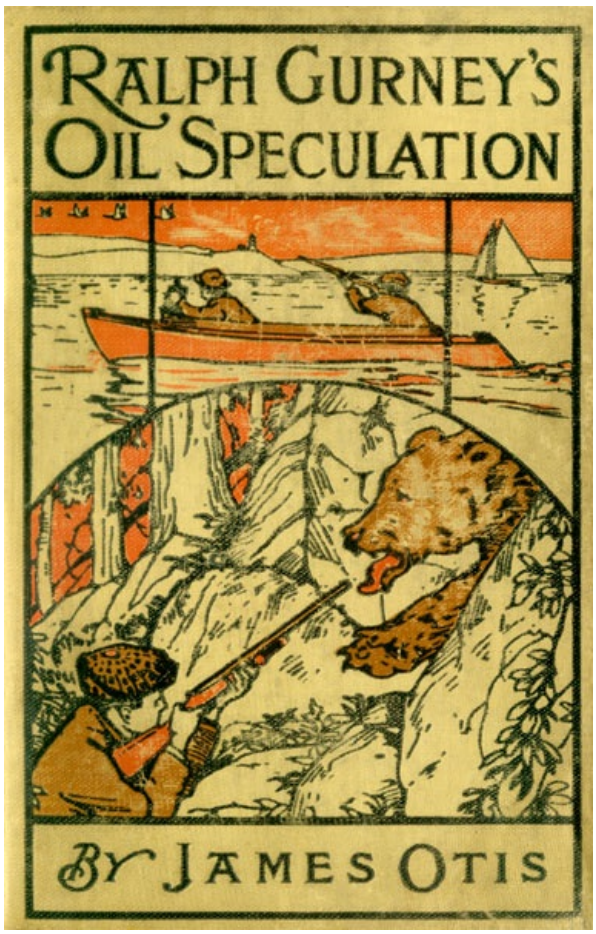

RALPH GURNEY'S OIL SPECULATION

By JAMES OTIS

Author of "The Cruise of the Sprite," "The Clown's Protege," "Roy Barton's Adventures on the Mexican Border," Etc.

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RALPH GURNEY'S OIL SPECULATION

Renewal Granted to James Otis Kaler, 1911

RALPH GURNEY'S OIL SPECULATION.

CHAPTER I.

THE "CHUMS."

The puffing, panting engine that dragged the long train of heavy cars into the busy little city of Bradford, in the State of Pennsylvania, one day last summer, witnessed through its one white, staring eye, sometimes called the head-light, many happy meetings between waiting and coming friends; but none was more hearty than that between two college mates—one who had graduated the year previous, and the other who hoped to carry off the honors at the close of the next term.

"Here at last!" exclaimed George Harnett, as he met his old chum with a hearty clasp of the hand. "In this case, if the hope had been much longer deferred, the heart would indeed have been sick."

"It was thoughtless in me, old fellow, not to have sent you word when I concluded to remain at home two days longer, but the fact of the matter is that I did not think you would be at the depot to meet me, but would let me hunt you up, for I suppose you do have some kind of an office."

"Yes," laughed the young man, "I have an office; but since my work just now is several miles from here, I am seldom at home, and was obliged to come for you, or run the chance of having you spend a good portion of your vacation hunting for me."

"And are you sorry yet that you chose civil engineering for a profession?"

"Sorry! Not a bit of it! Up here there is more excitement to it than you are aware of, and before you have finished your vacation, you will say that the life of a civil engineer in the oil fields of Pennsylvania is not by any means monotonous. But come this way. My team is here, and while we are talking we may as well be riding, for we have quite a little journey yet before us, over roads so bad, that you can form no idea of them by even the most vivid description."

"But I thought you lived here in Bradford."

"I live where my work is, my boy, and since it happens just now to be out of town, my home, for the time being, is in as old and comfortable a farm-house as city-weary mortals could ask for."

"Well, I can't say that I shall be sorry to live in the country—for awhile, at least."

"Sorry! Well, I hardly think you will be, when you learn what I have to offer you in the way of enjoyment. I am locating some oil-producing lands, in a valley where game is abundant, where

the fish prefer an artificial fly to a natural one, and where the moonlighter revels with his harmless-looking but decidedly dangerous nitro-glycerine cartridge."

"What do you mean by moonlighter?" asked Ralph, as he seated himself in the mud-bespattered [5] carriage which George pointed out as his.

"A moonlighter is one who shoots an oil well regardless of patent rights or those owning them, save when, by chance, he finds himself gathered in by the strong arm of the law."

"I thank you, Brother Harnett, for your decidedly clear explanation. I almost fancy that I know as much about moonlighters now as when I asked the question, which is saying a good deal, for you very often contrive, in explaining anything, to leave one even more ignorant than when he consulted you."

"If you are willing to listen to as long and as dry a dissertation on oil wells in general, and illegally-opened ones in particular, as ever Professor Gardner favored us with on topics in which we were not much interested, I will begin, stopping now and then only to prevent my teeth from being shaken out of my head as we ride over this road."

The two had hardly got out of the "city," and the thoroughly bad character of the road was already apparent. Riding over it was very much like sailing in a small boat on rough water—always down by the head or up by the stern, but seldom on an even keel.

"Go on with the lecture," said Ralph, "and while I try to hold myself in the carriage, I will listen."

"Because of my friendship for you. I will make it as brief as possible. In the first place, you must know that before oil is struck, the operator finds either a rock formed of sand or of gravel. This is [6] the strata just above the deposit of petroleum.

"Of course this must be bored through, if possible, and in the pebbly rock there is no trouble about it. The drills will go through, and the gravel will be forced to the surface without much difficulty. But when the sand-rock is met, it clogs the drills, making it almost impossible to bore through. A heavy charge of nitro-glycerine makes short work of this rock, and out comes the oil.

"Now, this method of blasting in oil wells has been patented, or, at least, the cases for the glycerine and the manner of exploding it has, and the company, which has its office in Bradford, use every effort to discover infringements of their patent. Like all owners of patent rights, they charge an extra price for their wares, and the result is that there are parties who will, for a much smaller amount of money, shoot a well and infringe the patent at the same time. These people are called moonlighters, and the risk they run of losing their lives or their liberty is, to say the least, very great. The lecture-hour has now been fully, and I hope I may say profitably, employed."

"If it profits one to learn of your friends, the moonlighters, then your lecture has been a success. But how do you find excitement in anything they do? Surely they do not make public their unlawful doings."

"Oh, everything save the shooting of the well is done legally, and with many even that is questionable! The cases are to be tried, and many believe that the owners of the patent have [7] really no rights in the premises. The owners or prospective owners of the land whereon the wells are to be sunk, employ me to survey their tracts, and by that means I frequently make the acquaintance of those people who, for the almighty dollar, will peril their lives driving around the country with nitro-glycerine enough to blow an entire town up."

"Let me trespass once more on you for dry detail, and then I will learn anything else I may want to know from observation. What is nitro-glycerine?"

"I will answer your question by quoting as nearly as I can from what I read the other day. It is composed of:

Aqueous vapor	20	parts
Carbonic acid	58	"
Oxygen	3.5	"
Nitrogen	18.5	"

"Until 1864 it found no practical application, except as a homeopathic remedy for headache, similar to those which it causes. In that year, Alfred Nobel, a Swede, of Hamburg, began its manufacture on a large scale, and, though he sacrificed a brother to the terrible agent he had created, he persevered until in its later and safer forms nitro-glycerine has come into wide use and popularity. It is a clear, oily, colorless, odorless, and slightly sweet liquid, and can, with safety, only be poured into some running stream if one wishes to be rid of it. Through the pores of the skin, or in the stomach, even in small quantities, this oil causes a terrible headache and [8] colic, while headaches also result from inhaling the gases of its combustion. It has thirteen times the force of gunpowder, exploding so much more suddenly than that agent does, that in reality it is much more powerful, and it is this same rapid explosive power that prevents it from being used in fire-arms."

"You would make a first-rate professor, George," said Ralph, laughing, "and you may refer to me in case you should desire to procure such a position. Now I think I am armed with sufficient knowledge to be able to meet your oily friends, the moonlighters, and have some idea of what they mean when they speak."

"If I am not mistaken we shall meet some of them very soon, without trying hard; but if we do not, I will take you to one of their cabins as soon as we may both feel inclined to go."

"Don't think that I have come here to spend my vacation simply with the idea that I am at liberty to make drafts at sight on your time," replied Ralph, as an unusually rough portion of the road necessitated his exerting all his strength to prevent being thrown out of the wagon. "I intend to be of every possible assistance to you, and when I cannot do that, if you are still obliged to labor, I will extract no small amount of enjoyment out of your farm-house and its surroundings. But at any time that you have a few hours to spare, I will be only too well pleased to meet with any adventure, from nitro-glycerine blasts to the perils of trout-fishing."

[9] By this time the conversation ceased, owing to Ralph's interest in the scenery around him, and the curious combination of oil-tanks and derricks with which the landscape was profusely dotted. From Bradford to Sawyer the road winds along at the base of the hills through a lovely valley, that seems entirely given over to machinery for the production and storage of oil. On every hand are the tall, unsightly constructions of timber that form the derricks, looking not unlike enormous spiders, as they stand on the sides of the mountains or in the ravines, while the network of iron pipes, through which the oil is forced by steam-pumps from the wells to Jersey City, are fitting webs for such spiders.

Huge iron tanks, capable of holding from twenty to forty thousand barrels of oil, dot the valley quite as thickly as do the blots of ink on a school-boy's first composition, and form storage places for this strange product of earth, when the supply is greater than the demand. It is truly a singular scene, and he who visits this portion of the country for the first time cannot rid himself of the impression that he has, by some mysterious combination of circumstances, been transported to some remote and unknown portion of the globe.

George, to whom this scene was perfectly familiar, did not seem inclined to allow his friend to remain in silent wonder, for he persisted in supplying him with a fund of dry detail, which effectually prevented any indulgence of day-dreams.

[10] Although Ralph would have preferred to gaze about him in silence, George told him of the Pipe-Line Company, who owned the greater portion of the huge iron receptacles for oil; who also owned the network of iron pipes, through which they forced the oil to the market at a charge of twenty-five cents per barrel.

He also told him that this company connected the main line of pipes with each tank owned by the oil producers, supplying a small steam-pump at each connection, and, at stated times, drew off from private tanks the oil. He even went into the particulars of the work, explaining how each man could tell exactly the number of barrels the company had taken from his tank by measuring the depth of the oil before and after the drawing-off process.

Then he described how these huge receptacles were frequently struck by lightning, setting fire to the inflammable liquid, and causing consternation everywhere in the valley; of the firing of solid shot into the base of the tanks to make a perforation that would allow the oil to run off, and of the loss of property and danger of life attending such catastrophes.

So much of dry detail or interesting particulars of the oil business had the young engineer to tell, that he had hardly finished when the horses turned sharply into a narrow road, over which the trees formed a perfect archway, that led to just such a farm-house as suggests by outside appearance all the good things and comforts of life.

[11] "This is to be home to you for a while," said George, breaking off abruptly in his dissertation on the price and quality of oil, in which Ralph was not very much interested, "and I can safely guarantee it to be a place which you will be sorry to leave after once knowing it."

"It certainly does not seem to be a place around which anything exciting can be found," thought Ralph; but, since it was only rest from study he was in search of, he was content with that which he saw.

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CHAPTER II.

[12]

A NEW ACQUAINTANCE.

Ralph Gurney was one who thoroughly enjoyed everything in which pleasure could be found,

and even while George was caring for his horses, of which he was very fond, Ralph had already begun a survey of the farm on which he was to spend his vacation.

The cattle, poultry, horses, dogs, and even the cat, had received some attention from him, and he was on his way to the sheep-pasture near by to make the acquaintance of the woolly members of the flock, when the sharp ping of a bullet was heard as it whistled by his head, while, a second later, the report of a rifle rang out sharply.

There was something so entirely unexpected and so thoroughly startling in this mode of salutation in so peaceful a place, that Ralph leaped two or three feet in his fright, and at the same time saw the hole in the brim of his hat, which showed how near the deadly missile had come to him.

Almost any one would be alarmed at such a visitor, even though he might have been expecting [13]
this attention, and Ralph came very near trembling with fear as he realized how narrow had been his escape from death.

He looked quickly around to see who was using him as a target; but no one was in sight. The sheep had been quite as much startled by the report as he had by the proximity of the bullet; therefore, there was no reason to suspect that they had had anything to do with this decided frightening of the new boarder.

Ralph was on the point of calling out to George for an explanation of this apparently reckless shooting, when a voice from amid a small clump of trees shouted:

"Hold out your hat and I will put a bullet through the center of it."

Even if Ralph had not been angry because of the danger he had been forced to run, he would not have accepted any such cheerful invitation, and, instead of replying, he looked carefully around in search of the speaker.

"Hold out your hat, and I will show you what I can do," continued the voice, while its owner persistently remained hidden.

"I don't know who you are," said Ralph, speaking sharply; "but from what I have already seen of your reckless shooting, I consider it to be some one's duty to teach you how to handle fire-arms."

"And you propose to do it, eh?" was the question, as a boy eighteen or nineteen years of age, with a face that was the perfect picture of good humor, walked out of the thicket. On his shoulder he carried a rifle, and in his left hand some partridges and a fox-skin. "That was a nasty shave for [14]
you," he continued, in a half-apologetic tone; "but, you see, I hadn't any idea there was any one around. Farmer Kenniston is down on the meadow, and Harnett went to town this morning; so you see that, by rights, you ought not have been here."

"And because, in your opinion, I should have been somewhere else, you concluded to send me away by the most certain and effectual method?" asked Ralph, having by no means subdued his anger, although it was vanishing quite rapidly before the pleasant tone and face of the boy who had come so near killing him.

"Well, you see, I didn't know you or any one else was within a mile of the place. I had a charge left in my rifle, and I wanted to see if I could knock a knot out of that second board in the barn. Just as I pulled the trigger, you came from behind the shed, and then I couldn't call the bullet back. I am sorry that I startled you so, and I was in hopes you would hold out your hat, so that you could have seen how handy I am with a rifle, which would have made you feel easier."

"I must confess that I can't understand how I could be soothed by any proof of your skill as a marksman," replied Ralph, with a smile, his anger now almost completely gone. "Of course, I know that you didn't intend to shoot so near me; but in the future I advise you to empty your rifle before you come so near to a house."

"But I have wanted to put a bullet into that knot from the trees back there ever since I have [15]
been here, and now let's see if I struck it fairly."

As if he considered that he had made all necessary apologies for the shot which had startled Ralph, the boy started towards the barn, and in another instant he was pointing triumphantly to the offending knot in the board, which had been completely shattered by the bullet.

"There!" he cried. "Harnett said I couldn't hit it from that dead pine tree, and that even if I did succeed in hitting it, I couldn't split it. Now we'll see what he has got to say to that."

Ralph had nothing to say as to the argument between his friend and the stranger, and in the absence of anything else to say, he asked:

"Do you live here?"

"I am living here just now, and shall for some weeks longer, I suppose. You are Ralph Gurney, whom Harnett has been expecting, I fancy?"

"Yes; but if George has told you who I am in advance of my coming, he has not been so liberal to me in regard to yourself."

"That probably arose from the fact that I am no one in particular, while, on the contrary, you

are to become one of the particularly bright and shining lights in the medical world. I am only Bob Hubbard."

Who Bob Hubbard might be Ralph had no idea; but even though the young gentleman spoke of himself in such a deprecating way, it was easy to see that he did not consider himself of slight consequence in the world. He was a bright, jovial, generous looking boy, with a certain air about [16] him which made the shot, fired so dangerously near Ralph, seem just such a reckless act as might be expected of him.

"Do you like hunting and fishing?" he asked, after he found that Ralph was not disposed to say anything about the profession of medicine he had chosen, and which George had evidently spoken of.

"Indeed I do," was the decided reply. "Is there much sport around here?"

"All you want. I have only been out about two hours, and I have got these," he said, as he held up his game. "And as for fishing, you can catch trout until your arms ache—providing they bite rapidly enough."

"Indeed!" replied Ralph, dryly. "I fancy I have seen as good almost anywhere. Do you go fishing very often?"

"Nearly every day."

"Then, if George has any business to attend to this afternoon, suppose you and I see if the fish will bite fast enough to make our arms ache pulling them in."

Bob hesitated in what Ralph thought a very peculiar way, and said, after a pause of some moments:

"I'd like to, but I have an important engagement this afternoon, and I hardly see how I can arrange it."

There was certainly nothing singular in his not being at liberty to accept the proposition made so suddenly, and Ralph would have thought his refusal the most natural thing in the world had it [17] not been for his evident embarrassment when none seemed reasonable. However, the young pleasure-seeker attached no importance to what seemed like singular behavior on the part of this newly-made acquaintance, and was about to make another proposition for a fishing excursion, when Harnett suddenly made his appearance.

"Hello, Bob!" he cried, "you've been making the acquaintance of my chum, have you?"

"Yes, after a fashion. I fired at that knot in the barn you said I couldn't hit from the pine tree, and came near putting a bullet through his head. But I hit the knot, and what's more, I split it."

"And here is a hole in the brim of my hat, to prove that he did fire at it," said Ralph, laughing, as he held up his perforated hat to display the mark of the bullet.

Harnett looked with no small degree of alarm at the evidence of Bob's shooting, and said, sternly:

"I think it is quite time that you became a trifle more careful with your fire-arms, Bob. You have already had several narrow escapes, and will end by killing some one, if you don't stop shooting at every promising mark you see."

"I'm not half as careless as I might be," said Bob, earnestly. "This is the first time that I have ever really come near hurting any one."

"What about the time when you came near hitting Farmer Kenniston, and killed a lamb? Have you forgotten the untimely death of Mrs. Kenniston's favorite duck, or your adventure with the [18] red calf in the pasture?"

"Oh, those don't count—at least none except the lamb scrape are worth talking about, Harnett, so don't read me one of your long-winded lectures; and, now that I have hit the knot in the barn, I promise not to shoot at anything within half a mile of the place. I'm going down to town for a while, and when I get through with what I have on hand, we'll make some arrangement to show your friend the oil region."

As he spoke Bob went into the stables, and when the two friends were alone again, George asked:

"Well, Ralph, how do you like what you have seen of the moonlighters? Not very ferocious, eh?"

"What do you mean? I haven't seen any moonlighters yet."

"Indeed! You have been talking for the last ten minutes with the most successful of them. Bob Hubbard enjoys the rather questionable distinction of being the most noted one in this section of the country."

Ralph looked at his friend in speechless astonishment for several minutes; this careless, good-natured boy was very far from being the famous moonlighter his fancy had conjured up, and it is barely possible that he was disappointed at not having seen some more savage looking party, for he had speculated considerably about these people who explode nitro-glycerine in an illegal

manner.

"If I am not mistaken," continued Harnett, "he is going to shoot a well to-night, and I guess there will be no difficulty in getting his consent for you to be present. Wait here, and I will talk with him." [19]

George hurried away toward the stables, leaving Ralph in a curious condition of mingled wonder and surprise that in this very peaceful-looking place there could be found such an evident fund for adventure.

The gaining of Bob's consent for Ralph to be present at the shooting of the well was not such a difficult matter, judging from the very short time George found it necessary to talk with him. When Harnett came from the stable, he told Ralph that the necessary permission had been given, and that they would start for the cabin of the moonlighters at once, in order that none of the details of the work might be lost.

While they were speaking, Bob drove out of the stable behind a pair of small gray horses, which were so spirited that their driver could pay no attention to anything but them.

"I'll see you again very soon," he shouted; and hardly had he uttered the words before he was tearing along the rough road at a rate of speed that threatened a rapid dissolution of the light carriage.

If George had any business to attend to on that day, he evidently made up his mind to neglect it, for he began to make his arrangements for the journey with quite as much eagerness and zest as displayed by Ralph.

Since it was by no means certain that the well would be opened that night, owing to the vigilance of the owners of the torpedo patent, George made preparations to remain away from [20] Farmer Kenniston's all night, taking blankets, food, fishing-tackle and rifles, as if their excursion was to be one simply of a sporting nature.

"It wouldn't do for us to drive out to the moonlighters' cabin as if we were going to see a well shot," he said, in reply to Ralph's questions of what he proposed doing with rifles and fishing-rods; "for, if we were seen, it would be quickly reported in town, and Bob would have the whole posse of Roberts Brothers' force upon him. Now, there would be nothing thought of our going out fishing, which fully accounts for my preparations. I have known Bob to wait for a week before he dared explode a charge, and I don't care to get mixed up in any encounter between these two sets of torpedo men."

"I don't want any harm to come to him through me," replied Ralph, gleefully, "but I should not be at all sorry to see just a little excitement in the way of a chase of the moonlighters."

"There is every chance that you will be fully satisfied before you leave this portion of the country," said George, grimly; and then, as his horses were ready for the road once more, he added: "Get in, and, if nothing happens, I will show you the cabin of the moonlighters in less than an hour."

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CHAPTER III. [21]

THE CABIN OF THE MOONLIGHTERS.

Bob Hubbard had been away from the Kenniston farm-house nearly half an hour when Ralph and George left it, but the latter was so well acquainted with the country that he did not need any guide to the cabin, and could not have had one, had he so desired, for Bob was far too cautious to be seen leading any one to his base of operations.

It was well known by the owners of the torpedo patents that Robert Hubbard was the most skillful of all the moonlighters, and whenever he was seen traveling toward any of the wells that were being bored, he was followed, but, thanks to the fleetness of his horses, he had never been seen at his work by any one who would inform on him.

Bob believed, as did a great many, that the firm holding the patent had no legal right to prevent any one from exploding nitro-glycerine by the means of a percussion cap placed in the top of a tin shell or cartridge. Several cases were before the courts undecided, and until a decision was reached, the owners of the patent would do all in their power to prevent any one from interfering in the business which they proposed to make a monopoly. Therefore, when Bob went about his [22] work, he did so with quite as much mystery as if he had been engaged in some decidedly unlawful act.

The ride from Sawyer, among the mountains, was quite as rough a one as that from Bradford,

and Ralph found that he had about as much as he could attend to in keeping the guns, fishing-rods and himself in the carriage, without attempting to carry on any extended conversation with his friend. It was, therefore, almost in silence that the two rode along until George turned the horses abruptly from the main road into the woods, saying, as he did so:

"If I am not mistaken, this path will lead us directly to Bob's headquarters."

He was not mistaken, for before they had ridden a mile into the woods, they emerged into a clearing, in the midst of which stood a small log-house and stable.

Instead of windows, the hut had stout plank shutters, which prevented any one from looking in, even if they did prevent the occupants from gazing out, and the door had more the appearance of having been made to resist an attack than simply to keep the wind or cold out.

The stable was in keeping with the hut, so far as an appearance of solidity went; and as its one door was closely shut, with no bars or locks on the outside, one could fancy that when it was occupied, a guard remained on the inside, where the fastenings of the door evidently were.

"I guess we have got here too soon," said Ralph, as George stopped the horses in front of the [23] hut, without any signs of life having been seen.

"There is a smoke from the chimney," said George, as he pointed to the clumsy affair of mud and sticks from which a thin, blue curl of smoke could be dimly seen, "and if they are ready to let us in, we shall soon see some one."

The two sat patiently in the carriage several moments, and at the end of that time the door of the hut was opened by a young man standing in the doorway, to whom George said:

"Well, Dick, hasn't Bob got here yet?"

"Yes, he's here; but we didn't open the door at first because we were not sure but that you had been followed." Then turning toward the barn, the young man shouted, "Come out here, Pete, and take care of these horses!"

In response to this demand the stable door was opened as cautiously as if the man behind it feared a dozen were ready to pounce upon him, and then, much as if he were unfolding himself, a tall negro came out, leading the horses away without speaking, almost before Ralph and George had time to leap to the ground.

"Get into the hut as quickly as possible," George said to Ralph; and as the three entered, the door was securely barred behind them with two heavy beams that would have resisted almost any ordinary force that might have been used against them.

The hut boasted of but one room, in which were to be seen piles of blankets that had evidently been used as beds, cooking utensils, provisions, sheets of tin, tools such as are used by tinsmiths, [24] and, in fact, as varied an assortment of goods as could well have been gathered into so small a compass.

In one corner of the room the floor of earth had been excavated, until a space about six feet square and four deep had been formed, and into this excavation was packed a number of square tin cans, which Ralph felt certain contained that powerful agent, nitro-glycerine.

Bob was at work soldering together a long tin shell, about six inches in diameter and fully ten feet long, and he called out, as his friends entered:

"Come right in. Don't be afraid that you will be shot at, for we drop all that kind of business here for fear we might all go up together. This, Mr. Gurney, is the moonlighters' cabin, and I am free to confess that it is not the most cheerful place in the world."

"I don't find as much fault with the cabin as I do with what you keep stored in those innocent-looking tin cans," replied Ralph, as he seated himself on a pile of blankets at a respectful distance from the glycerine.

"Oh, that's harmless enough so long as you leave it alone!" replied Bob, carelessly, and then as he resumed his work of soldering, he asked: "Did you see anything of Jim as you came in?"

"No; where is he?"

"Out by the road somewhere. We heard that our particular friends in town had got wind of the fact that we were going to put in a charge to-night, so Jim is doing guard duty outside, leaving Dick Norton and I to do the tinker's work. We expected to have gotten our shells all made in [25] town; but they are looking out so sharp for us just now that it was entirely too much of a risk to bring them out here."

"How did they learn that you were going to work to-night?" asked George.

"That's more than I can say, unless old Hoxie was fool enough to let it out that we were going to shoot his well for him," replied Bob, working savagely with the soldering iron, much as if he would have been pleased had he been using it on Mr. Hoxie's too ready tongue.

"Do you anticipate *much* trouble?" asked Ralph, with just a shade of anxiety, beginning to realize that it would not be the most pleasant thing in the world to commence his vacation by being arrested as a moonlighter.

"That's just what I can't say. We may have it, and we may not; but there's one thing certain, and that is that I'll shoot that well if I don't get back to the Kenniston farm for three months."

"I don't believe that they are even looking for us. They think we went out of the business two weeks ago," said Dick Norton, as he, in a very unworkmanlike manner, attempted to aid Bob. "You see, Jim is nervous, and the least thing frightens him."

"Something has startled him, at all events!" exclaimed Bob, running to the door as a low, quick whistle was heard from the outside.

Dick, despite the rather contemptuous way in which he had spoken, also appeared to think something serious had happened, for he joined Bob at the door, looking very serious as both of [26] them quickly unfastened the bars, opening the door just as a young man ran in from the woods, breathless and excited.

"What is it, Jim? What has happened?" asked Bob, replacing the heavy bars instantly the newcomer was inside the building.

"Newcombe and five men have just turned into the path, coming down here as if they knew just what they should find."

For a moment Bob and Dick were silent, and Ralph had an opportunity to ask George:

"Who is Newcombe?"

"A man in the employ of the owners of the patent, and one who has threatened several times to secure the arrest of Bob."

Dick's first act, after he fully realized what Jim had said, was to cover the fire, at which they had been soldering, with ashes, in order to prevent any smoke from escaping through the chimney, and by that time Bob had recovered all his presence of mind.

"Even if they have at last found the hut, they will be puzzled to get into it, or to get us out," he said, as he noted the fastenings of the window-shutters, and uncovered a small aperture which served as a loop-hole through which everything that occurred outside could be seen.

"You ought to have warned Pete," said George, not feeling remarkably well pleased at the chance of being besieged as a moonlighter, but yet anxious that his friends should elude arrest where the cartridges and explosive fluid would be sufficient proof against them. [27]

"There is no need of that," replied Bob. "He wouldn't show himself under any circumstances unless we called him, and from the loft of the stable he can see all that is going on."

Ralph was the most uncomfortable of the party. Not being so familiar with the doings of the moonlighters, nor acquainted with the general feeling of the public against them, the idea of being thus hunted like a criminal was very repugnant to him.

It was as if his companions were engaged in some crime, instead of simply infringing a patent, the legality of which had not been fully tested, and, if he could have had his choice, he would have been miles away from that spot just then.

"There they come!" exclaimed Bob from his post of observation, and, looking out for a moment, Ralph saw six men riding into the clearing directly toward the house.

Almost before he had time to regain his seat, and just as Bob held up his hand as a signal for silence, a knock was heard at the door, as if some one was pounding with the butt-end of a whip.

No one made any reply, and it seemed to Ralph as if he could hear the pulsations of his own heart, so oppressive was the silence.

Again the summons was repeated, and a gruff voice cried:

"Open the door a moment. I wish to speak with Mr. Robert Hubbard."

Then there was a long silence, and, seeing the look of anxiety on Ralph's face, George said, in a [28] low whisper:

"Don't look so distressed, my boy. Those men have got no more right to enter here than you have to go into another man's dwelling. If they should succeed in getting in, however, they would find sufficient to prove that Bob was about to infringe their patent; but, as it is, they have no authority to do anything, although Bob will hardly get a chance to shoot the Hoxie well to-night."

"That's just what I will do," whispered Bob, who had heard George's remark. "I will put in that charge if they camp where they are all night."

The men on the outside waited some moments in silence, and then the request was repeated, while at the same time footsteps could be heard as if some of them had gone toward the stable.

"They might easily batter in one of the windows," said Ralph, as the pounding at the door was continued.

"They would hardly try that plan," replied George, with a meaning smile. "There are a hundred or two quarts of nitro-glycerine stored here, needing only the necessary concussion to explode them. Those men know quite as well as we do how unpleasant such liquid may become, and I

assure you that they will strike no very heavy blows on the building."

It was a singular position for any one to be in, and Ralph was far from being comfortable in his mind, as he awaited the result of this visit to the cabin of the moonlighters.

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CHAPTER IV.

[29]

A REGULAR SIEGE.

RALPH, simply a visitor to the cabin of the moonlighters, felt far more uncomfortable than did his hosts, to whom alone there was any danger.

As the party waited silently for any move by those outside, Ralph had plenty of time to review his own position, and this review was far from pleasant or reassuring.

In that section of the country the fact of being arrested as a moonlighter did not imply either disgrace or crime; but in Ralph's home, where nothing was known of such an industry, save when occasionally a newspaper item was read but not understood, the news of his arrest while trying illegally to "shoot" a well, would cause as much consternation and sorrow as if he had attempted to shoot a man. It was far from being a pleasant beginning to his vacation, and he would have been much better satisfied with himself if he had not made any attempt to penetrate the mysteries of the moonlighters' dangerous calling.

While these uncomfortable thoughts were presenting themselves to Ralph, Bob Hubbard was standing on a rudely-constructed table, in order that he might keep a watch upon Newcombe and his men, and from time to time he whispered to his companions of that which he saw.

[30]

"They've got tired trying to find out anything at the stable, and now they're coming this way. If we keep perfectly quiet they will begin soon to believe that no one is here, and then, very likely, they will go away."

It was in the highest degree necessary that these men should be thrown off the scent if possible, and each one in the hut remained motionless as statues, but, as was shown a moment later, their silence was fruitless, owing to the defective construction of their furniture.

"Now they are gathering close around the door," continued Bob, from his post of observation; and then, fearing he might betray himself even through the loop-hole, he began cautiously to descend.

It was as if his very efforts to move without noise hastened the catastrophe he was trying to avert, for as he started to lower himself from the table, the entire structure gave way, and he came to the floor with such a crash as could have been heard many yards away.

There was no need of question as to whether Bob's downfall had been heard by those outside, for at the moment a low, involuntary cry of triumph was heard, which did not detract from the unfortunate moonlighter's discomfiture. Had Bob cried out his name he could not have proclaimed his presence any more plainly, and as he disentangled himself from amid the wreck of the table, his face spoke eloquently the anger he felt, either at his own carelessness or the weakness of the table.

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"It's all up now," said Jim, despondently. "There was a chance that they might get tired in time, and go away; but now they will stay here until they see us leave."

"Well, let them stay," said Bob, savagely. "I have come here to get ready to shoot the Hoxie well, and I'll do it before I go home again."

"Perhaps you will, and perhaps you won't," said Jim, doubtingly; "but if my opinion's worth anything, you won't."

Bob made no reply to this; but attacked the tin cartridges on which he had been working with an energy that told plainly of his determination; although how it might be possible for him to do more than to get ready for the work, no one could imagine. He no longer tried to be silent, but made so much bustle with his work that George said:

"What makes you so careless, Bob? Even if they did hear you when you fell, there is no reason why you should advertise the fact that you are making cartridges."

"What difference does it make what they hear now?" asked Bob, not even looking up from his work as he spoke. "Do you fancy that Newcombe, finding us here, does not know just as well as we do what there is inside here? If we remain quiet, he will say to himself that we are all ready for the shot, and only waiting for him to get out of the way before we let it off. If we work, he will know no more, and we may as well take things comfortable."

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"It isn't any use for us to try to do anything," said Dick, disconsolately. "Newcombe will stay right where he is until we go out, and the best thing we can do is give the thing up for a while."

"Yes," interrupted Jim, "let's go home, and wait until we can give him the slip and get out again."

"I'll do nothing of the kind," replied Bob, doggedly. "I agreed to shoot Hoxie's well to-night, and I'm going to do it."

"You can't without Newcombe's seeing you, and you know that your arrest would follow as soon after that as he could get out a warrant," said George, thinking it was high time for him to interfere with advice. "They have never been able to get any proof against you yet, and you don't want to give them the chance now just through spite."

"I'm not going to give them the chance," said Bob, calmly. "I am going to take what I need out of this place while they are guarding it, and without their seeing me. If any of you fellows are afraid, and want to go home, you know how to get there; but I am going to stay, and do just as I have said."

Bob could have used no better argument, if he had been anxious to have his companions remain with him, than when he proposed they should go home if they were afraid. Much as Ralph would have liked to, he did not think of leaving, when to do so was to be considered proof that he was afraid, and he, as well as the others, settled themselves down to await the result of Bob's [33] plan, whatever it might be.

Those on the outside, however, were not as contented in their waiting, as they showed in a short time, when Newcombe's voice could be heard addressing those whom he believed he had "run to earth."

"Say, boys!" he cried, "you know very well that I shall stay here until you come out, and the best thing you can do is to give the job up for a while, for I promise you that you will get no chance to do the work this time."

It was quite evident that Mr. Newcombe had no more desire to remain outside of the hut on guard than Ralph and George had to remain inside, and that he was anxious to put a speedy end to what had every appearance of being a long job. It was plain to be seen that he neither understood nor relished this singular behavior on the part of those whom he had no authority to arrest until they had committed some overt act, and that he was anxious to bring the case to an issue at once.

The others looked at Bob, expecting he would make some reply to the proposition, but he made no sign that he had even heard what had been said. He worked industriously at the long tin tubes, neither speaking nor looking up.

"You know that I have got wind of what you are going to do to-night," continued Newcombe, from the outside, "and you know that I shall stay right here until you leave; so what's the use of acting so childishly about it? Come right out like men, and begin the thing over at some other [34] time."

Even Ralph could understand that, in his eagerness to be away, Mr. Newcombe was making a great mistake in thus pleading with those over whom he could have no control until after their work was done, and Dick's face lightened wonderfully as he began to hope the "torpedo detective," as Newcombe was called, might tire of his watching and go away.

All the inmates of the hut appeared to share the same hope, and Jim at once began to replace the broken table with some empty boxes, in order that he might have access to the loop-hole.

"What will be the result of all this?" Ralph asked of George, as the two seated themselves comfortably in one corner of the room, where they would at the same time be out of Bob's way, and see all that was going on.

"That I can't say. It may be forty-eight hours before Bob gives up the scheme he has evidently formed, and in the meanwhile here we are prisoners, for we cannot ask to leave the hut until the others do. It promises to be a tedious thing for us; but you remember that you wished there might be some excitement other than the mere shooting of the well."

"Yes," replied Ralph, with a laugh, "I remember that I was foolish enough to make some such remark, and I am in a fair way to get all I wanted."

By this time Jim had built up a shaky sort of a platform, by which he was enabled to climb to the loop-hole, and he at once gave the result of his outlook to his companions. [35]

"They are unharnessing the horses," he cried, in a tone of disappointment; for he had almost persuaded himself that they would leave the place at once. "Newcombe's team is directly in front, and the other two are drawn up on either side, about fifty yards from it. They are preparing for a regular siege."

"Which is the most fortunate thing for us that could have happened," said Bob, contentedly.

"Why? I don't see how we can do anything when they are all ready to follow us the moment we show ourselves out of doors," said Dick.

"If you can't, I can," replied Bob, working leisurely at his cartridges, and with as much precision as if the "torpedo detectives" were miles away.

"Tell me what you intend to do."

"I'll show you when everything is ready, Dick, and not before. You have said that we couldn't do anything while they were here; therefore, whatever my plan may be, it is better than giving the whole thing up. Now, if your fears will permit, suppose you take hold and help me while Jim watches our friends outside."

It was as if Dick understood for the first time that while they were bewailing their fate that Newcombe should have found their hiding-place, Bob was working industriously at the task on hand, and he began to help him at once, which employment had the effect of dispelling his fears in a wonderful degree.

[36] "Three of the men are watching the house from the front, while Newcombe and the other two are going towards the stable," said Jim; and then he added, excitedly: "I believe that rascal Pete is talking with them, for they are standing there now, looking up towards the roof as if they saw or heard some one."

Dick was disposed to leave his work at this startling announcement but Bob's industry had a quieting effect upon him, and he continued in his office of helper, although with evident mental anxiety.

"Now they have called one of the other men over, and all four of them are going through the motions of a conversation. Now Newcombe has taken some money out of his pocket, and is holding it up in his hand."

There was a moment of silence in the hut, during which all the boys, even including Bob, awaited in anxiety the result of this evident bribe, and then Jim said, excitedly:

"Pete has shown himself, and is reaching out with the pitch-fork for the money. He is selling us to Newcombe, who will know now exactly what we were going to do."

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CHAPTER V.

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BOB'S SCHEME.

FROM what Jim could see from the loop-hole, there was every reason for the young moonlighters to believe that the negro Pete, whom they hired, was betraying them to Newcombe, and each one felt more than uneasy when Jim reported that the detective had fastened some money on one of the prongs of the hay-fork. But they were somewhat relieved when Bob said:

"If you weren't all a good deal frightened, you would remember that Pete hasn't been told where we were going. He doesn't know anything more than Newcombe himself does, and if he can make a few dollars for nothing, why let him."

"But what are they giving him money for?" asked Jim, who was even more disturbed by this apparent treachery on the part of their servant than were the others.

"For an answer to that question, I shall be obliged to refer you to the worthy Pete himself. At all events, the only harm he could do us would be to let Newcombe know when we leave here—in case he don't want to wait—and that is just what I fancy Pete himself won't know."

[38] As soon as the boys realized that Pete had no secrets of theirs worth the purchasing, they grew more easy in their minds, and were inclined to look upon this giving of money by Newcombe as a very good joke.

Jim had nothing of interest to report for nearly ten minutes after this, during all of which time the detective and his men had been engaged in earnest conversation with the negro, and then he announced that they were returning to their wagons.

They had not unharnessed their horses, but had slipped the bridles from them that they might make a dinner from the rich grass, and yet be ready for a start at a moment's notice.

After their return to the front of the house, one of the men drove away with one of the teams, after having received some instructions from Newcombe, and as it was nearly dark, the boys believed that the detective had sent for food, since there was no longer any doubt about his having regularly besieged the house.

All this time Bob had continued his work, assisted by Dick, and it was not until the setting sun had distorted the shadows of the trees into dark images of giants that he announced its

completion.

"There!" he cried, triumphantly, as he laid the last tin tube by the side of the other two, "we are all ready, and in two hours more we will start."

"In two hours Newcombe and his men will be there just as they are now," said Jim, rather impatiently, for he thought Bob was assuming to be able to do very much more than was possible.

"I suppose they will," was the quiet reply, "and I should not be very much surprised if we [39] should see them there twenty-four hours later."

"What is it you propose doing, Bob?" asked George, who, thoroughly tired of the inactivity as was Ralph, was only anxious to know when their irksome captivity would come to an end.

"I'll tell you. In the first place, how far is Hoxie's well from here in a straight line?"

"Directly through the woods, I suppose it is not more than half a mile. I surveyed the next tract to it, and I fancy that is about the distance."

"And if we should start from the back of the hut, traveling in a straight line, we should come to it?"

"Yes; there would be no difficulty about that."

"Then I propose that we simply go out through the back window, unless Newcombe has sufficient wits about him to station one of his men there. We can, by making two trips, carry enough glycerine to shoot the well in good style, and by midnight we should be all ready for the work."

The plan was so simple, and with so many elements of success about it, that Bob's audience testified to their appreciation of it by vigorous applause, which must have mystified the worthy Mr. Newcombe considerably.

"In an hour from now we can begin work. Ralph, who might possibly have some compunctions about carrying a couple of cans of glycerine through the woods, where to strike one against a tree might result in his immediate departure from the world, shall carry the cartridges. Then [40] there will be four of us, each of whom can carry eight quarts. Two trips will give us sixty-four quarts, and that will be enough to start the oil from Mr. Hoxie's well, if there is any there."

Bob's plan was quite as dangerous as it was simple. To carry eight quarts of glycerine through the woods when a mis-step might explode it, was such a task as any one might well fear to undertake. But the desire to leave the detective on a weary vigil while they pursued their work unmolested was such an inducement, as caused each one, even Ralph, to be anxious to try it.

The night was not as favorable for the scheme as it might have been, for the moon was nearly full, and objects could be distinguished almost as readily as at noonday, save when under the veil cast by the shadows.

This moonlight, Bob thought, would not interfere with their plan, since from the back of the house to the forest was but a few yards, and unless Newcombe should station one of his men there, the building would screen them from view.

In case they got safely away from the house, the light would aid them, both in their journey through the woods and in their work after they arrived at the well.

For some time the boys enjoyed thoroughly the anticipation of fooling Mr. Newcombe, and they might have continued to do so until it would have been too late to accomplish the work, had not Bob reminded them that they had no time to lose.

Then they made their preparations for the journey or flight, whichever it might be called. The [41] long, tin cartridges were tied together securely, with wads of paper between to prevent them from rattling; the cans of nitro-glycerine were placed by the window, where they could be gotten at readily, and Bob produced a three-cornered piece of iron, about four feet long, which weighed twenty or thirty pounds.

"It will be quite an addition to your load; but I fancy you will feel safer carrying it than you would one of the cans," he said to Ralph.

"What is it?"

And the tone in which the question was asked showed that the newcomer to the oil fields looked upon this carrying a useless piece of iron through the woods as very unnecessary work.

"That's the go-devil," replied Bob; and then, as he saw that Ralph did not understand, he added: "It is to drop through the hole to explode the cartridges after they are placed in position."

Still Ralph could not fully understand its importance; but he stationed himself by the window, resolved to carry the go-devil and the cartridges any distance, rather than take the chances of being obliged to burden himself with the dangerous oil which the others appeared to regard with so little fear.

Everything was in readiness for the start, and Bob clambered up to the peep-hole that he might be sure the enemy were yet in their position, which was so favorable to the plans of the

moonlighters.

"They are all there except the one who drove away some time ago, and—here comes the other now. He had been for food, and they are pitching into it as if they were hungry. Now is our time to start. They will be at their supper for the next half hour, and by the end of that time we shall be ready to come back for a second load." [42]

Bob looked once more to the fastenings of the doors and windows to be certain that they could not be loosened by any one from the outside, and then he cautiously unbarred the window at the back of the house.

Knowing that the detective and all his force were in front, he spent no time in looking around; but, leaping out, was soon busily engaged in taking out the cans of glycerine which Jim and Dick handed him.

Less than ten minutes sufficed for this work, and then each member of the party was out of doors, Ralph with the cartridges over his shoulder and the go-devil under his arm, while the others carried a can of the dangerous liquid in each hand.

It had been decided that George, being accustomed to traveling through the woods in straight lines by his work as engineer, should lead the party, as the one most likely to keep a direct course, and Ralph had decided that he would remain as far in the rear as possible; for, when he saw the boys swinging the terrible explosive around so carelessly, he felt that the further away one could get from that party the safer they were.

George was not as much at his ease as he might have been, for he had not grown familiar with the explosive, as the others had, and he uttered many a word of caution when they came to those portions of the woods where the trees stood more thickly together. [43]

Their progress was necessarily slow, owing to the care they were obliged to use in walking; but before Mr. Newcombe and his friends had finished their supper, the moonlighters were at Mr. Hoxie's well, where they found their arrival had long been expected.

Mr. Hoxie could understand, from the manner in which the moonlighters had come, that they had run some risk of detection in getting there, and when he learned that they were obliged to make a second trip for more glycerine, he offered either to accompany them or send some of his men with them, as they should prefer.

Bob refused all these offers of assistance, however, for he believed that it was owing to Mr. Hoxie's incautious remarks that the detectives had paid them a visit, and he did not propose to run any more risks than were absolutely necessary.

Since four of them could carry all the glycerine needed to make up the charge, and since Ralph had such a wholesome fear of the dangerous compound, Bob insisted that Ralph remain at the well, while the others paid a second visit to the hut in the forest, a proposition which Ralph eagerly accepted, for carrying nitro-glycerine through the woods in the night was a task he was not at all anxious to perform.

The return through the woods was made in a very short time, the boys walking on at full speed until they were near the hut, when the utmost caution was used. By making quite a detour through the woods, Bob was able to get a full view of the watchful detectives, all of whom were seated on the grass in front of the hut, gazing at it so intently that there was no question that any suspicion had been aroused in their minds. [44]

Before they had left the hut Bob had placed the glycerine near the window, so that it could be reached from the outside, and, after it was learned that the enemy were still in blissful ignorance, but little time was lost in getting ready to return to Mr. Hoxie's well.

Perhaps the boys were no more careless in carrying the glycerine this second time than they were the first, but they certainly walked faster, and when they arrived at their destination, they had been away such a short time that Ralph could hardly believe they had been to the hut in the woods and back.

Everything was now in readiness for the important work, and the question that troubled the young moonlighters was whether the worthy Mr. Newcombe and his assistants would remain looking at the empty hut until the charge was exploded.

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CHAPTER VI [45]

TORPEDOING AN OIL-WELL.

It is safe to say that Ralph, who was interested in the shooting of the well only as a spectator, was the most nervous one of all that party who were about to show Mr. Hoxie whether he had "struck oil" or not.

Bob set about the work with the air of one perfectly familiar with what he was doing, and the others aided him whenever it was possible, George alone remaining inactive, since he considered himself entitled to a seat with the spectator.

The well had, of course, been bored down as far as the bed-rock, leaving an opening from eight to ten inches in diameter and quite twelve hundred feet deep, which was nearly filled with the water that had flowed in and the oil that had been poured in to give some slight resistance at the top of the cartridge.

Over this, grim and weird-looking in the moonlight, rose the framework of the derrick, formed of heavy timbers, and apparently solid enough to resist any pressure that might be brought to bear upon it. Near by were scattered pieces of machinery, tools and such debris as would naturally accumulate around a place of the kind.

A large reel, wound with heavy cord, capable of sustaining a hundred pounds' weight, and with [46] a shallow hook, which would easily become detached when the pressure was removed, was fastened at one of the uprights of the derrick, while directly over the well was a block for the cord to pass through. This was to be used to lower the cartridges into the well.

After this portion of the work had been completed—and all three of the moonlighters moved as rapidly as possible, lest Mr. Newcombe should put in an appearance—the task of filling the shells was begun. The tops of the long tin tubes were removed, and into these rather frail shells the glycerine was poured, Bob handling it as if it was no more dangerous than the petroleum they hoped to find.

As fast as each tube or cartridge was filled it was lowered into the well by the stout wire bail that was fastened to the top, and just under the cover was the hammer which would explode the percussion cap when struck. These cartridges were pointed at the head, and since the point of the second would rest on the top of the first, and the third on the second, the blow which exploded the first would naturally be communicated to the other two.

It was in lowering these cartridges into the well that Bob showed his first signs of caution in handling the explosive liquid, for the least jar or concussion, as the tin tubes were being let down into the well, would have resulted in a premature explosion, which might have had the most deplorable results.

Ralph, seeing that at this point even Bob was willing to admit that there might be some danger [47] in the work he was doing, proposed to George that they move a short distance further away, lest there should be an accident, and the reply he received was not well calculated to soothe his nervousness.

"If one of those tubes should explode on the surface here, we should stand as good a chance of being killed a quarter of a mile away, as here. So we might just as well stay where we are."

And Ralph remained, although he was far from feeling as comfortable as he would have felt at a more respectful distance.

"All ready, now," said Bob, as the last cartridge was lowered into position, and the reel removed from the derrick. "Now in order to honor Harnett's guest, I am going to allow him the distinction of exploding the charge."

For a moment Ralph thought of what an experience it would be, to explode sixty-four quarts of nitro-glycerine, and what an adventure would be his to relate when he returned to college; therefore he marched boldly up to the well, at the bottom of which was such a dangerous agent ready to do its work. But when he saw the others seeking places of safety from the gases, and possibly fragments that would follow the explosion, and when he stood upon the platform of the derrick which afforded so insecure a foot-hold, because of the oil upon it, his courage failed him.

"It may be a big thing," he said to Bob, "to drop this piece of iron through the hole, and be the remote cause of such a powerful effect. But if, when I attempt to get out of the way, my foot [48] should slip, I should hardly be in a condition to care for glory. I am greatly obliged to you for the proposed honor; but think I had better decline it."

"Just as you please, my dear boy," replied Bob, carelessly. "Just find a good place where you can see her when she shoots, and I'll drop the go-devil."

Ralph lost no time in obeying the young moonlighter's instructions, seeking a refuge near the corner of a small tool-house to the windward of the well, and about a hundred yards from it.

"Look out for your mouth and nose just after the explosion," cautioned George, "for the gases which will come first to the surface are very poisonous."

"All ready!" shouted Bob, as he looked around to see that every one was in a safe position, and then approached the well with the go-devil in his hands.

There was an instant's pause as the boy stood with the heavy iron poised over the aperture, and then dropping it, he sought shelter by the side of Ralph and George.

Perfect silence reigned for what seemed a long time while the go-devil was falling through twelve hundred feet of oil and water; but the time was hardly more than a minute, and then Ralph, who had expected to hear a deafening noise, simply heard a crackling sound, much as if two small fire-crackers had been exploded. It had not occurred to him that but little could be heard from such a distance beneath the surface.

"Look out for the gases!" cried George.

And as Ralph covered his nose and mouth with his handkerchief, he could see a black vapor, [49] almost like smoke, arising from the mouth of the well.

"There is no oil there," he said to himself, as second after second went by and there was no appearance of anything save the gases of combustion. He was almost as disappointed as Mr. Hoxie would have been at finding a "dry well;" for after all his tedious waiting he hoped to have been rewarded by seeing the "shoot" of the oil.

He was rather surprised that Bob's face showed no signs of disappointment, for he surely must have wanted to see oil after his dangerous work. But Bob simply looked expectant, with his gaze fixed on the mouth of the well, and Ralph turned again just in time to see a most wonderful sight.

From out of the mouth of the well arose what appeared to be a solid column of greenish yellow, rising slowly in the air like one of the pillars of Aladdin's palace as it was formed by the genii. The top was rounded, and the sides of this marvelous column, held together only by some mighty force, shone in the moonlight like a polished surface of marble, while all the time it arose inch by inch without fret or check, until the top wavered in the night wind. Then one or two drops could be seen rolling off from the summit, and in an instant the entire appearance changed.

With a mighty bound the oil leaped into the air, tearing asunder the summit of the derrick as if it had been of veriest gossamer, dashing the heavy timbers aside like feathers, and spouting in [50] the pale light drops as of molten gold.

For a radius of twenty feet around the well the air seemed filled with this liquid gold that was coming from the very bowels of the earth.

The oil poured out in torrents with a sharp, hissing noise that told how great was the volume of gas imprisoned beneath the rock, which was sending this oily deluge out, and the question of the value of the well was decided.

"It's good for two hundred barrels a day!" cried Bob.

And Mr. Hoxie, who would reap this rich harvest, insisted that it would produce very much more than that.

The damage done to the derrick was not heeded by the owner since the destructive agent was worth just so much money per barrel to him.

After spouting to a height of fully two hundred feet, for nearly ten minutes, the volume of oil, or, rather, of the gas that was forcing it to the surface, appeared to be exhausted, and lower and lower sank the torrent, spreading out in a fan-shape as it lessened, until finally it ceased entirely.

"What is the matter?" asked Ralph, who fancied that oil-wells flowed incessantly. "Your two-hundred-barrel well will hardly produce as much as you thought."

"Indeed it will," replied Bob. "You don't think wells go on flowing like that all the time, do you? They have breathing spells, like men. They spout anywhere from five to fifteen minutes, and then remain quiet about the same time, or longer. You see the gas in the reservoir of oil forces it to the [51] surface; the escape of the oil lessens the pressure under the rock, and it remains inactive until sufficient gas has gathered again to force more up. This well is as good a one as I have ever shot."

Then Bob and his partners began to make their preparations for departure, since, for them to be found with their tools near a newly-opened well, would have been almost as dangerous as to have been caught in the very act of "shooting it."

Ralph would have been only too well pleased if he could have waited long enough to see the second spout, but being a guest of the moonlighters, he could not offer any objection to their movements, and he also made ready for the journey back to the hut.

Bob had settled his business with Mr. Hoxie, which was simply to get the agreed amount for the work performed, and was just getting the reel into shape to carry, when the clatter of hoofs was heard far down the road.

"The detectives!" shouted Mr. Hoxie, as he started toward the tool-house, where, in a very few seconds, he would be counterfeiting the most profound slumber.

"The detectives!" shouted the workmen, as they sought convenient places for hiding; and the moonlighters were left to dispose of themselves as best they could.

"Come this way!" cried Bob, as he caught up the reel, which might be recognized as his, regardless of how he carried it, and dashed off into the woods at full speed, followed by his [52] partners and guests.

It was a flight which would be presumptive guilt, if they were overtaken, but, under the circumstances, it was the only course the moonlighters could pursue.

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CHAPTER VII.

MR. NEWCOMBE'S CERTAINTY.

VARIED and many were Ralph's thoughts, as he followed his friends at full speed through the woods, and none of them were complimentary to the business of the moonlighters. He had hoped there would be some excitement attending the shooting of the well, other than that incident to the regular work, and he had every reason to be satisfied; but he had seen a trifle more than was necessary to his comfort or happiness, and this race through the woods was quite sufficient to take the last bit of romance from the business. The work had been done; but if those who had been heard on the road were the officers, the chances were that they might succeed in finding sufficient proof as to who had done the job.

Ralph understood fully that by aiding the moonlighters, even in the slight way he had, he was, for the time being, one of them, and this thought was far from reassuring. Without any reason, other than to see the sport, he had, perhaps, infringed the rights of those who were using every effort to protect them, and what the result might be perplexed him in no slight degree.

But one thing was certain, and that was, now that he had become involved with his new acquaintances to a certain extent, it was necessary for him to continue with them until he could leave without either compromising himself or injuring them.

Of course, every one believed that the noise made on the road immediately after the well was shot was occasioned by Newcombe's men, who, having discovered that the hut was empty, had started at once for the probable scene of operations.

Under this belief, Bob dashed on toward the hut at full speed, never thinking of making any investigations to learn whether they were correct in their surmises, until, when they were but a short distance from the clearing in the woods, George called out:

"Before we show ourselves, it would be well to find out whether Newcombe has really left."

"That would be only a waste of time," objected Jim, "for, of course, it was he whom we heard."

"I believe it was," replied George; "but, at the same time, it is well to be sure. It will only take a few moments longer, and, since Ralph and I have got mixed up in this thing, I insist that you find out whether any one is there before you attempt to go into the hut."

Bob thought, as did both Dick and Jim, that Harnett was foolishly particular; but, since the young engineer was so decided about the matter, he thought it best to do as he was requested.

When, therefore, they arrived at the edge of the clearing, the party waited within the shadow of the trees, while Bob stole cautiously around as before, with no idea that he should see any one in front of the hut.

While he was absent, Dick and Jim were disposed to make sport of what they termed George's caution, and this merriment caused so much noise that Harnett found it necessary to remind them very sharply that both he and Ralph, without any interest, other than curiosity in the matter, and after they had been of no slight service, might be obliged to pay dearly for the part they had taken; in consideration of which, the least that could be done would be to follow out this very reasonable request.

After this, the boys quieted down considerably, and when Bob returned, they were thankful that they had done so.

Bob startled them all, even George and Ralph, by the information that Newcombe and his men were still on guard in front of the hut, and that, to all appearances, they had not left the stations they were occupying when the party started out to shoot Mr. Hoxie's well.

If this was the case, who, then, was the party that had disturbed them at the completion of their work? This was the question that agitated them decidedly, and they were beginning a very animated discussion on the subject, when George said:

"It can make no particular difference just at this moment who they were. Some one was coming, probably other torpedo detectives, and we ran away. Newcombe and his men are still here on guard. Now the most important thing for us to do is to get into the hut as quickly and silently as possible, and if those others were detectives, perhaps our friend, Mr. Newcombe, will be able to swear that we have not been outside during the night."

There could be no answer to such an argument as this, save in action, and each one started for the hut, Dick and Jim feeling decidedly ashamed of the sport they had made of George's excess of caution.

To enter the building silently was as easy as to leave it, and in five minutes more the party were inside, with the shutters of the back window carefully barred.

Then they gave way without restraint to their mirth at having accomplished their work, while Newcombe watched their hut for them, and they might have continued at this amusing occupation during the remainder of the night, if sounds from the outside had not told them that other visitors were arriving.

"Now we shall find out who it was that disturbed us," said Bob, gleefully, as he clambered upon the improvised platform, that he might see what was going on outside from the peep-hole.

The boys, believing as Bob did, that these newcomers were the same ones whose arrival at Mr. Hoxie's lately-opened well was the cause of their hasty flight, awaited expectantly the result of Bob's survey.

"Three men are riding up," said Bob, "and now they are stopping their horses as Newcombe goes toward them. They all appear to be talking excitedly, and every few seconds Newcombe points this way. Now they are coming right toward the door." [57]

There was no longer any need for Bob to describe the proceedings, for the noise made by the carriage could be plainly heard by all as it came toward the house, and in a very few moments even the conversation of the men could be distinguished.

"The well had just been shot as we got there," one of the newcomers could be heard to say, "and you know that Bob Hubbard was to do the work. You have allowed the boy to fool you, Newcombe, and while you have been here, he has been working at Hoxie's."

"But I tell you that I heard him in here early in the afternoon, and the darkey told me his team was in the stable. Now, how could he have gotten the glycerine or cartridges out of here while six of us have been on duty all the time?"

And from the tone of Newcombe's voice it was easy to understand that he was very angry with these colleagues of his for doubting his ability to watch three boys.

"Are you certain it was Bob whom you heard?" asked the first speaker. "He may have left some one here, and been at Hoxie's before you arrived."

"I am certain there was some one here," said Newcombe, speaking less decidedly than before, "and I would be willing to bet everything I own that it was Bob Hubbard."

"Betting is a very bad way to settle disputes, Mr. Newcombe," said Bob, laughingly, shouting so that every one outside could hear his voice, "and I would advise you to give it up in the future; [58] but in this particular case you would win the money."

"There! What did I tell you?" cried the detective to his visitors; and it is very probable that just at that moment he looked upon Bob as a true friend.

"Yes, Bob is there," said the man, reluctantly; "but Jim and Dick were at the well."

"Here's Dick!" shouted that young gentleman; "and when you two want to hold an animated conversation about either one of us, try not to start it at night, nor so near the door of a sleeping-room as to disturb those who may need a little rest."

"And here is Jim!" shouted that young moonlighter. "So now that you know we are here, where Brother Newcombe has been watching for the last dozen hours, suppose the whole posse of you drive back to Bradford, where you belong."

For a moment there was a profound silence outside, as if this last astute detective was too much surprised to be able to speak, and then Mr. Newcombe burst into an uncontrollable fit of triumphant laughter. He knew that it was impossible for any number of boys to fool him, and very likely he almost pitied his brother-detective for being so simple.

From the sounds, the boys judged that the men were moving away from the hut, and Bob once more had access to the peep-hole as a point of observation.

"They are harnessing their horses now," he said, after he had looked out a few moments, "and I guess Newcombe has convinced his friend that we must have been innocent of the shooting of [59] Hoxie's well."

"The question among them now will be as to who the other moonlighters are," laughed Dick.

And all of them found no little cause for merriment in the idea of Newcombe and his friends pursuing these imaginary moonlighters.

"They have started for the stable again," continued Bob. "I suppose they want to make sure that there is no chance for us to get the horses out by any way other than the front door. What muffs they are not to think how easy it would be for us to do just as we did! They have walked entirely around the stable, and are now coming back again."

It was evident that Mr. Newcombe's friend needed some further proof to assure himself that it was not the boys whom he had disturbed, for Newcombe said, as he came near the hut:

"Bob, I don't suppose you have any especial love for any of us, but you know that what we are doing is all fair in the way of business, and nothing as especially against you. Now, just as a favor to me, I want you to tell us what we have done since we came here."

It was apparent to Bob, as it was to all in the hut, that the question was asked simply to convince the newcomers that the boys could not have left the hut during the night, and Bob, after having descended from his perch, in order that his voice might not betray the fact that he had been on the lookout, answered, readily:

"I didn't know that you had been doing much of anything. You paid Pete for some information [60] which could hardly have been worth the money, and passed it up to him on the hay-fork, for he wouldn't open the door to you. Then you sent one of your party somewhere for food, and since you had your supper, you have amused us by sitting in front of the hut. Is that enough?"

"Plenty, and thank you!" was the reply, made in such a cheery tone that there was no question but that it had been sufficiently convincing.

Then Bob scrambled upon his rather shaky perch once more, in order to give full information to his companions of the movements of those outside.

He reported from time to time as to what they were doing in the way getting their teams ready, looking around the premises, but without taking more than a casual glance at the rear of the house, however, and then he said:

"Now they are getting into their wagons. Now they are driving out on the road, and now," he added, as he leaped down with a loud shout, "they have disappeared to find the parties who shot the Hoxie well, perfectly content that we could have had no hand in the business, since it is a certainty in Newcombe's mind that we have not left the hut since he drove up here. Hurrah for Bob Hubbard's scheme, and Newcombe's belief in his own ability as a detective!"

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CHAPTER VIII. [61]

NEW QUARTERS.

UNTIL nearly daylight the boys remained awake, laughing over Newcombe's credulity, or congratulating each other on the success of that night's work, and then Bob, who for half an hour had been studying some plan, said:

"It isn't best for us to spend all our time laughing at Newcombe, or we may find out that he's smarter than we give him credit of being. If we expect to shoot any more wells in this vicinity, we must change our quarters, for we can safely count on this being watched."

"What if it is?" cried Dick, their success having made him very bold. "Wasn't it watched to-night, and didn't we shoot the Hoxie well in spite of them all?"

"Yes, we fooled Newcombe well; but we might find it difficult to do so the second time. Then again, all our work would not be as convenient to the hut as this was, and if it had been necessary for us to get our horses out, you must admit that Newcombe had us very foul."

And Bob, while he felt thoroughly elated by their victory, did not want that his partners should come to believe that all difficulties could be surmounted as readily. [62]

"But what do you mean about changing our quarters?" asked Jim, who looked upon their hut as something particularly convenient and well located.

"I mean that we have got to build another shanty somewhere, if we can't find one ready-made."

"Nonsense! there's no more use of our leaving this place than there is of our trying to fly!" said Dick. "I ain't afraid that Newcombe will come here again very soon."

"But I *know* he will," persisted Bob. "Just as soon as he suspects that we are about to do any work, he will have so many men around here that we can't show our noses out of doors without being seen. You think I'm right, don't you, Harnett?"

"Well, now, see here," replied George, with a laugh, "I think Ralph and I have had all the moonlighting that is good for us, without going still further by aiding and abetting you with advice."

"But you can tell us what you think," persisted Bob.

"Well, I suppose I may venture that far, after having participated in the shooting of the Hoxie well. I don't think that this place is safe for you any longer, and if I was a member of this firm, I should move everything from here as soon as possible."

It was plain to be seen that Dick and Jim had great faith in Harnett's advice on any subject, for as soon as he had spoken all argument was at an end, and, after a brief pause, Dick asked:

"But where could we go?" [63]

"I think I know of a place as good as this, about five miles up the valley, where by working a couple of days we could fix things up as well as we have them here."

"Then let's see to it at once," said Jim, who thought, if they were obliged to move, the sooner the disagreeable job was over the better.

"I'm ready to start now, if George and Gurney will help us," replied Bob, quietly.

"If we will help you!" echoed George. "You believe in using your friends for your benefit, don't you?"

"Well, in this case, it seems as if you might be of great assistance to us, and yet not do very much violence to your own feelings. You know as well as I do that the chances are Newcombe or his men are or will be scouring the country to-day for those who shot Hoxie's well. Now, if Dick, Jim and I start out alone, and they see us driving about the country where we presumably have no business, they will follow us, and good-by to our chances of getting settled very soon. But if you and Gurney will take your fishing-tackle, Pete and I will go with you in our double wagon, and while he and I are attending to work, I will show you as good trout fishing as you ever saw."

It was a skillfully-prepared bait, as he intended it should be, for he knew that the two friends were fond of fishing, and they knew that he was an authority on the subject of trout streams.

At first George attempted to excuse himself on the score of having business to attend to, but it [64] was easy to see that he wanted to go, and equally plain that Ralph had forgotten all the unpleasant experiences of the night, in his desire for sport.

"You see, you won't be doing anything in the way of moonlighting," said Bob, persuasively, "for you will honestly be going out fishing. You need know nothing whatever about what Pete and I are doing, and since we have a supply of food sufficient to last at least two days longer, you will have no better chance than this."

Whether George really had any work to which he should have attended or not, he evidently put all consideration of everything save sport aside, for he asked:

"Well, what do you think of it, Ralph?"

"I think it is just as Bob says. We shan't be doing anything but that which we have a perfect right to do, and if you can remain away from your business so long, I say let's go."

Bob waited only long enough to hear this decision, and then he went at once to the stable, where he ordered Pete to harness his horses into the double wagon, in which they carried their materials when out on professional business.

The old negro did not hesitate to tell his employer all that Newcombe had said to him. The detective had offered him ten dollars if he would answer certain questions, and, understanding that he did not know anything which could compromise those who hired him, had not thought it a breach of confidence to take the money.

Newcombe had asked who were in the hut, and Pete had told him, for he knew the detective [65] was quite as well informed as he was; but when Newcombe questioned him as to what the boys were about to do, where or when they were going, he was truly unable to give the desired information.

This was all the detective had received for his expenditure of ten dollars, and the old darkey chuckled greatly over the ease with which he had earned the money.

When the team was ready, Dick and Jim started out for the purpose of having their horses harnessed, since they had no idea but that they were to accompany the expedition, but such was not a portion of Bob's plan.

"You must stay here and get the traps ready to be moved," he said, "for if we should all go, it would be quite as bad, if we were seen, as if we hadn't George and Ralph with us. Besides, your horses must be fresh for to-night, for we will hitch them into the torpedo wagon, and it is necessary that they should be able to get away from anything on the road, in case Newcombe should take it into his head to chase us."

Both the boys knew Bob was right, and, much as they disliked remaining at the hut while the others were enjoying themselves fishing, they quietly submitted to what could not be avoided.

Pete put a few tools into the wagon, Bob added enough in the way of eatables to last the party twenty-four hours, and, just as the sun was rising, the real and pretended fishermen started.

The road led directly back through Sawyer, and on the opposite side of the creek, a fact which [66] showed how necessary it was for Bob to have some one with him who would give to the journey

the semblance of sport, rather than business.

The horses were driven at a brisk trot, despite the roughness of the roads, and in less than an hour from the time of leaving the hut Bob turned his horse into what apparently was the thick woods, but in which a road, that was hardly more than a path, could just be discerned after the thicket by the side of the highway had been passed through.

Over logs, stumps and brushwood Bob drove, with a calm disregard to the difficulties of the way, or to the comfort of himself and his companions, until a small hut, or, rather, shanty, was reached, when he announced that they were at the end of their journey.

"Well," said George, as he alighted from the wagon, "so far as being hidden from view goes, this is a good place; but I fancy it will be quite a different matter when you try to bring a load of glycerine here. It would be a job that I should hesitate to undertake."

"We can make the road all right with a few hours' work, and then we will put up some kind of a shelter for a stable. But just now fishing, not a roadway for torpedo wagons, is your aim, and, if you and Ralph will follow right up on this path, you will come to a stream, from which you can catch as many trout as you want."

Taking a generous lunch with them, and wishing Bob success in his work, George and Ralph set [67] out for a day's fishing, believing that their connection with the moonlighters was very nearly at an end.

After leaving Bob, neither of the boys had very much to say about their adventure of the previous night, for it had terminated so happily that it no longer worried them, and the thought of the enjoyment they were to have drove everything else from their minds.

The stream was as promising a one as the most ardent disciple of Walton could have desired, and but little time was spent, after they arrived at its banks, before they had made their first cast.

The fish were as plenty as Bob had promised, and, when the time came for their noon-day lunch, they had nearly full baskets of speckled beauties, that would weigh from a quarter to three-quarters of a pound each.

During the forenoon they had fished up stream, and, when their lunch was finished, they started down with the idea that they would reach the path they had started from just about the time Bob would be ready to return to the other hut.

On the way down, there was no necessity that they should fish in company; therefore, each went along as he chose, with the understanding that the one who reached the path first should wait for the other.

Ralph walked on ahead of George, dropping his line at every promising-looking place in the stream, but meeting with very poor luck, as compared with the forenoon's work. He only succeeded in catching four while returning, when he had captured fully thirty on the way up, and, [68] owing to the absence of fish, or their disinclination to bite at his hook, he arrived at the point from which he had started, fully two hours before he had expected to be there.

But early as he was, he found Bob impatiently awaiting his arrival, and the moonlighter's first inquiry was for the absent engineer.

"We agreed to fish leisurely down stream, expecting to be here about sunset," replied Ralph. "I fancy he is meeting with better luck than I did, and that it will be some time before he gets here."

"Well, we can't wait for him," said Bob, quickly. "We have got everything so that we can move in to-night, and I want to be off. It won't do for me to show myself without at least one of you, so we will send Pete back here to wait for George, and you and I will go on."

"But how shall I meet him?" asked Ralph, not by any means pleased at this idea of leaving his friend.

"That's easy enough to manage. Go back with me, get Harnett's team, come back here behind us, get him and drive home to Kenniston's. You will be there by ten o'clock, and we shall see you at breakfast time."

"But I don't like to leave George, for I promised him I would wait for him here."

"Ah, that will be all right, for Pete will explain matters to him."

And, as he spoke, Bob dragged Ralph along, regardless alike of his remonstrances or his [69] struggles.

On arriving at the shanty the old negro was given his instructions, and without further delay the two started, Ralph feeling decidedly uncomfortable, for it seemed to him that, in some way, he had no idea how, he was being forced to take part in another of Bob's schemes.

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CHAPTER IX.

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THE NIGHT DRIVE OF THE TORPEDO WAGON.

Bob was in such good spirits as he drove along toward the hut he was about to abandon, that if Ralph had been in the least degree suspicious, he would have believed that it was a portion of the young moonlighter's plan to separate him from his friend. Although, if such an idea had presented itself to Ralph, he would have been at a loss to understand how such a separation could have affected Bob's interest.

Had the young student been more acquainted with the work of the moonlighters, however, he would have understood that another wagon behind the one containing the tools and materials for well-shooting would aid very decidedly in allowing the first team to escape, in case it was pursued.

Then again, Ralph did not know that it was against the laws of any town to convey nitro-glycerine through its streets, and that, in thus moving his quarters, Bob not only ran the chance of being pursued by the torpedo detectives, but also by the authorities of the town through which he must pass in order to get to his new camp.

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Had George been with Ralph, the two would simply have driven back to the hut in the woods, and from there to Farmer Kenniston's home. But, in his absence, it would be necessary for Ralph to follow Bob back in Harnett's team for the purpose of taking his friend home.

However earnestly the young student had resolved not to have anything more to do with the moonlighters, either actively or as a spectator, he was, by chance and Bob's scheming, aiding them in a more active and more dangerous way than ever before.

"We shall come right back," said Bob, in a reassuring tone, as he saw how ill at ease Ralph felt, "and George won't have any longer time to wait than will be pleasant, because of his weariness."

"Still I had much rather waited for him," replied Ralph.

And then, when it was too late, he began to blame himself for not having insisted on staying behind as George proposed.

"It is much better this way, because it will be a saving of time for him," replied Bob.

And then he began to tell stories and make himself generally agreeable, in order to allay any suspicions that might arise in his companion's mind.

In this, Bob was so far successful that when they arrived at the hut where Jim and Dick were waiting, Ralph had nearly forgotten his vexation at having left George, and believed that no better fellow or more agreeable companion than Bob Hubbard could be found in all the oil region.

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Dick and Jim had not been idle while the others had been away, and everything in the hut was made ready for immediate removal.

Bob told them briefly of the hiding-place he had found, and then the work of loading the wagons was begun, Ralph noting with a slight feeling of resentment, that George's team was to be loaded as well as the others.

The torpedo wagon was already laden with its dangerous load, and Bob showed it to him as a new feature of the oil business which he had not seen in operation the night previous because of Newcombe's vigilance.

To all outward appearance it was a long-bodied box buggy, with a much deeper seat than is usually seen, and with a double set of finely-tempered springs to prevent, as much as possible, any jolting of the load. When the seat was turned over, working on hinges placed in front, the peculiar formation of the vehicle was seen. That portion of the carriage usually covered by the seat, was divided into sixteen compartments, each padded over springs, and formed with as much care as a jewel casket. In each of these compartments was a can of nitro-glycerine, protected from any undue-concussion or jolting by the springs within as well as without.

At each end, on the left side of the wagon, rose a slender iron rod, fashioned at the top like the letter U, which was used as a resting-place for the tin cartridges, and rising high enough to be out of the way of the driver.

[73]

"There are one hundred and twenty-eight quarts of glycerine in that little cart," said Bob, as he gazed at it admiringly, "and if any one chooses to chase us through Sawyer, they'll take precious good care that they don't get very near. You see, the officers must keep up a show of activity in trying to prevent us from driving through the town; but they are careful not to run us down too sharply."

Ralph had not the slightest idea of what Bob meant when he spoke of officers in the town chasing them, and would have asked for an explanation then had not the moonlighter hurried away to get the other teams ready.

It was then dark, and the boys were anxious to make the journey as quickly as possible, for it

was a task about which even they did not feel wholly at ease.

In the carriage Bob and Ralph had just come in, were packed the tools, provisions, sheet-tin, and such material as made a heavy load, while in George's buggy, was the bedding and other light articles, which made up a bulky load, but one in which there was but little weight.

After the three teams had been loaded, the house locked and barred as carefully as if the inmates were yet within, and the stable door secured by Jim, who barred it from the interior and then clambered out of the window in the loft, Bob called his two partners one side for a private consultation.

Without knowing why, Ralph felt decidedly uncomfortable at this secrecy. It was true that he had no desire to be told all the details of this somewhat questionable business, but it seemed to him as if he was in some way the subject of their conversation—as if he had been and was again [74] to be duped, and Bob was explaining the scheme to his partners.

It was some time before the private portion of their consultation was over, and then Bob said, sufficiently loud for Ralph to hear, much as if that had been all they were talking of:

"Now remember. We are to keep close together until we get through Sawyer. Then, if we are followed, you are to give me a chance to get ahead, and you will keep straight on until you tire them out, if you drive all night. Ralph," he added, "Jim knows the road and you don't, so I am going to let him drive for you."

Then Bob got into the torpedo-wagon, Dick mounted the one that had come from the new camp, Jim and Ralph clambered into George's team, and in that order they started toward the highway, Bob driving leisurely, as if to keep his horses fresh, in case they were called upon for any unusual exertion.

The orders Bob had given aroused in Ralph's mind, now that it was too late to make any objection, the suspicions that his pleasing manner had lulled. He began to see why it was he had been hurried away before George came.

The torpedo-wagon was the one that the authorities would attempt to capture, if they saw it, and George's team, being in the rear, would be the one that would most likely stand the brunt of the pursuit, in case one was made. The other two teams being ahead, could turn from the road into the woods, at a favorable opportunity, while George's horses would lure the officers away [75] from the tell-tale loads.

Ralph knew perfectly well that had Harnett come from the stream at the same time he did, his team would not have been used as a "cover," for he had no desire to implicate himself with the moonlighters, even if they were his friends, and would possibly have refused to act, or allow his team to act, any such part.

But while all these ideas passed through Ralph's mind, he was not certain he was correct in his suppositions, and it was, so he thought, not advisable for him to say anything until the time came when Bob's plans were made apparent. Besides, he hoped that the officers would not see them, that there would be no necessity for flight, and that George's horses would be restored to their owner, fresh and in good condition.

During the first two miles of their journey, there was nothing to which the most careful person could have taken objection, unless, indeed, it was the fact of riding behind a carriage loaded with nitro-glycerine, which was by no means a pleasant thing to do, and then the little town of Sawyer was reached.

Up to this time the horses had trotted slowly; but on entering the town, Bob set the example of driving faster, and all three teams were urged along at full speed.

It surely seemed as if the moving of the moonlighters' property was to be accomplished without difficulty, for the outskirts of Sawyer had nearly been passed before any sign was made that they had been observed, and then the clattering of horses' hoofs was heard, at the same time that a [76] voice cried:

"Halt!"

The time had come when Ralph was to learn whether Bob was making a cat's-paw of him or not, and the suspicions he had had fast became certainties.

No reply was made by the moonlighters; but the horses were urged to still greater speed, and the race had begun.

"Don't drive so fast!" said Ralph, believing the time had come for him to act in George's behalf.

"Why not?" asked Jim, coolly. "They'll overhaul us if we don't put on all steam."

"And what if they do? This is Harnett's team, and there is no reason why we should run away."

"What about all these things that are in here?"

"There is nothing here but what we have a perfect right to carry, and I know that George will be angry by running away from the officers with his team, which is probably well known. We seem to be doing something which we have no right to do," said Ralph, sternly, at the same time

that he endeavored to get possession of the reins.

"Look out! Don't make a fool of yourself!" cried Jim, sharply.

And he urged the horses on until he had worked them up into such a state that it required all his strength to hold them.

To have attempted to seize the reins then would simply have been to capsize the buggy, for the road was so rough that the least deviation from the beaten track, at the pace the horses were [77] then going, would have been fatal, and Ralph was obliged to acquiesce in the flight by remaining perfectly quiet.

On the horses dashed as if bent on the destruction of the carriage. Behind could be heard the clatter of hoofs, as the pursuers did their best to overtake the violators of the law, and in the advance was the carriage, with its deadly load, that the least concussion would liberate in all its dreadful power.

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CHAPTER X. [78]

THE RETURN.

In the excitement of the flight, and the sorrow caused by the thought of the injury which was being done his friend, in which he was forced, unwillingly, to take part, Ralph almost entirely forgot the dangerous load in advance, until an exclamation of triumph from Jim caused him to look ahead, when he discovered that Bob was no longer in sight.

Ralph was almost certain that they had just passed the road that led to the new camp, and equally positive that Bob had driven in at that point, but there was nothing to show that the torpedo-wagon had been driven in there, and Jim was too much occupied with his efforts to keep in advance of his pursuers to answer a question, or even to speak.

George's horses, of whom he was so fond that he would never allow them to be forced to full speed, were urged by both whip and word until they could no longer trot, but were running madly on, while the light carriage swayed from one side of the road to the other, until it seemed certain it would be overturned.

Ralph was powerless to prevent such use of his friend's property, but he entered his protest [79] against it by saying:

"This matter of using George's team to permit your own to escape is something on which I have not been consulted, nor have I been permitted to say anything about it. I think I understand why Hubbard got me away from the stream before George came down, and I say to you now, as I shall say to both of your friends, that it is a mean piece of business, and one which I would do all in my power to prevent if it was possible for me to do so without running the risk of doing more harm than good."

"Oh, that's all right," replied Jim, as he tried to urge the already nearly-exhausted horses to still greater exertions.

But Ralph had no idea as to what he meant by "all right." If he meant that there was no harm in driving at such a mad pace, Ralph was certain he was wrong, and if he wished to convey the impression that Harnett would not be angry, the young student was equally certain he was mistaken.

The sounds made by the pursuers seemed to be dying away in the distance, as if the pace was too fast for them, and as Dick guided his team skillfully into the woods, two miles beyond where Bob had disappeared; Jim gave vent to another yell of triumph.

The moonlighters' property was safe, and it only remained to be seen how much Harnett was to suffer by the flight.

The now thoroughly maddened horses were dashing along the rough road at a most reckless pace, and Ralph shuddered at the thought of what the result might be if they should meet any [80] teams either coming or going. But, fortunately, it was so late in the night that thus far they had seen no travelers, and the only hope was that they would be equally successful until the wild flight was ended.

On and on Jim urged the horses, with no signs of checking their speed, until finally, when it was no longer possible to hear any sounds from the rear, Ralph said:

"I don't hear any one behind, and if you do not pull the horses up soon, you will ruin them, if, indeed, you have not done so already."

As near as Ralph could judge, they were fully ten miles beyond the place where Bob had left the road, when Jim began to quiet the frightened animals, and before another mile had been traveled, he had succeeded so far as to make them sober down to a walk.

Guiding them to one side of the road, where it chanced to be very broad, Jim brought them to a full stop, and Ralph leaped out to examine them.

The glossy coats of the beautiful animals were wet with perspiration, and covered with foam until they looked like white horses marked with small patches of black; their red, dilating nostrils and heaving flanks told of the effect the mad pace had had upon them, and they looked as if it would have been impossible for them to have run another mile.

Ralph even believed that they were already exhausted, and that they were utterly ruined; but Jim treated his fears as childish, being hardly willing to follow out the suggestions made. [81]

"If they are not foundered already they will be unless we do something for them at once. Let's rub them down thoroughly, and then start them back at a walk."

Jim objected to doing what he considered useless work, and would have started the exhausted animals on the return at once, if Ralph had not assumed a tone that startled him.

"During the ride I held my peace, because I could do no good; but now I want you distinctly to understand that you will do as I say in regard to caring for these horses, or there will be trouble between us. I should not hesitate for a moment, after what you have done, to leave you here and drive back alone."

"You might not hesitate, providing you could get me out of the carriage," replied Jim, pertly; "but I might have something to say if you should attempt any interference."

"Look here, Mr. James Lansel," said Ralph, decidedly, trying not to betray by his voice the anger he felt, "you will please understand now that I have interfered, and that I shall do exactly what I say. You will come out here and help me to care for these horses you have abused, or I shall endeavor to prove to your entire satisfaction which one of us is master."

While Ralph had been speaking he had unfastened the traces of the horses, and by the time he concluded, one of the animals was clear from the carriage. Had he not done so it is extremely probable that Jim might have tried to run away and leave him, instead of being left. As it was, [82] however, he apparently did not think it either a pleasant or a safe operation to measure strength with a boy fresh from school, and after a moment's hesitation, in a very sulky sort of way he alighted, doing as Ralph had commanded.

The gallant little steeds were rubbed down well with dried grass; Ralph rinsed their mouths out as cleanly as possible with water from the side of the road, but taking good care not to allow them any to drink, and for an hour the two boys—one through fear, and the other because of his care for his friend's property—did all they could for the comfort of the animals.

During all this time Jim had not spoken once, and Ralph was quite content to let him sulk as much as he wished; he felt as though Jim and his partners had done him a grievous wrong in placing him in such a position as made it seem that he had aided in the abusing and temporary theft of George's horses, and if the entire party of moonlighters chose to be angry with him he did not care.

At the end of the hour Ralph said to the still angry, injured Jim:

"We will harness them now, and I will drive on the way back."

"You can do just as you please," replied Jim, "I've got nothing to do with it, and I wash my hands of the whole affair."

"You may wash your hands of this portion of the affair as much as you please; but you'll take the full share of responsibility for having driven out here." [83]

Jim made no reply, which was a matter of but little moment, so Ralph thought; but he assisted in harnessing the horses, and when that was done, he took his seat in the carriage like a martyr.

Ralph followed him, and, gathering up the reins, he allowed the horses to choose their own gait going back, a tenderness towards animals that Jim looked upon with the most supreme contempt.

As a matter of course, their progress was very slow, for the animals were so weary that they had no desire to go faster than a walk; and still, without speaking, the two boys rode on, occupying three hours in returning over the same distance they had come in one.

To find in the night the place into which Bob had driven was an extremely difficult task, and more than once did Ralph stop the horses by the side of the road, calling vigorously to George, in the belief that they had reached the new quarters of the moonlighters.

It was not until after they had made four such mistakes that they heard George's voice in reply, and then he and Pete came out to lead the horses in through the thicket of bushes that screened the entrance of the road.

Ralph saw at once by the look on his friend's face, and the solicitude with which he examined his horses, that Bob had told the first portion of the story, which had been more than displeasing

to him.

"Did you drive all the way, Ralph?" he asked. [84]

And his tone was far from being as friendly as usual.

"I had nothing whatever to do with the horses or the trip, except to help rub them down when we stopped, and to drive home," replied Ralph, almost indignant that George should think even for a moment that he would have countenanced such a thing.

Harnett said no more then, but busied himself in caring for the animals by unharnessing and feeding them.

Jim soon joined his partners in the hut, and after he had gone, George asked Ralph for the particulars of the chase, which were given minutely.

After he had finished the story, not without several interruptions from George, he asked:

"How long are you going to stay here?"

"Only until morning. I would have gone home to-night if the horses had not had such a long and hard drive; but as it is, we can do no better than to stay here a while, and early in the morning we will say good-by to Mr. Bob Hubbard and his partners, trying to get out of the trouble they have placed us in as cheaply as possible."

"Why, is there anything new?" asked Ralph, anxiously.

"Nothing save this last scheme of Bob's, and that is quite enough. I don't consider shooting wells as anything really illegal, for I do not believe that the patent can be held. But when it comes to violating a town ordinance by carrying a large quantity of nitro-glycerine through it in the manner Bob did, I consider a great wrong has been done, for it endangers the lives of every one [85] living there. We shall probably hear from it very soon, for my team is well known in Sawyer. Then again, Bob knew that such a thing would injure me seriously in my business. I set myself up as civil engineer, and thereby ask people to employ me. That they will have every reason to refuse to do when they see me mixed up with Bob Hubbard's mad actions."

Ralph had thought the matter serious enough before; but now he understood from what George had said just how much trouble might grow out of it, and all the anger he had felt during the ride was revived.

"I wish I had stopped the horses, as I had a mind to do during the drive, regardless of whether I smashed the carriage or not," he said, bitterly. "I felt that things were going wrong in some way when I first left here with Bob, but I didn't know in what way, and what he said was so practical that I couldn't give a single good reason as to why I should not do as he said."

"I'm not blaming you, Ralph, for I know as well as you do that it was not your fault. It was a portion of one of Bob's schemes, and, without caring how much he has injured us, he is probably congratulating himself on its perfect success. But come, let's go and lie down for a little while, and when we do get away from here in the morning, we will be careful not to place ourselves where Bob can use us again."

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CHAPTER XI. [86]

THE STORM IN THE VALLEY.

JUDGING from appearances, when they entered the new cabin of the moonlighters, Ralph concluded that George had said some hard things to Bob because of the part he had obliged him to play. When the two went in to get the few hours of sleep they needed so sadly, for they had been awake during all of the previous night, no one spoke. They were all having what Ralph afterward described as a grand sulking match; but neither one of their guests paid the slightest attention to their ill humor.

It was then very late in the night, and, tired as each one was, it was but a few moments before the camp was in a state of complete repose, from which neither moonlighter, engineer nor student awakened until the sun had been looking in upon them nearly an hour.

If Bob had been cross the previous evening, his sleep had restored him to his usual good humor, and he greeted Ralph and George with the cheeriest of smiles.

"I say, old fellow," he began, when Harnett returned from making his toilet at the brook-side, "I [87] realize that we played you a dirty kind of a trick in using your team as we did last night; but at the time I was so anxious to get everything over here all right that I did not stop to think about it.

Of course, I can't undo what has been done, but if any money trouble comes to you because of last night's work, neither you nor Gurney shall lose a cent. Try to forget it, won't you, George? Shake hands with me, and say that you will."

Very few could withstand Bob Hubbard when he spoke as he did then, and Harnett's anger began to vanish immediately his moonlighting friend spoke.

"We'll say no more about it, Bob; and I'll believe you wouldn't have done such a thing to me if you had taken time to think it over," replied George, as he shook hands not only with Bob, but with the other two.

"Now, Gurney, come right up, and say that you bear no grudge against Jim. He knows that you were in the right when you insisted on having the horses cared for, and he would have known it last night if he hadn't got excited, as he always does when anything is up."

Jim came up with outstretched hand as Bob spoke, and in a few moments the party were friendly once more, although the determination which Ralph and George had formed, relative to not visiting the moonlighters in their haunts again, was still as strong as ever.

With the provisions they had on hand, and the fish that had been caught the day before, Pete served up such a breakfast as would have tempted an epicure, and it may be imagined with what [88] zest these hungry boys attacked it.

Bob and his party intended to remain where they were during that day, at least, for it would be necessary to do many things to the shanty before it would be even a secure hiding-place for their goods, and although they urged that their visitors remain with them, George was still firm in his determination to return to the Kenniston farm as soon as he had finished breakfast.

It was not until after Bob had exhausted every other argument in vain that he said:

"I think it would be much better, George, if you should stay here to-day, and give the people a chance to cool off in regard to last night's proceedings. If you go through Sawyer this morning, they may make it disagreeable for you."

"That is one reason why I am determined to go at once. If any trouble is to come of your drive, I want it over as soon as possible, and the sooner I show myself in Sawyer, the more satisfied I shall feel."

"But the chances are that the matter will drop through if you keep out of sight for a day or two," persisted Bob, almost entreatingly.

"And I don't want it to drop through. If they propose to make any trouble, I prefer to meet them rather than wait around in the hope that it will be forgotten. I am obliged to earn my living, and from these people here, for the time being. Therefore, they will be doing me a very great favor if they find out exactly how far I am responsible for last night's work." [89]

It was useless to attempt to persuade George to do other than that which he had decided upon, and Bob recognized that fact. He said nothing more against the departure of his guests, but did all in his power to aid them in getting ready for the journey.

The horses did not appear to be affected in the least by their hard drive on the previous night, and this, more than anything else, caused George to feel less hard toward his friends, the moonlighters.

It was nine o'clock in the morning before Ralph and George were ready to set out, and as they were starting, Bob called out:

"Remember, we shall stand whatever my drive may cost you, and this evening we will meet you at home."

There was a feeling of positive relief in Ralph's heart when they drove out into the road, the trees behind shutting out the moonlighters from view. It was as if he had been suffering from some disagreeable nightmare, and he would have been thankful it was ended if it was not for the awakening in the form of driving through Sawyer, liable to be arrested at any moment.

"George," he asked, at length, "do you really think that what was done last night will injure your business prospects?"

"I feel so certain of it that I shall begin to make preparations to leave here as soon as I finish what I have on hand. I certainly know that I would not employ a man who would deliberately [90] assist in carrying a large quantity of glycerine through a town, and at the same time drive in the most reckless manner."

"But you can prove that you were not with the party, and that you knew nothing of what was being done."

"Yes, I can prove that, if they give me the opportunity, and I am now in the position of a man who longs most ardently to be arrested, but yet who does not dare to appear too eager about it."

"I can't say that I want to be arrested," said Ralph, dubiously, "for father and mother would think I had been doing something terrible; but I would be perfectly willing to stand it if it would do you any good."

"It is about the only thing that can do me any good," replied George, decidedly; and then he added, quickly: "But we won't talk any more about it. Let us enjoy this ride thoroughly, for we have just escaped from the moonlighters' den. I can't say, however, that our troubles are entirely over; for, by the looks of those black clouds, we shall stand a chance of getting a drenching."

It was as George had said. The sky, which had been cloudless when they started, was now being obscured by black, angry-looking clouds, which threatened at any moment to break and pour their burden of water upon the parched earth.

Had they been riding where no shelter could be found, both the boys would have been alarmed, for there was every indication of a heavy shower; but since there were houses along the road in [91] which they could take shelter at almost any moment, they rode on, determined to get as near as possible to their destination before the storm burst.

George urged the horses along, hoping that they might reach the town of Sawyer before the rain came; but in this he was mistaken, for, before they had ridden five minutes from the time he first spoke, the great drops that acted as *avant couriers* to the large body of water, descended, and the boys had just time to drive under a rude shed before the storm was upon them.

A vivid flash of lightning, followed immediately by a deafening peal of thunder, was the prelude to as terrific a thunder-storm as the boys had ever seen, and, as the rain descended in what seemed to be sheets of water rather than drops, the lightning flashed almost incessantly, while the thunder roared until it seemed as if the very earth was shaken.

Even George had never passed a summer in this section of the country before, and he knew no more than did Ralph the destruction often caused by the electric current where so much inflammable material is stored.

Without a thought of the possible catastrophe that might occur, they remained under their apology for a shelter, through which the water poured in anything but tiny streams, looking out at the majestic spectacle, fearing only that the wind might throw the frail shed down upon them.

"Look there!" cried Ralph, as an unusually brilliant flash was seen. "It almost appeared as if the [92] lightning ran entirely around that oil-tank. I wonder if those are ever struck?"

"It must make sad work if they are," replied George, thinking for the first time of such a possibility. "In that tank alone there must be fully thirty-five thousand barrels of oil, and the conflagration would be something terrible."

He had hardly ceased speaking, when there came a flash that almost blinded them as it descended directly on the top of a huge derrick, crackling and hissing as it came, and in what seemed to be the slightest possible fraction of time, the air was filled with fragments of the heavy timbers, while, despite the pouring rain, a sulphurous odor was perceptible.

The derrick had been struck, and its thousand fragments strewed the earth in every direction.

"How terrible!" cried Ralph, as he covered his face with is hands in affright, for never before had he witnessed the terrific force of the lightning's bolt.

George stood at the door of the shed, restless, regardless alike of the deluge of water that fell upon him, and of the neighing and stamping of the frightened horses; he was like one fascinated by the awful majesty of that which he saw everywhere around him.

His gaze was directed toward the largest oil tank in the valley, while it seemed as if some will stronger than his own impelled him to look at this enormous construction of iron, filled with its easily ignited contents; and as he thus stood, awed into silence, it seemed to him that the largest cloud was rent entirely asunder, while from its very center a torrent of fire was poured on to the [93] tank, from which the flames appeared to leap to meet the shaft from heaven.

In an instant the entire body of oil was a seething mass of flames, while the very rain seemed to add to their fury. One of the largest tanks in the valley had been struck, and the destruction threatened every living thing that could not flee to the mountains from the river of fire that poured out over the shattered iron sides of the tank.

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CHAPTER XII. [94]

THE CONFLAGRATION.

The grandeur of the scene upon which George and Ralph looked was indescribable, the slightest detail of which once seen could never be forgotten.

The lurid flames, surmounted by the thick, black smoke, towered upward as if to meet the

lightning's flash, and then, as the wind and rain beat it down for a moment, the heavy clouds of smoke rolled down the valley like some funereal pall sent in advance of the death and destruction that was to come.

"What can we do?" cried Ralph, when the awe which the scene had brought with it gave place to fear for others, and a desire to avert suffering and destruction.

"We can do nothing," replied George, in a low tone. "We do not even know how to fight the burning oil, and are powerless to do anything, at least until others shall come to direct the work."

"But we can surely give the alarm and arouse the people," cried Ralph, as he attempted to rush out of the shed, but was prevented by George.

"Do you think there is any one within two miles of here who cannot see that blaze?" asked George, as he pointed to the mountain of flame. "We can accomplish nothing, therefore we will [95] remain here quiet until those who are familiar with such scenes shall come."

Ralph recognized the common sense of George's suggestion even when it seemed impossible that he could remain idle, and while the two stood outside the shed, regardless of the furious rain, waiting for those to come who could direct their labor, they witnessed another scene, fitting companion to the one already pictured.

The lightning flashes were as vivid and rapid as ever, save that the glare may have seemed a trifle less blinding because of the flames, and there was no sign that the storm was decreasing. Suddenly, even while it appeared as if a small whirlwind enveloped a derrick that stood on the hill on the opposite side of the valley, another storm of fire descended from the sky, wrapping the heavy timbers in flames without shattering them, and flinging angry tongues of fire on nearly every timber in the towering pile.

For a few moments this lofty beacon burned as if trying to outshine the larger conflagration, and then, as the heat grew more intense, the small tank at its base became a receptacle for flames, which, overflowing, poured an angry stream of fire down the side of the mountain, igniting the various deposits of oil in its course.

In an incredibly short space of time, the valley, which had but a few moments before been deluged with water, was covered with flames and burning streams, which the rain appeared to feed rather than extinguish.

Then, as rapidly as they had come, the storm-clouds cleared away, the rain ceased, and the sun [96] came out, clear and hot, but unable to send its rays through the impenetrable clouds of smoke which overhung the lowland, and wrapped the hills with a sable shroud.

Others besides Ralph and George had seen the first damage done by the lightning, for, living where such scenes were not infrequent, they feared, at each threatened storm, just that catastrophe which had occurred, and a small army of men were already on the scene by the time the two boys had recovered from the awe which had come upon them with this second danger that was pouring down upon the valley from the mountain-side.

It seemed a useless, because impossible, task to attempt to check the progress of or extinguish the burning oil, and yet the assembled multitude attacked it with a will that seemed all the more heroic because of the well-nigh hopelessness of the labor.

Fastening the now thoroughly frightened horses so that they could not release themselves from the shed, which was situated on ground sufficiently high to prevent the burning torrent from flowing around it, Ralph and George threw off their coats and vests, preparatory to doing what they could to check the course of this servant of man, now become master.

Quantities of shovels and pickaxes had been brought at the first alarm, and, armed with one of these, Ralph and George joined the others in throwing up embankments to check the course of the streams of burning oil, in order to hold them confined until the liquid should be consumed. [97]

Then women and children were aiding in the work, for it was to save their homes from destruction that they labored, and foremost among them ever was George, struggling against the fire-fiend, as if everything the world held dear to him was in danger of destruction.

Then came the call for volunteers to get the cannon, which were nearly two miles away, that solid shot might be fired into the tank to open a passage for the oil not yet ignited, and Ralph was the first to offer his services.

He had already had some considerable experience in artillery practice, and when George explained this to some of those who were directing the work, Ralph was gladly accepted to take charge of the guns.

He was a gunner without any artillery, but twice as many men as were necessary started at full speed toward the town, and in a short time the only two cannon that could be procured, without going to Bradford, were on the ground, while Ralph was hastily preparing the charges of powder.

It may be thought that it would not require much skill to hit, at short range, such a large object as an oil-tank capable of holding thirty-five thousand barrels; but since, in order to send the ball through the iron plates it was necessary to hit it full at the place aimed for, otherwise the projectile would glance off, it can be seen that Ralph was obliged to exhibit considerable skill.

While this was being done, the others were throwing up earthworks to divert the course of the [98]
blazing streams, or to dam the oil in such places as it could burn without damage to other property; and it can safely be imagined that but little time was spent in watching what the others were doing.

After George had announced that Ralph had had experience in the use of artillery pieces, and after the cannon had been brought from the town, he was left to superintend the work, a sufficient number of men remaining near to follow his instructions.

The day was a hot one, and the heat from the fire, together with that from the sun, was almost insupportable; but, stripped of all clothing that could conveniently be cast aside, each one continued at his self-imposed task of averting the threatened destruction from the town.

Each moment, despite all that was being done, the flames were creeping closer and closer to the town, which seemed doomed, and, as the time passed, every one saw how useless their efforts would be unless the iron tank could be pierced, allowing a portion of the oil to run off before it could be ignited.

Many were the entreaties to Ralph to hurry with his work; but, fully believing the old adage that "haste makes waste," he completed his operations with deliberation, only hurrying when he could do so without running any risk of a failure.

"Be quick, Ralph," cried George, as he came up, smoke begrimed, and bearing many traces of
his severe work. "Every moment is more than precious now; and, even after you begin, you may [99]
have to fire several shots."

"I shall fire only one at each tank," replied Ralph, calmly. "The pieces were dirty and rusty, and it would have been a waste of both time and ammunition to have shot with them before they were cleaned. I am ready now. Both pieces are loaded, and you shall see both balls count."

Ralph had been working as near the blazing tanks as the heat would permit, and as he finished speaking with George, he shouted for those near by to stand back. Already had the weapons been aimed, and, with a blazing stick in his hand, he stood ready to show either his skill or his ignorance.

Quickly the crowd separated, knowing only too well the value of time, and Ralph applied the torch.

The explosion was almost deadened by the roar of the flames and the sharp reports of the iron plates, as they were broken by the heat, but above all could be heard the crashing of the iron, as the ball, aimed perfectly true to the mark, made its way into the oil, allowing it to spout forth in torrents.

"Hurrah! hurrah!" burst from the crowd, as they realized that the boy, whose skill a moment before they had doubted, had done that which would have required hours for them to do so successfully, and then on every side arose the demand that another outlet be opened.

Ralph was perplexed for a moment, since the other cannon was aimed at the smaller tank, and he had believed that one opening would be sufficient.

"You will have to put another shot in," cried George. "It will take too long for the oil to run out [100]
of that one hole."

While the crowd were engaged in digging a ditch for the oil that Ralph's shot had let out, in order that it should not be set on fire by that which was already blazing, the young student aimed the second cannon.

Again the word was passed for the people to stand back, and a second ball was sent crashing into the tank with as true an aim as the first.

Then, while all save those who were at work on the dam or helping at the cannon worked at ditches to carry off the unlighted oil, Ralph made ready for another volley.

Two perforations were made in the small tank, and two more in the large one, which admitted of such a discharge of the contents, that all hands could hasten to the relief of those who were working at the dams.

Already was the day nearly spent, and yet the fire-fiend was raging with fury hardly abated. The trees had long since fallen before the fiery blast; the derricks and buildings of the adjacent wells were consumed, while inch by inch the oil-fed fire crept nearer the town.

George had paid no attention to his horses all this time; in fact, he had hardly thought of them until, almost exhausted, he was obliged to rest a few moments, or be entirely overcome by the heat.

Then the recollection of his team, in which he took so much pride, came to him, and he started towards the shed where he had left them.

One glance back at the fiery torrent, which even the children were trying to turn from the [101]
town, and he realized how important was even one man's labor in this battle with the flames.

A man on crutches was standing near him as he paused irresolutely, and to him George said,

hurriedly:

"I left a pair of horses in a light carriage in that shed up yonder when the fire first broke out. Not even one man can be spared from here now, and yet my team must be attended to. Crippled as you are, you can be of no service here; therefore, if you will go there and get them, and then drive them to some stable in town, I will pay you well for your trouble."

"I'll see that they are well taken care of, and come back here to tell you where they are," said the cripple, as he started towards the shed.

And George returned to the fight once more.

Had the men been working where it was cool, by their very numbers they could have checked the advance of the flames; but hot as it was, fully half who entered the conflict were overpowered by the heat in a very short time, or obliged to cease their exertions for a while, as George had done. Therefore, although fresh recruits were arriving each hour, not one-third of all the force there could be counted upon as able workers.

It was an hour after George had cared for his horses, as he supposed, that the cripple whom he had engaged to do the work, approached where he was, by the side of Ralph, strengthening the banks of the ditch that carried off the escaping oil.

"I went up to the shed," shouted the man, "but there wasn't any horses there, nor carriage either." [102]

"Where are they?" asked George, in bewilderment.

"How should I know?" was the reply, in an angry tone.

And then, before anything more could be said, a shout, almost of despair, arose from those who were working nearer the town—

"The waste oil has caught fire!"

The oil which had been drawn off from the tanks, through the perforations made by the cannon balls, had been set on fire by the heat of the blazing stream by its side, and the flames were moving rapidly toward the two other large tanks in the immediate vicinity.

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CHAPTER XIII. [103]

A FRUITLESS SEARCH.

MANY conflagrations, caused by the lightning striking an oil-tank, have been known since the discovery of petroleum; but none had ever been so disastrous as the one of which the reader has had but an imperfect account.

Forty-five thousand barrels of oil had been consumed or wasted up to the time as narrated in the previous chapter, and fully as much more was now threatened by the overflow, which had taken fire, and was shooting forth flames most dangerously near the other two large tanks.

At the first alarm the entire force present left whatever they were working at to combat the new danger, when George and several of those who, with him, were directing the work, saw at once the peril to which the town was exposed by this sudden abandonment of the labor which had been performed for the purpose of presenting an impassable barrier to the angry flames.

It was impossible that the now nearly exhausted workers could prevent the flames from attacking the two tanks upon which they were sweeping, and if vain labor was spent upon that quarter, the enemy would, beyond a doubt, gain possession of the town. [104]

To keep the men from neglecting the safety of their homes to try uselessly to save property which could easily be replaced, was absolutely necessary, and the length of time required to persuade them to return to the work they had first been engaged in would decide the fate of the village.

Leaping directly in front of what had almost become an unreasoning mob, George and Ralph tried by their strength to resist the impulsive dash forward, at the same time that they shouted at the full strength of their lungs the reason why the work nearer the town should not be neglected.

For some moments it seemed as if they would be trampled under the feet of the frightened multitude, and then their coolness won the victory over unreasoning fear, as it always will whenever displayed.

The people returned to the more important labor the moment they understood how fruitless

would have been their work in the other direction, and George aided them by his efforts and advice, while Ralph, with a dozen assistants, began a cannonading of the other two tanks that were just beginning to add their fuel to the fearful blaze.

The breeze, which, caused by the heated air, always springs up during a conflagration, now rolled the thick, black smoke first in one direction and then in another, until those who had not already succumbed to the heat were nearly suffocated, and it seemed impossible that any one could continue at his work.

The sun had set, although that fact was hardly noticed, since for several hours the heavy smoke [105] had veiled the scene as with the mantle of night, through which the flames glowed and flashed luridly.

In the struggle between the men and the flames, first one and then the other gained a victory; but neither had made any progress.

Ralph and his assistants had opened vent-holes for the oil in the last-attacked tanks, thereby preventing fully half the oil from combustion, although it was entirely lost.

The female portion of the workers had long since desisted from any effort to check the flames, and had continued their work by preparing food for the laborers, carrying it to them that they might not be obliged to spend any more time than was absolutely necessary in getting it.

During all that long night the people worked in relays, that each might have an opportunity for rest, and when morning came the flames were well-nigh subdued—not so much through the exertions of those who fought against them, as because of the fact that there was nothing more remaining for them to feed upon.

By that time a small body of watchers, in order to see that the remaining flames did not overleap the boundaries set, was all that was necessary at the place where ninety thousand barrels of oil had been consumed or wasted, and for the first time since the thunderstorm had cleared away, Ralph and George felt that they were at liberty to go where they chose. Both were begrimed by the smoke until it would have puzzled their best friends to tell whether they were [106] white men or negroes, and both were in a very dilapidated condition, so far as clothing was concerned.

The garments they had cast off when the work of fighting fire was begun, had been tossed about, trampled on, or scorched until they could no longer be called serviceable, and, half-clothed, dirty and disreputable-looking generally as they were, they started wearily for the town in search of rest, and, what was quite as important, a bath.

Many times during the night had George thought about his missing horses; but it was not until he was relieved from all care which the conflagration had caused, that he began to grow seriously alarmed. It did not seem possible that any one could have stolen them, and he cheered himself with the thought that they had simply broken loose and run away, or that some one living near by had cared for them.

A visit to the shed where the team had been left dissipated this first supposition, for there was every indication that the horses had been taken by some one, since no broken harness was there to tell of flight, and the door was carefully closed behind them, showing an excess of precaution on the part of some one, since both doors had been left wide open when George drove in.

"Some one must have recognized them as yours, and taken them away thinking they were not safe while the fire was raging so furiously," said Ralph, after the survey of the shed was completed, and George believed such was the case.

"At all events, we will get a bath and borrow some clothes first; then we can soon find out [107] where they are," said George.

And in pursuance of this plan the boys started towards Sawyer, so weary that it seemed almost impossible for them to walk.

It was not a difficult matter for two who had worked as hard and done as much service as George and Ralph, to get all they required at the town, once they arrived there, and the bath had revived them so much that both were in favor of finding the team at once, in order that they might get what else they required at the Kenniston farm.

Under ordinary circumstances they could have hired a team with which to search for their own; but now, with every one in that state of excitement or prostration which follows such scenes as the inhabitants of Sawyer had just passed through, it was almost impossible to find any one sufficiently calm to transact the most ordinary business.

Twice George made the attempt to hire a horse, and then he gave up what promised to be a useless effort, both he and Ralph thinking it better to pursue their inquiries on foot than waste their time by trying to hire a team, and being obliged to walk after all.

They began the search by making inquiries in town, of any one whom they met, and by going to each stable or even barn, looking in each place large enough to shelter the team; but without seeing any signs of it whatever.

Then they started up the road in the direction from which they had just come, and at the [108]

dwelling nearest the shed where the team had been left, they heard the first tidings.

The lady living in this house knew George's team, and said that while the fire was at its height, when she had come to her house for the purpose of getting food to carry to her husband, she had seen two men drive toward Sawyer in it. The men were entire strangers to her, she said, and they were driving at full speed, but whether that was due to the fear the horses had of the flames, or to a liberal use of the whip, she was unable to say. She described the men as being young and well dressed, and was quite positive that she had never seen them before.

George's first thought was that his friends, the moonlighters, had taken the horses away, as a favor to him, and this belief was strengthened when, on questioning the woman closely, he learned that she did not know either Jim or Dick even by sight.

"They probably came down when they saw the smoke," said George, confidently, to Ralph, "and on finding the team here, knowing we were at work, have carried it to Farmer Kenniston's."

"I should have thought they would have tried to find us first, so as to let us know what they were going to do," said Ralph.

"In order to have found us, they would have been obliged to meet some of the people here, and they probably did not think that safe, even though everyone had so much to attend to."

"But they would have left word with someone," insisted Ralph.

"That would have been as bad as to show themselves. Bob probably wants to make it appear [109] that he hasn't even been in this section of the country, and if any trouble comes of carrying the glycerine through the town, he will insist that he hasn't been here."

Ralph was far from being as positive that they would find the horses at the Kenniston farm as his friend was, but he contented himself with waiting until it could be proven, rather than to provoke an argument when it seemed that, under any circumstances, they had better return there.

After some considerable difficulty, the boys found a man who, for a generous consideration, would carry them to the farm in his wagon, drawn by a slow, methodical-moving horse, and they set out, George's fears for the safety of his team entirely allayed, and Ralph's increasing each moment.

In order to make sure that the horses had been driven toward the farm, and not in the direction of Jim's home, George made inquiries of all he met on the road, as well as at several of the houses.

Quite a number of people had seen the team, driven along at full speed by two young men, and had noticed it particularly because they believed it had been sent to Bradford to get assistance in extinguishing the fire.

This continued news caused George to be positive that his horses were safe at the farm, and in the rapid driving he recognized, or thought he did, Jim's presence, for that young gentleman was always anxious to get over the road as fast as possible.

But when they had arrived within a mile of Farmer Kenniston's home, they received [110] information of the team which had the effect of arousing George from his dream of fancied security, so far as his horses were concerned.

A farmer who was well acquainted with all three of the moonlighters, had seen the horses as they were driven past his home on the afternoon of the previous day, and he was positive that neither Bob, Jim nor Dick was in the carriage. The men were young, well dressed, and strangers, so far as George's informant knew, and he was certain that they had not been in Sawyer, nor in the vicinity, any length of time.

This aroused all of George's fears, and it was with the greatest difficulty that he could restrain his impatience until the farm-house was reached, when the first question asked was as to whether the horses were there.

Farmer Kenniston was surprised that such a question should be asked, for he had seen the team going toward Bradford the day previous, and, as it was in advance of him at the time, he had no doubt but that it was George who was driving.

That the horses had been stolen there could no longer be any doubt, and how they could be recovered was just what neither of the boys could decide.

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CHAPTER XIV. [111]

THE PURSUIT.

It was some time before the boys, even with the aid of Farmer Kenniston's not very valuable advice, could decide upon what course to pursue for the recovery of the stolen property. The plan which met with the most favor, however, was that they should take one of the farmer's teams, and follow in the direction the men had been seen to drive, which was evidently through Bradford. By making inquiries on the road, they might be able to track the thieves and overtake them, although this seemed hardly probable, because of the start of nearly twenty-four hours which the men had.

If the trail led through Bradford, they could there notify the authorities, and also telegraph to the different towns near by; and if it did not, it was decided that Ralph should leave George, going by himself to try to intercept the thieves by the aid of the electric current.

Farmer Kenniston's best horse, which, by-the-way, was not a very valuable animal, was soon harnessed into a stout wagon, and the boys set out, having but little faith in the success of their journey.

George had taken with him all the money he had, which was a trifle over two hundred dollars, since they might not only be gone a long while, but it was quite possible that if they did recover the team, they would be obliged to incur some heavy expenses. [112]

Ralph had one hundred dollars, which his father had given him for the necessary bills while on his vacation, and this he offered to George, in case he should need on the journey any more than he had. Thus the boys were, as they believed, amply provided with money, and they intended to follow the thieves just as long as they could track them.

On the road to Bradford, George met two men who had seen the team the day before, and they drove into the town, confident that the men they were in pursuit of had entered there the day previous.

Before trying to learn who had seen the horses, George went directly to the chief of police, told his story, and was assured that before morning at least the direction in which the men had gone should be made known.

Under the officer's direction, telegrams were sent to different points where it was thought probable the thieves might go, and, so far as the boys were concerned, nothing more could be done until the officers, who had been sent out to find some news of the team during the time it had been in Bradford, should return.

George was not by any means in the mood to remain idle while waiting for the policemen's report; for the loss of his team, in which he had taken so much pride, weighed heavily upon him. Instead of waiting in the police office for some news, he insisted on going out to make inquiries on his own account, and, as a matter of course, Ralph accompanied him. [113]

It is an easy matter in the country to stop at each house and inquire if the occupants have seen a team pass; but the boys found that such a system could hardly be pursued in the city, since a gentleman might feel insulted if any one should stop him in the street to ask if he had seen a pair of horses, attached to a light wagon, pass there twenty-four hours before.

This difficulty had not presented itself either to George or Ralph, until they were on the street, ready to pursue their investigations, and then they were sadly puzzled to know what to do.

While they were standing irresolutely in front of the police quarters, trying to make up their minds how they should proceed, George was accosted by a rough, but pleasant-looking old gentleman, who appeared very glad to see him, and at the same time acted as if he was in deep trouble about something.

"I am powerful glad to see yer, Mr. Harnett; for I conclude that you've forgotten all about the promise you made to drive out an' see us every time you had the chance."

"And I'm glad to see you, Mr. Simpson," replied George, as he introduced Ralph to Mr. David Simpson. "I have by no means forgotten my promise to call upon you, for I spent too many happy hours while I was boarding with you, when I was surveying the Walters' property, to ever forget that I should like to go again. I have been at work near Farmer Kenniston's, and have not had the time to pay you a visit. But now that I shall have more leisure, I will drive out some day and bring Ralph with me." [114]

"I would be powerful glad to see you, Mr. Harnett," said the old man, sadly; "but it won't be in the old home, and the good Lord only knows where the remainder of my old life will be spent."

"What do you mean, Mr. Simpson?" asked George, in surprise; for the sadness visible on the old man's face astonished him quite as much as the singular words did.

"It means, Mr. Harnett, that I've lost the old place I was raised on, and all for the lack of a little money. You know that I helped poor Tom set himself up in business by mortgaging the farm. If the poor boy had lived, he would have paid it all; but jest when we thought he was gettin' along so famously, he died. I've walked the streets of this town all day, hopin' I could find some one who would help me make up the balance I owe; but the fire yesterday makes everybody feel poor, I s'pose, an' I couldn't borrow a dollar; so I'm goin' home now to tell mother that we've got to

leave the home where all our babies were born, and where they all died."

The old man could not prevent the tears from gathering in his eyes as he spoke, and both the boys felt an uncomfortably hard lump rise in their throats as he finished.

"Can't you persuade your creditor to give you longer time?" asked George.

"I've just come from his office, where I begged harder of him than I ever begged of man before [115] to take what money I had and wait a year longer; but he wants my back pasture to piece on to his own, and says he will foreclose to-morrow," replied the old man.

And then, as if conscious that he was obtruding his own sorrows on one whom he had no right to burden with them, he would have changed the conversation; but George prevented him by asking:

"How much did you owe him, Mr. Simpson?"

"Well, you see, I'd kept the interest paid up reg'lar, an' it come to jest the face of the mortgage, five hundred dollars. I'd managed to scrape up two hundred an' twenty-five, an' up to this mornin' I'd reckoned on sellin' the wood lot for enough to make up the balance. But when the fire come yesterday, the man who was to buy it—'Siah Rich—had lost so much that he couldn't take it."

"Was you to sell him the wood-lot for two hundred and seventy-five dollars?"

"Yes, an' I think it was well worth that. I didn't really need it, an' if I could only have sold it I'd been all right, but now the whole thing's got to go. I don't care so much for myself, but it'll come powerful hard on the wife, for she does set a store by the old place, if it is rough-lookin'."

George beckoned to Ralph to step aside with him, but there was no need of any consultation just then, for the latter said, quickly:

"I know what you mean, George, and here is all I have got."

As he spoke Ralph handed his friend the roll of bills which was to enable him to spend a long [116] vacation, and then turned away, as if not wanting to embarrass the old gentleman by his presence.

"Mr. Simpson," said George, as he added his own money to that which Ralph had given him, "between the two of us we have got enough to buy your wood-lot, and here is the money. Pay the mortgage this afternoon, and then you can make out a deed to these two names."

George wrote his own and Ralph's name on a slip of paper, which he handed to the old man at the same time he gave him the money.

"But I can't take this, Mr. Harnett," he said, while at the same time his face showed how delighted he would be to keep it. "You and your friend don't want my wood-lot, an' you only offer me this money because I have been tellin' you of my troubles, like a beggar, an' an old fool that I am. Take it back, Mr Harnett, an' mother an' I won't feel half so bad about goin' away when we've once left."

"But suppose I tell you that we want to buy the land on a speculation?" said George, with a smile. "There may be oil there, and we may want to sink a well."

"You wouldn't buy that land if it was oil you were after. One time I did think we might strike it, but those as know told me there wasn't any there, after they'd looked the property over," replied the old man, as with trembling hand he held the money toward George.

"Well, we'll buy the land, anyway," said the young engineer, with a smile. "You have said that it [117] was worth that amount of money, and we may be able to sell it for more than we paid you, even if there isn't any oil. So have the deed made out, and leave it for me at Farmer Kenniston's."

Then, before the old man could make any further reply, George walked swiftly on, followed by Ralph, and Mr. Simpson was left to enjoy the generosity which enabled him still to retain the home that was made dear both to him and his wife by so many pleasant, and at the same time sad, recollections.

"Well?" he said, inquiringly, when he and Ralph had left Mr. Simpson some distance behind, wondering if the good fortune which had come to him was real or not.

"Well?" repeated Ralph, laughing. "I suppose you mean to ask if I am sorry for what I have done? Not a bit of it, for I can get father to give me money enough to pay for my ticket home, while, simply at the expense of a little enjoyment, we have made that old man happy. But how will it affect you, George? How can you search for your horses if you have no money?"

"From the united funds we have twenty-three dollars left, and if that is not enough then the horses must remain lost, for I would willingly have given them up rather than that Mr. Simpson and his wife should have been turned homeless into the world."

"If you think that way, then I think we have done a good thing, and we certainly ought to feel [118] that we are of considerably more importance in the world, since we are landed proprietors. But we must look at the property before I go home, for I want to see it; and now come with me where I can write a letter to father, for the longer I stay now, the more deeply in debt shall I be."

"You're not going to shorten your vacation because of lending this money, Ralph, for you shall live with me, and the only inconvenience you will suffer will be the lack of money to spend."

Ralph was not so certain that he would become a burden on George simply because he had expended some money in charity; but just at that moment there was no need of discussing it; and he proposed that they return to the police head-quarters in order to find out if the detectives had learned anything about the team.

Greater good fortune awaited them here than they had thought possible, for when they returned the officers furnished them with the complete description of the men, and reported that they had, indeed, driven into Bradford the afternoon before, but, during the night, had returned by the same road they had come, stating that they were going to Babcock.

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CHAPTER XV.

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THE ARREST.

It was evident, from the information brought by the police, that the men who had stolen Harnett's team had driven to Bradford simply for the purpose of deceiving any one who might search for them, and that they would push on into New York State, where they might find a better opportunity of disposing of their ill-gotten property.

Under the circumstances there was nothing the boys could do save return by the road they had come, and, since it was necessary to do this, it was as well that they should sleep that night in the Kenniston farm-house as in Bradford, where they would be obliged to spend some of their small store of money for lodging and breakfast.

As soon, therefore, as they had received from the chief of police all the information he could impart, they started toward home, neither nearer nor further from the object of their search.

All that they had done on the way down would have necessarily to be done over again, in the hope of learning of the thieves on their return, and no time was to be lost in this second search.

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Of course, if the men had started from Bradford in the night, there would be no use in inquiring for them anywhere between there and some distance from Sawyer; therefore, the boys decided that they would sleep at the Kenniston farm that night, recommencing the pursuit at an early hour next morning.

When they reached the farm-house they found Bob Hubbard awaiting their arrival; he had come there two hours before, and when, on asking for George, he was told that the engineer had gone in search of his horses, had told the farmer that, while he did not intend to remain there during the night, he would wait for George's arrival, which he was certain would not be long delayed.

Not knowing Bob's reason for expecting George's return, when it seemed certain he would be away some time, Farmer Kenniston was considerably mystified by his guest's manner; but the reason for his thus speaking was soon explained when, at a late hour in the evening, George and Ralph did arrive.

"I knew you would come back to-night," said Bob, as he rushed out to meet the friends whom he had not treated exactly as it would seem friendship demanded, "for I knew, if you learned anything at all, you would find it necessary to come back this way."

"Why, what do you know?" asked George, quickly.

"When I tell you that I knew your team had been stolen even before you did, you must admit that I know something about it," replied Bob, feeling fully how important he was just then.

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"Don't be long-winded now, Bob," said George, sharply; "for you know how anxious I am."

"I'll tell you all I know, and I think I may be able to make amends for the trick we played upon you in using your team the other night, unless you think it was because of that that you had your horses where they could be stolen."

"Tell me what you have heard of my team!" exclaimed George, impatiently.

"Jack Roberts told me, this afternoon, that he saw two fellows in your carriage about midnight, and that they stopped all night, or at least the remainder of it, in the woods just above our camp. I went up there with him about five o'clock, and it didn't seem as if they could have been gone more than an hour before we got there."

"Did you find out which way they went?"

"As near as could be told by the tracks, they kept straight on toward Babcock."

"That's where they said they were going," said Ralph, excitedly, delighted at this confirmation of the policeman's story.

"From the looks of the place where they stayed last night, I should say that they don't know very much about camping out," continued Bob. "They just hitched the horses to a tree, and laid down on the ground, with a few boughs under them, instead of putting up a shelter, which wouldn't have taken ten minutes. I found pieces of newspaper, in which had been food, scattered around. So I fancy their arrangements for the journey were made very hurriedly and incompletely. I don't think they had hay or grain for the horses, for I couldn't find any signs of either." [122]

It was evident that Bob had examined the ground thoroughly in expectation of a chase, and as he gave what was really valuable information, gathered simply from a desire to aid his friend, George was perfectly willing to forgive him for any and everything he had ever done against him.

"Then we won't stop here to-night," said the owner of the stolen horses, hurriedly. "If they left there this afternoon, we may stand a chance of overtaking them to-night. You needn't take the horse out, Mr. Kenniston, for we will start right off again."

"Do you think there is any chance of overtaking your horses, even if they haven't had any grain, with this poor old nag of the farmer's, whose greatest speed has been shown in front of a plow?"

And Bob laughed gleefully at the idea.

"It is the best horse I can get just now," said George, fretfully; for he could not see anything very comical in the fact of being thus hampered in the pursuit.

"There's where you are mistaken, my dear boy," replied Bob, in his old, lofty way. "My horses are as fast, and I'm inclined to think a little faster, than yours. When Jack told me what he had seen, I thought there was a chance to pay off old scores. So I harnessed into the light double wagon, put in some blankets, and come here. While I have been waiting for you, I have got a good-sized lunch from Mrs. Kenniston, a bag of grain from the farmer, and now we are ready to start, even if we drive to the lake." [123]

"Bob, you are a good fellow," exclaimed George, as he grasped the moonlighter by the hand, and made a mental vow that he would never speak harshly to him again.

While they had been talking, Farmer Kenniston had backed Bob's horses out of the shed, where their master had left them, that the journey might be commenced as quickly as possible, and the boys got into the wagon at once, George and Ralph on the back seat, and Bob in front.

That the chase would be an exciting one, in case they should get within sight of the thieves, was shown by the way Bob's horses started off, and, for the first time since he was convinced of his loss, George began to have some hopes of regaining his property.

"There is one danger in our chasing those fellows in the night," said Bob, after they had started, "and as to whether you will take the risk, you must decide. They will probably spend this night as they did last night—in the woods. Of course, we could not see in the dark if an ox-cart had driven into the woods, and we run every chance of driving past them. Then again, if we wait until morning, we are just so much further behind. Now, what will you do?"

"I hardly know," replied George, after considerable thought. "What is your advice?"

"Well," and Bob spoke like one who has already decided the matter in his own mind, "my idea is that they won't stop this side of Babcock, and I am certain they won't stop in the town. So I think we shall be safe to drive as far as there. The chances are that the thieves will drive through the town in the night, and stop in the first likely place they come to on the other side. We can start in the morning again, about as early as they can." [124]

"Then that is what we will do," said George, satisfied that Bob had deliberated upon this plan until he was convinced it was the best that could be done.

"Do you believe we shall catch them?" asked Ralph, speaking for the first time since he had met Bob.

"Catch them!" echoed the moonlighter. "I wish I was as sure of striking a thousand-barrel well as I am that we shall be interviewing the young gentlemen before to-morrow night."

But if Bob's hopes of striking a big well had been dependent upon catching the thieves before the next night, he would never have made a success in the oil region, save as a moonlighter.

"There is our wood-lot," said George, as he pointed to a grove on the opposite side of the creek, near which a very old and a very dilapidated house could be seen.

Bob was curious, of course, to know what George meant, and, after the story had been told him, he said:

"It was a big thing for you to do, boys, and Simpson probably appreciates it as much as any man could; but I tell you for a fact that you will get your reward for that good deed sooner than you expect. There's oil in that same wood-lot, and I've sort of reckoned on buying it myself some [125]

day. If I had known how Simpson was fixed, it would have been mine before now, for two hundred and seventy-five dollars is cheap for ten acres, even if there is nothing there but rocks."

"But Simpson says he has had oil men examine the place, and there's nothing there," said George, half believing Bob had some good reason for speaking as he did.

"Yes, he had a lot of old fogies there who couldn't tell the difference between oil and a tallow candle. They walked around ten minutes, collected twenty-five dollars from the old man, and then walked away. Simpson was probably paying ten per cent to old Massie, for I've heard he was the one who held the mortgage, and if he could have got half the amount loaned, don't you suppose he would have waited any length of time if he hadn't seen a chance to make more? Massie knows the oil is there as well as I do, and the old miser thought he was going to get the whole farm for his five hundred dollars. Why, the old fellow would choke both of you boys if he could get hold of you just now."

Bob laughed long and loud at the way in which the money-lender had over-reached himself, and it is hard to say just how long his merriment would have lasted, since it received a sudden check.

They were then just entering the town of Sawyer, and a man had stepped into the road, as if to speak to the party, seizing one of the horses by the bridle as they approached him, to make sure of being heard. [126]

"Hello! What's the matter now?" asked Bob, who had not noticed the man, and was surprised at the sudden stopping of his team.

"I wished to speak with you for a moment," said the man, as he fumbled in his pocket with his disengaged hand, and then as he produced some papers, he said: "I arrest you, Mr. Robert Hubbard, and you, Mr. George Harnett, for violating a town ordinance by carrying nitro-glycerine through the streets."

George had said he hoped he would be arrested, in order that he might show he had not been guilty of such a violation, but when he expressed the wish, he could have had no idea that the arrest would be made just at the moment when, in order to recover his team, it was necessary for him to be free.

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CHAPTER XVI. [127]

PLEADING FOR LIBERTY.

THIS arrest, coming just when it did, was a complete surprise to George. He had hoped a few hours before that it would come, in order that he might have an opportunity of showing that he was innocent of that which was charged against him, simply because his team had been the one the officers had chased. But to be deprived of his liberty now, when every moment was precious, seemed to be doubly disastrous.

To be prevented from chasing the thieves when he was at last on the track of them, was to lose his horses beyond any probable chance of recovery, while to have forty-eight hours of liberty just then, was, as he thought, almost a guarantee that he could recover his stolen team.

Bob was even more excited by the arrest than George. He had the pleasing thought that he was guilty of the offense charged, added to the disappointment at not being able to aid his friend in recovering the property which he was the remote cause of being lost.

He knew, as well as did George, that at the worst they would only be fined for violating the town ordinance; but it was the loss of time just then that made the matter a serious one, and he resolved to do his best to secure their liberty for a short while longer, at all events. [128]

"I won't say anything about myself," said Bob, with a laugh, "for I don't suppose my reputation as a steady young man is first-class; but you, Mr. Constable, as well as nearly every one in Sawyer, know Harnett, and you know he will keep his word. While he was helping extinguish the fire yesterday, his pair of horses and carriage were stolen. We have just got on the track of the thieves, and if we are obliged to remain here now, there will be no chance of recovering the property. Now, if you will give us our liberty, Harnett will give you his word that we will return here at any time you shall set."

"That is hardly a regular way of doing business, Mr. Hubbard," said the man, with a smile, that showed he had no hard feelings against those whom he was obliged to arrest; "and if it was your word alone that I was asked to take, I am afraid I should be obliged to refuse. I'm doubtful as to whether I ought to even consider the matter."

"Of course you ought," said Bob, quickly. "Now, if we should be convicted, the penalty is only a

fine, and we can leave you as much money as would be required to pay those as security that we will return."

"I suppose in that case, and if Mr. Harnett promises that both you and he will come here a week from to-day, I might take the risk of any accident that would prevent you from appearing." [129]

"Now that's what I call acting squarely," said Bob, in a satisfied way; and George asked:

"How much money will be necessary to satisfy you that we will appear for trial?"

"Well, I don't suppose the fines will be over fifty dollars. So, if you leave that amount with me, you can keep on in search of the thieves, whom I hope you will catch."

Ralph's heart, which had been very light when he saw that there was a chance they might continue their journey, sank again when the officer mentioned the amount of security he demanded, for he knew that the united funds of his and George's fell far short of the sum, and what little they had would be actually necessary for their expenses on the road.

"How much money have you got, Bob?" asked George, speaking in a low, determined tone, that told plainly how anxious he was to be in pursuit once more, and of the sacrifice he would be willing to make in order to be released from the meshes of the law, even if it was only for a few days.

"I can't say exactly, but I'll promise you it isn't very much," replied Bob, carelessly, as if he did not think the amount of any great importance.

And, after rummaging in all his pockets, he succeeded in producing one very ragged-looking twenty-dollar bill.

"That's the size of my fortune," he said, as he handed the money to George, as if the matter was already ended.

George had twenty-three dollars, all of which he would undoubtedly need before he returned; but, willing to run any risk rather than be longer delayed, he said to the officer: [130]

"It happens very unfortunately, but we have not got fifty dollars between us. If you will take my solemn promise that both Bob and myself will meet you here a week from to-day, and also that I will report to you on our return, together with this forty dollars, you will be doing us a favor which shall not be forgotten."

The man hesitated for a moment, and Bob said, impatiently:

"Oh, take the money, and let us go. You have got really more than the fine will amount to, for I promise you that Harnett can prove by us all that he had nothing to do with violating the ordinance. I simply got possession of his team to deceive you."

"I shall be here when the case is called," said George, quietly; "for I am very anxious to show that I had nothing whatever to do with the matter; so please let us get on."

"Well, I guess there's no trouble about it, and I don't believe any one will blame me for accommodating you, in view of all the circumstances," said the officer, as he stepped back from the wagon in order that they might drive on. "I hope you will succeed in getting your team, Mr. Harnett. Good-night, gentlemen!"

"Good-night!" cried Bob, as he started the horses with a jerk that nearly threw his passengers from their seats.

And in another instant they were riding at full speed in the direction of Babcock. [131]

"I hardly know what we had better do," said George, thoughtfully. "Here we are starting out on what may be a long journey, with only three dollars in our pockets, and I am not sure but that we ought to go back to town to try to get some more."

"That would never do," replied Bob, decidedly. "If we should do that we could not get to Babcock to-night, and that we must do, if we expect to catch the thieves. We have got food and grain enough to last a day and a half or two days, and we can rough it in the woods, as the men we are chasing are doing."

George would have preferred decidedly to be able to go to a hotel at night, rather than to camp in the woods; but Bob and Ralph were only too well pleased at the idea of living a gipsy life, therefore it was decided to keep on, or, more properly speaking, since no one made any objection to the plan, Bob continued to urge the horses on in the direction the thieves were supposed to have gone.

The night was not so dark but that they could drive a good pace, but had it been daylight there is no question but that Bob's horses would have shown considerably better speed, for their driver was anxious to reach Babcock early, in order that the animals might have as long a rest as possible, before starting on their journey next day, which would likely be a hard one.

Bob sang, laughed, and acted generally as if he was in the best of spirits, while Ralph joined in with him, for he enjoyed this night-drive immensely; but George remained silent, his great desire to get on faster causing the speed at which they were traveling to seem very slow. [132]

It was some time past midnight when they arrived at Babcock, and much as they liked to camp out, both Ralph and Bob would have been better satisfied, just then, if they could have remained all night at the hotel, for they were so tired that sleeping in the open air had not as many charms for them as usual.

"Here's where we would have stopped if we had not been obliged to give up all our money," said Bob, as they drove past the hotel. "But now that we are nothing more nor less than three-dollar paupers, we shall be obliged to do as the thieves are probably doing—make up our bed under the greenwood, or some other kind of a tree."

"It might be worse," said George, who was beginning to recover some of his cheerfulness as his companions lost theirs, "and we will stop at the next clump of trees."

"There will be no doubt about our finding accommodations," laughed Bob, "unless our friends who are the cause of this excursion have engaged all the promising-looking groves."

Above half a mile from the town the road ran through a piece of dense woods, which shut out even the faint rays of the moon, and Bob stopped the horses, while George and Ralph explored, as well as possible in the darkness, for a chance to make a camp.

A small, open space, surrounded by bushes, about ten yards from the road, was the best place [133] they could find, and preparations for the night began at once.

The horses were unharnessed and the carriage backed in among the trees, where it would not be seen by any one who might pass during the night.

The horses were fastened to a couple of trees, where they could feed without danger of getting their halters entangled among the bushes, and each was given a generous supply of grain.

Among other things which Bob had placed into the carriage while waiting at the Kenniston farm was a water-pail, and with this on his arm he started out in search of water for the horses, while George and Ralph attended to the making of what could only be an apology for a camp.

The blankets, cushions and rug were taken from the carriage, and were spread on the ground over a small pile of brush, for the boys were too tired to make any elaborate arrangements for the night.

The carriage cushions formed the pillow to this one bed which was to serve for all three, and with the rug and one blanket under them, and the other blanket over them, George thought they would get along very comfortably.

Bob was not long in finding plenty of water for the horses, and when he returned with it, after it was decided to go supperless to bed, in order to save the provisions, all three lay down on the hastily-improvised bed, little dreaming that they were within but a few rods of those whom they were pursuing.

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CHAPTER XVII. [134]

NEAR NEIGHBORS.

As may be imagined, the sleep which visited the three boys was not as profound as it would have been had they been in bed at Kenniston farm. In the first place, the bed of brush, which had seemed so soft when they first lay down, seemed suddenly to have developed a great number of hard places, while the ends of the boughs, which had seemed so small when they were cut, apparently increased in size after they had served as a bed for an hour.

Many times during the night did Bob get up to see if the horses were all right, and, while he would not admit that the bed had anything to do with his wakefulness, he knew, as well as did his companions, that when sleeping at home, he hardly opened his eyes once during the entire night.

It was at a very early hour, therefore, that the boys were up, and ready to continue the chase. As a matter of course, after having gone to bed supperless, they were ready for a hearty breakfast, and, since they would have plenty of time to eat it before sunrise, they at once made preparations for breaking their fast.

Thanks to the cooked food they had with them, these preparations did not consume very much [135] time, since they were only obliged to take the paper packages from the carriage, and eat such portions of Mrs. Kenniston's samples of cookery as they desired.

Bob gave his horses food and water before he satisfied his own hunger, and, just as he finished this work, he cried, as he held his hand up, warningly:

"Hark! what was that?"

The boys listened intently several moments, but nothing could be heard save the rustling of the leaves, as they were moved back and forth by the morning breeze, or the twitter of birds, as they started out in search of breakfast, and George said, with a laugh:

"This is the first time I ever knew you to betray any caution, my dear boy, and you should be commended for it; but just now I think it is thrown away, for I hardly believe there is any one within half a mile of us who is awake so early."

"I thought I heard some one coming through the bushes," replied Bob, as he began a vigorous attack on the food; "but I guess it was nothing but the wind."

Five minutes passed, during which each one was so busy with his breakfast that he had no time for conversation, and then George motioned his companions to be silent. The warning was useless, for all had heard a sound in the bushes, as if some heavy body was moving through the underbrush, and all paused to listen.

There was evidently some person or animal near by, and moving directly away from them; but [136] it seemed so reasonable to suppose that it was a cow, or some other domestic animal, who had slept out of doors all night, that it was some moments before any one of the three thought of learning the cause of the noise.

Even though they had every reason to believe that those whom they were pursuing would spend the night as they had spent it, each one of that party was so certain the thieves were a long distance away, that the thought that it might be those they were in pursuit of which were making the noise never occurred to them.

It was not until some time after the sounds had died away that George realized how important it was that he should know what had caused them, and then he started up at once, dashing through the underbrush toward the direction from which the noise had come.

Ralph and Bob started impulsively to follow him, and then the latter said, as he pulled his companion back:

"One is enough to find the cow, for that is probably what we have been hearing, and we might as well be eating our breakfast while he is hunting."

Ralph thought, as did Bob, that they had no occasion to disturb themselves simply at a rustling of leaves in the woods, and he willingly followed his companion's suggestion.

But, before either of them could begin their breakfast again, a loud shout was heard from George, which caused them to start to their feet in dismay, for they understood that something [137] serious had caused it.

"Harness the horses quickly!" George shouted again.

And without trying to understand the reason for this peremptory command, Bob and Ralph sprang toward the animals.

It was not an order that could be obeyed very quickly, owing to the lack of facilities in their stable.

The horses were quietly eating their breakfast; the harness was hanging on a tree some distance away, and the carriage had been pulled into the woods so far that it would require at least ten minutes before it could be gotten on to the road.

Bob began to harness one horse, while Ralph attended to the other, and while they were thus employed, George came out of the woods in a very excited condition.

"We have been camping within five rods of the thieves!" he cried. "The noise we heard was probably made by the horses as they led them out into the road, and I got there just in time to see them drive away."

Haste surely made waste then, for all the party were so excited by what they had seen and heard, and so anxious to start in pursuit quickly, that they retarded their own progress by the bungling manner in which they went to work.

Ralph, in his eagerness, got the harness so mixed up that he was obliged to undo all he had done and begin all over again before he could accomplish anything, while Bob searched five [138] minutes for the bridle, which, in the first excitement, he had flung some distance from him among the bushes.

So far as coolness and presence of mind was concerned, George was no better off than his companions. He attempted to pull the carriage into the road, and got it so fastened among the small trees that Ralph was obliged to come to his assistance, lifting it bodily out before it could be extricated.

In this confused way of doing things fully ten minutes of time was wasted, and the thieves had a start of nearly twenty minutes before their pursuers were ready for the chase.

It was useless for them now to reproach themselves with carelessness in not examining the woods when they first awoke, as they should have done, since they knew the thieves would spend

the night in some such place, and quite as useless to complain, because they did not attempt to discover the cause of the noise when they first heard it. Had they done either one of these things, which it seemed the most inexperienced in this kind of work would have done, they would have discovered the team and had it then in their possession.

As it was, however, they could only try to atone for their carelessness by being more cautious in the future, which each mentally resolved to be as he clambered into the carriage as soon as the horses were harnessed. This time George sat on the front seat with Bob, where he could more readily leap from the wagon if necessary.

Bob started his horses at full speed, and George was satisfied that there would be no necessity [139] of urging him to drive faster, for he held his steeds well in hand, requiring of them the best possible gait.

"They have got quite a start of us," Bob said, after they had been on the road a few moments, and while Ralph was regretting the absence of a comb, which would enable him to feel so much more comfortable, "but I do not think your horses have had any grain since they stole them, and if that is so, I don't think we shall have any trouble in overtaking them within an hour."

Perhaps, if Bob had spoken exactly as he thought, he would have insisted that his horses were so much faster, that the twenty minutes' advantage which the thieves had could be more than compensated for in speed; but just then he refrained from saying anything which might make his troubled friend feel uncomfortable or disagreeable.

"Did you see the place where they slept last night?" Ralph asked of George, for as yet he had not told them of what he had seen when he ran through the woods.

"Yes; I came right upon it when I first left you. They had made a sort of hut of boughs near a clearing, in which I should judge the horses had been feeding. The instant I saw the camp, and so near ours that a stone could have been thrown from one to the other, I thought it had been made by the thieves, and I ran at full speed for the road, following a trail that looked as if a carriage had but just passed that way. I got out of the woods just as they turned the bend in the road, and [140] simply had the satisfaction of seeing my team driven away at a gallop, when, if I had done what almost any child would have thought of doing, it would have been in my possession."

"Could you see the men?"

"No; the top of the carriage was up, and I could see no one. They were probably looking out through the window and saw me, for if they stayed so near us since we stopped last night, they must know who we are, and will try to escape, even if they kill the horses."

"I'm not so sure that they could have known who we were," said Bob, "for I have been trying to think if we said anything about the team, or what we were there for, and I do not believe we did."

If the men whom they were pursuing did not know that this party who had encamped so near them were the ones in search of the team, it would be a great point in favor of our boys, for the others would not be likely to push their horses so hard. Therefore, each one tried to recall the conversation, and the result of this thought relieved George's mind somewhat, for no one could remember that a thing had been said which might betray their errand.

The road over which they were traveling was a good one, and the horses were urged along by Bob at a lively rate, save on ascending ground, when they were allowed to choose their own pace, in order that they might not become "blown."

At no one place, owing to the trees on each side, could they see very far ahead on the road, [141] which prevented them from knowing whether they were gaining on the fugitives or not, although Bob firmly believed they were, for his horses had never shown better speed, nor been more in the humor for traveling.

"We shall be on our way home in less than two hours," he said, triumphantly, as the horses dashed down a long hill at a pace that would be hard to beat; and then, as they began the ascent of the next hill, all their hopes were dashed.

During the last ten minutes, it had seemed to Ralph that the easy-running carriage dragged, and as the horses neared the top of the hill, he discovered the trouble.

"The hind axle is heated," he shouted, "and the wheel no longer turns."

It surely seemed as if everything was conspiring in favor of the thieves, for the pursuers were now seriously crippled by a "hot box."

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CHAPTER XVIII. [142]

IN A TRAP.

It seemed so impossible to Bob that such a misfortune could overtake them just when success appeared certain, that he could not believe what Ralph had said was true until he had jumped out and examined the axle.

There was no doubt then but that they would be delayed for a long time, for the axle was already so hot that it was smoking, and they had neither oil nor water with which to cool it.

In the valley or ravine through which they had just ridden there was no stream, and the only thing which could be done was to look for one further ahead, since they had passed the last house fully three miles behind.

"It's no use crying about it," said Bob, with an assumption of cheerfulness he was far from feeling, "for here we are, and the sooner we mend matters the sooner we shall be riding on again."

"But what can we do?" asked Ralph, feeling thoroughly discouraged at this accident, which, however quickly it might be repaired, would give the thieves a chance of making good their escape. "Even if we had a whole ocean of water, you haven't got any oil after the axle is cool, nor [143] even a wrench with which to take the wheel off."

"One of us must walk on ahead until he comes to some house, where oil and a wrench can be borrowed. Bob must drive his horses on at a walk, and halt at the first water he sees. It's an unlucky accident for us, and it seems strange that it should have happened just when it did."

"It isn't so very strange," said Bob, as he started his team along at a walk, "and, as usual, it's all my fault. When we moved the other day, we left our oil behind in the stable, and I knew the wagon needed oiling when I got down to Kenniston's. I was just going to do it when you drove up, and then, like an idiot, I forgot it."

It would do no good to discuss the causes of the accident after it had occurred. The only question was as to how the damage could be repaired, and, after that was decided, to set about doing it at once.

"I will go on ahead for the oil," said Ralph, starting out at a run as he spoke, and in few moments he was lost to view, as he disappeared behind the trees, where the road made a decided curve.

Bob and George walked, while the horses dragged the carriage with its one useless wheel, and in this fashion the boys, who a few moments before had believed that in two hours they would have overtaken the thieves and recovered the property, continued on their journey, as sad and dispirited as before they had been happy and confident.

"If this hadn't happened," said Bob, bitterly, "we should have caught the men before noon; but [144] now it is an open question as to whether they won't get away."

"It will be strange if they don't escape," and George's voice sounded no more cheerful than did Bob's; "for even if they were not sure who their neighbors were last night, they must have been suspicious, and will do all they can to throw us off the scent. But there," he added, with a shrug of the shoulder indicative of resolution; "what's the use of mourning over what can't be helped? All we can say or do won't change matters, and we might as well look cheerful as cry."

"I know that," replied Bob, with a grimace; "but when a fellow is disabled, in the woods, and probably two or three miles from any house, the most appropriate thing is to cry, even if the tears don't do any good."

At this moment, as if in answer to Bob's assertion that they were probably a long distance from any house, and very much to their surprise, Ralph was seen coming down the road waving his hands triumphantly.

"What is the matter?" cried George, not daring to believe that Ralph had already seen a house.

"There's a farm-house just around the bend here, with everything we need in the stable," shouted Ralph, while he was yet some distance away. "I told the owner that we had a hot axle, and were anxious to get on as quickly as possible, and he says we can borrow one of his wagons, [145] or take anything we need to fix ours."

It is needless to say how delighted George and Bob were by the information Ralph had brought. Instead of losing nearly the whole of that day, as they had feared they should, by walking several miles before finding a stable, they could repair damages in a comparatively short time, and could, perhaps, yet overtake the men before night.

"Hurrah!" shouted Bob, as he urged his horses into a trot, the party running behind.

And in a few moments they were in the stable-yard of a large farm, where the proprietor was awaiting their arrival, ready to lend them any assistance in his power.

Both he, as well as they, knew exactly what to do for this outgrowth of carelessness, and pail after pail of water was dashed on to the hub of the wheel to cool it off, even while he was yet repeating his offer to loan them one of his wagons if they were in a hurry to be on their journey

again.

Leaving Bob and Ralph to continue the cold-water application, since not more than two could work at a time advantageously, George went with the farmer to see what sort of a vehicle they could borrow in exchange for their own.

He returned very shortly, however, with the word that he thought it best for them to get their own carriage into working order, since those belonging to the farmer were all so heavy that they would probably gain in speed, if they waited for their own, more than they would lose in time.

This decision was about what Bob had expected, and he continued his work, which had not [146] been delayed during George's absence, until it was thought that they could remove the wheel.

It was a hard, and quite a long job; but it was accomplished finally, and then, when the iron was nearly cold, a plentiful amount of oil was applied; the other wheels were lubricated, and the boys were ready to continue their journey again, having lost by this accident not more than an hour's time.

"You are all right now," said the farmer, after he had positively refused to take any payment for his own time or for the use of his tools, "an' I reckon the waiting here won't make much of any difference to you."

"It wouldn't have been of any account if we hadn't been chasing a pair of horses of mine that were stolen at Sawyer. We were close behind them, and should have overtaken them by this time if it hadn't been for this delay."

"What is the color of your horses?" asked the man, evincing such a sudden interest that it seemed certain he knew something about the missing property.

"A pair of small, dark chestnut horses, in a box buggy, driven by two young men," replied Bob, quickly, confident that they were about to hear some good news, and answering all possible questions at once, in order that they might not be delayed any longer than necessary.

"Then it is fortunate for you that you had trouble which made you stop here, or else you would [147] have gone on and missed them," replied the man, speaking slowly, as if there was no possible reason why the boys should hurry on in pursuit.

"When did you see them?" asked George, hurriedly. "Tell us at once, so that we needn't lose any more time."

"There's no need for you to rush," drawled the man, much as if he enjoyed keeping the boys in suspense, "for if you stay right where you are, you will see them. They've got to come back this way, sure."

The boys looked around as if they expected to see the thieves pop out from some hiding-place near by, and after waiting a moment to enjoy the effect his words had produced, the farmer asked, as he pointed nearly opposite the house to where a road branched off from the highway, leading, apparently, into the woods:

"Do you see that road?" And then, as if realizing how useless such a question was when the road was so well defined, he continued: "Wa-al, I reckon that the same team you are huntin' after was driv up that road about an hour or so ago. It was a small pair of dark chestnut hosses, an' good ones, with a fancy buggy, an' two young fellers drivin'."

"Where does that road lead to?" asked Bob, excitedly.

"That's the joke of it," said the farmer, with a laugh. "It don't lead nowhere 'cept inter my wood-lot, an' that's what made me notice ther team so perticularly, 'cause I couldn't make out what they wanted up there. I tell you what it is, boys, you've got your hoss-thieves in a trap, an' you kin [148] pull 'em out whenever you want to."

"Are you sure that there isn't any way out of that? Can't they strike the main road by driving across some field?" asked George.

"Wa-al, I've driv over that road as many as forty times every year for the last thirty, haulin' down wood, an' I wouldn't undertake to git a wheel-barrer out any other way than I went in. You kin stay here an' ketch 'em when they come out, or go in after 'em—*they'll be there*!"

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CHAPTER XIX. [149]

CLOSE QUARTERS.

It hardly seemed possible to the boys that, after the mishap which it seemed would give the thieves all the time they needed to make good their escape, they could be so near to them that their capture seemed certain.

But the farmer insisted that there was no outlet to the road; that a team answering to the description of the one George had lost had been driven in there, and that it had not come out. Therefore, there could be no question but that they had the thieves in a trap, as the farmer had said, and all that was necessary was to go and get them or the team.

At first they were about to start out without any plan whatever, intent only on getting the horses as quickly as possible; but George realized in time that, secure as the thieves appeared to be against escape, all might be changed by too much precipitation.

If they should rush in recklessly, the men might get past them by concealing the team in the bushes until they had passed that particular point, and then the road would be clear before them, unless the farmer could succeed in stopping them.

[150] It was necessary, therefore, that, in going up this road, which they were told was about two miles long, they should not only see where the thieves had gone in, but where it would be possible for them to come out, in case they should succeed in making a detour through the woods.

The farmer, after listening to the discussion which the boys were having, suggested that they block up the road near its entrance with his heavy carts, and then, if the thieves should get past them, they would be obliged to leave the team at the obstruction in order to make good their own escape.

This suggestion was so good that they followed it at once. Bob using his horses to haul a hay-rack, a heavy ox-cart and two dump-carts into the road, about two hundred yards from the highway, overturning and wedging them in in such a way that a passage through could not be made in less than half an hour.

The farmer, having work that forenoon, which kept him near the house, promised to keep a sharp lookout while the boys went after the team, and to give the alarm in case the men should come down towards the barricade.

Then, all the preparations having been completed, there was nothing to prevent them from going into the trap the thieves had voluntarily entered.

Bob thought they ought to have weapons in case the men should attempt to fight for the possession of their ill-gotten booty; but George refused to consider the idea even for a moment. [151] He had no thought that the men would do anything of the kind, and, even though he was going after his own property, he was not willing to go in such a way as might endanger the life of any one.

"If you want any weapons, take a good stout club," he said, "and I think you will find even that unnecessary, for as soon as the men see us, they will do their best to get away."

Bob was by no means satisfied to start up the road unarmed; but since it was George's property they were in search of, he thought his orders should be obeyed, even though the attempt should be unsuccessful because of it.

"If I was in your place, I should make sure of the men as well as the team," the farmer called out, as they started, "for there's a good many more horse-thieves in the country than are needed, an' it's doin' a good turn to honest people to put 'em where they can't run off other people's property."

George made no reply, but at the same time he did not propose to make an amateur detective of himself, unless the men should attempt to prevent him from taking his own, and then he would have no hesitation about causing their arrest.

There was no difficulty in following the track of the carriage, for there had been so little travel on the road that the impress of the wheels was distinctly seen, and there could be no question but that it would be an easy matter to see where it was taken into the woods in case the men should attempt to hide.

[152] "I guess we had our labor for nothing in blocking up the road," said Bob, as they walked along, "for there is no chance of our passing the team so long as we can see the tracks as plain as this."

"We certainly didn't hurt ourselves piling up the carts, and the time was well spent, if only for the sake of the precaution," said George; and then, stopping suddenly, after they had walked nearly a mile, he pointed to a second track, which led directly into the woods a few yards ahead of them. "They have been to the end of the road, and come back," he whispered. "Perhaps they have just turned in here after hearing us."

For a moment the three boys stood looking at the trail made by those they had been so anxious to meet, and then George said, in a low tone:

"We mustn't lose any time here, and when we do start it must be quickly. We will follow this track in, and keep right on in it; for we shall either find the team now in the bushes, or else the men will have done as I feared—passed us while we were on the road."

There was still a chance that the men might get away with the team if they had succeeded in reaching the road in the rear of the boys, for it might be possible for them to clear away the obstructions near the main road before the boys could run a mile, unless the farmer could prevent them.

George dashed into the bushes, followed closely by Ralph and Bob, and before they had gone very far, it was evident to all that the men were trying to do just as George had suggested.

The track made by the carriage could be followed very readily, and there was no longer any question, after the boys had run a hundred yards, but that they were traveling in a half circle, the end of which would be at the road. [153]

"Come on as fast as you can," shouted George, when he thus saw his suspicions verified; and, regardless of whether he was followed or not, he dashed ahead at full speed, perfectly satisfied that when he saw his team again it would be at the barricade.

When he reached the road up which they had just come, the second track of wheels could be seen, and he half expected to hear the farmer's warning cry, forgetting for the time that any ordinary pair of lungs could hardly be heard a mile away.

Close behind George came Ralph and Bob, both excited by the thought that there was yet a possibility the men might escape with the team, and both running as fast as they could.

"They've come this way!" shouted George, "and now it only remains to be seen whether we can get there in time."

There was no need to say anything to urge either of the boys on to greater speed, for they were making every effort, and George himself was really the one who would be left behind if the race was continued very long.

Bent only on reaching a given point as quickly as possible, the boys paid no attention to anything else save getting over the ground rapidly, and the farmer's voice rang out long and loud before they realized that they heard it.

"Hello! Hello-o-o! Hello-o-o-o!" was the cry.

And when finally the boys did hear it, they understood by the tone that there was urgent reason for them to make haste, for now, beyond a doubt, the thieves were trying hard to remove the barricade. [154]

Panting, almost breathless, but not realizing how nearly exhausted they were, the boys rushed on, intent only on noting the way, that they might lose no time or vantage by a misstep, until they emerged from the woods at a point where they could see that which was causing such an outcry from the farmer, who was taking quite as much interest in the saving of their property as he would have done in his own.

George could see his team halted in front of the barricade they had piled up with so much, and what at the time Bob had thought useless, labor, while the men were straining every nerve to remove it, the farmer standing at a safe distance, screaming at the top of his voice, even though he must have seen the boys coming towards him as rapidly as they could run.

Already had the two men succeeded in removing the two dump-carts, and were now at work upon the hay-rack, with every prospect of pulling it sufficiently out of the way to admit of their driving past; but when they saw the three boys coming down the road, they evidently concluded that they had worked quite as long as was safe, for they began to look out for their own welfare, instead of trying longer to get away with the team.

After one look at the boys, probably to make sure they were the same ones whom they had seen coming up the road, the thieves ceased their efforts to move the hay-rack, and sought safety in flight, running down the road towards Babcock, instead of trying to escape in the opposite direction. [155]

The farmer, who was anxious that all horse-thieves should be placed beyond the possibility of carrying on their business, at once started in pursuit, probably without thought as to how he could make prisoners of two men whom he had not dared to grapple with when they were trying to tear down the barrier which prevented them from getting away with their booty.

George, who still continued to lead the party, stopped when he reached the side of the carriage. He had gained possession of his team once more, and he was content.

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CHAPTER XX. [156]

A SOUVENIR OF THE THIEVES.

EVEN had they been so disposed, neither Bob nor Ralph could have joined the farmer in the pursuit of the men, because by the time they arrived at the carriage they were so nearly exhausted that it would have been a matter of impossibility for them to run fifty yards further, whatever the inducement.

All three stood by the side of the recovered property, panting and breathless, but watching eagerly the unequal race, where the two men could run a trifle more than twice as fast as their pursuer.

The farmer, seeing how sadly he was being distanced, looked behind for an instant, to see if any of the boys were going to aid him, and then, seeing that they had all halted, gave up the contest by hobbling back to his stable, looking quite as red in the face and panting quite as hard as if he had run a thousand yards instead of twenty.

"If you'd only followed me we could have caught 'em all," he said, in a half-reproachful tone, as he came up to the boys.

"I don't believe you could have overtaken them if all of us had been close at your heels," replied [157] George, speaking with considerable difficulty because of the shortness of his breath. "But, as a matter of fact, I don't think we could have followed those men even if the team itself had been ours only in consideration of our catching them. You see, we have run a mile at full speed, and we're about used up."

"Wall, it's a pity to let 'em go, for they'll be lookin' 'round for some other team, now they've lost your'n, an' jest as likely as not I'll be the one that'll have to furnish it for 'em," said the farmer, mournfully, as he fanned himself vigorously with his broad-brimmed straw hat. "But I've seen them chaps before, I'm pretty sure. I b'lieve they're the same ones that was nosin' 'round here four or five weeks ago, lookin' for oil signs over my pasture."

"Oh, we'll hope not!" exclaimed Bob, with a laugh. "For the sake of those who are really engaged in the oil business, we'll hope they do not number horse-thieves among them."

"But I'm sure they're the same ones," persisted the farmer, "an' they talked as if they knowed all about the business."

As soon as the boys had recovered somewhat from the effects of their exertions they began to think of returning, and Bob started to get his team, which had been left in the stable-yard, when an exclamation from George caused him to pause.

The obstructions had not been cleared away from the road, and Harnett was fastening his horses to the fence, in order to help remove that which had been of so much service in stopping the flight of the horse-thieves, when some papers in the buggy arrested his attention. [158]

Taking them up carelessly he glanced over two or three quickly when something caught his eye which caused the cry of surprise that had stopped Bob.

"They were oil prospectors, after a fashion," said George, "and if they knew what they professed to, they have left us a valuable souvenir."

"A souvenir!" repeated Bob. "What have they done—left an empty pocket-book?"

"It may prove to be quite as valueless as one, and probably will; but it looks queer, for it is made out in proper form, and only verifies what Bob said last night."

"What I said last night!" repeated Bob, now thoroughly mystified. "In mercy to me tell me what you mean, and don't stand there mooning away like that."

"Well," said George, who had glanced over the contents of the particular paper which had caused him so much surprise, "listen to me. In the first place, here is what I should judge to be an accurate survey of the wood-lot Ralph and I bought of Simpson. It states the price for which the land was mortgaged, and the probable price for which it could be bonded or purchased. Here is a description of the entire property, and here is given the exact spot, by measurement, where they have found satisfactory evidences of oil. It would be singular if, in helping Mr. Simpson, we had helped ourselves, and still more singular that we should learn of it through those who stole my [159] team, and put us to so much trouble."

"The only thing singular about it would be that there wasn't any oil there," replied Bob, quickly. "I've looked over that place some, and I know it's there; but other people haven't seen fit to believe me when I said so."

"We didn't say whether we doubted you or not," said Ralph, who was inclined to believe fully the information contained in the paper George had found. "When you made the statement, we said nothing, one way nor the other."

"Then why were you surprised when you found the same thing written there?" asked Bob, somewhat sulkily, as he pointed to the paper George held.

"We were surprised to find it in the possession of such men," replied Harnett, with a laugh, "and perhaps also a little surprised to learn that we could have put so much faith in any one of

your assertions. But now, with such eminent authority on the subject, I am anxious to get back, and look at the land for myself."

"What are the other papers?" asked Bob.

"They refer to land near Simpson's, which the men have examined and reported upon carefully, but without finding so many favorable evidences that a well should be sunk. What puzzles me is, how these men could be oil prospectors, and at the same time steal a team."

"I think that is simple enough," said Bob, carelessly. "They were probably prospecting on their own account, expecting to sell their information after they obtained it. They hadn't any capital of [160] their own, but when they saw a fine team alone in a shed, at a time when there was a terrible fire raging, they thought they could steal it without running any risk. If they had got away with your horses, they could have raised money enough on them to buy the Simpson property, and once they struck oil, they would become honest men."

"That's nigh enough to the truth of it," said the farmer, solemnly; and all the party agreed to accept that as the explanation of what otherwise would have seemed very singular.

All three of the boys were now more than anxious to return to Sawyer, that they might learn whether the statement contained in the paper they had found was true or not.

Considerable labor had to be done, however, in the way of clearing the farmer's carts from the road, and all the boys went to work at once, while the owner sat on a rock near by, bemoaning his misfortune in not having caught the thieves, and in not having signs of oil on his wood-lot.

By the time the boys had replaced his carts as they had found them, he came out of his sorrow sufficiently to invite them to remain to dinner, and he urged the invitation so strongly that they concluded to accept it, especially since the horses, more particularly George's, needed dinner even more than they did.

It was a real country dinner they sat down to in the farm-house, half an hour later, while the horses stood before mangers, in which was a plentiful supply of grain, and the boys did full [161] justice to it, eating until their hostess could have no cause for complaining that her food had not been duly appreciated.

During dinner, Mr. Folsom, the host, learned that George and Bob were indirectly concerned in the oil business, and also heard some of the moonlighter's wonderful stories as to the famous wells he had discovered when others had said there was no oil in the vicinity. This was sufficient to revive all the farmer's hopes, which had been slumbering for a while, that he might be one of the lucky ones who are made rich by the discovery of oil on their lands, and he urged the boys to remain with him several days, or, at least, long enough to locate a well on his farm.

It seemed all in vain for the boys to urge that they did not know enough about prospecting to make a thorough examination of the farmer's lands, or if they did, that it would be impossible for them to remain because of business.

The old gentleman insisted so strongly, basing his claims to receive them as guests on what he had done to aid them in recovering George's property, that they were obliged to promise that they would return very soon, and examine, as far as they were able, his entire farm, which he was now very certain was situated directly on the oil-belt, even though wells had been sunk near him unsuccessfully.

It was quite late in the afternoon when the boys did finally succeed in getting away from the too hospitably inclined farmer, and then they started down the road leisurely, for they had a long journey before them if they expected to reach the Kenniston farm that night. [162]

Bob rode alone and in advance, while Ralph rode with George, the two teams driving along side by side whenever the width of the road would permit, in order that the occupants might talk over and over again the prospects of finding oil on the Simpson wood-lot.

And this conversation was continued by Ralph and George when Bob was obliged to drive ahead, both very much excited about it, and both building air-castles on the strength of the idea, even until the weary horses trotted up the lane to the Kenniston farm-house.

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CHAPTER XXI. [163]

PROSPECTING.

It was not until a late hour on the morning after the boys arrived at the Kenniston farm after their pursuit of the horse-thieves that any one of the three made their appearance, and even then

they would not have gotten up so early as they did, had not Jim and Dick paid them a visit for the purpose of hearing the particulars of the chase.

Bob's partners paid no attention to Farmer Kenniston when he proposed that they wait until the boys should awaken, since the chances were that they needed a considerable amount of sleep; but insisted on paying a visit to their partner in bed, which effectually prevented him from enjoying another morning nap.

When Ralph and George made their appearance half an hour later, Bob had told his friends all the particulars of the chase, including the finding of the report on the Simpson property, and the moonlighters were quite as much excited about it as if they had been the owners of the land. They insisted that George and Ralph should verify the truth of the statement at once, and, without waiting for an invitation, proposed to accompany them.

Just then, owing to the unusual vigilance of the torpedo detective, the moonlighter's business [164] was virtually at a standstill, and they had plenty of spare time in which to prospect for oil, or to prove the truth of the statement that had so singularly come into George's possession.

Both the owners of the Simpson wood-lot would have much preferred to make their investigations alone; but since they could give no good reason as to why the boys should not be allowed to accompany them, nor none as to why the work should not be begun at once, they were obliged once more to start out with the moonlighters.

During the ride home the night before, George and Ralph had discussed the question of what they should do in case oil was found on the property, and they both felt that in such case they should consider that Mr. Simpson still had a claim upon the land, even though they had paid him all he had said he considered it worth.

They would have willingly loaned him the money to pay off the mortgage if it could have been done as well; but that they thought at the time he would not accept, and George had purchased the wood-lot. Now, however, if it should be found that the land was very valuable, neither of the boys thought it right that they should reap the entire benefit, although they were legally entitled to do so.

They had feared that, by advancing the money to pay for the land, they would be seriously hampered in the search for the horses, and when they were obliged to give up the small amount which they had left, to the constable at Sawyer, it seemed certain that they would travel under [165] many disadvantages. But this very lack of money had aided them. If they had had sufficient to pay for their lodging at the hotel at Babcock, the chances are that Bob would have remembered that the carriage needed oiling; they would not have been able to follow the men so closely next morning, nor would they have stopped at Mr. Folsom's, the only place where they could have learned of the whereabouts of those whom they were pursuing.

The purchase of this land, made as it was in pure charity, had been a great advantage to them, and if it should prove a valuable piece of property, they intended that Mr. Simpson should be equally benefited.

The title deeds had been left with Farmer Kenniston, while the boys were away, and there could be no question as to their proprietorship.

The only thing now was to learn whether there really was any oil on the land, and this they were about to do, although it would have pleased them much more if they were to go alone, rather than in company with the moonlighters who had caused them so much trouble.

Jim and Dick had their own team, and Bob proposed to use his horses in the double wagon, so that in case he wanted to return home before George and Ralph did, he could do so, and they could get Mr. Simpson to bring them down.

Since this was to be a regular prospecting trip, which might necessitate their remaining out of doors all night, blankets and provisions were packed into the wagon as before, while, in addition, [166] George carried his surveyor's instruments, that he might be able to locate exactly the spot marked on the paper, in case they should have any difficulty in finding it.

On starting out, George insisted that they should first drive through Sawyer, in order that he might report to the constable, as he had promised; and, although the moonlighters did not fancy paying this visit, they were obliged to do so if they wanted to accompany the fortunate owners of the Simpson wood-lot on their prospecting trip.

There was no difficulty in finding the man who had arrested them on the night when time was of so much value to them, and by the reception which he gave George it was easy to see that he had changed his mind somewhat regarding his guilt, or had heard of the valuable assistance he had rendered during the conflagration.

"I will report to you at the time appointed," said George, after he had told the story of finding his horses; "and then I shall have no difficulty in proving that I knew nothing whatever about the transportation of the glycerine."

"And I believe that you will not, Mr. Harnett," replied the officer. "Since it is uncertain as to whether the case will be heard on the day set, you need not take the trouble to come here until I send you word. But I should like to see Mr. Hubbard once in a while, for he is so apt to fly off

from one point to another that I shall never feel really certain of him until he appears."

"Now, see what it is to have a bad name," said Bob, with a grimace. "I ought to be trusted as [167] entirely as George is, and yet I am not. Don't worry, Mr. Constable; I will be here in time for the examination, and I will also call upon you whenever I am in town."

Then Bob drove on toward the Simpson place, Jim and Dick having preceded the others, for they had no desire to meet a constable even in a friendly way.

Mr. Simpson was at home when the boys arrived at his farm, and the reception which both he and his wife gave Ralph and George was something to be remembered with pleasure by them for many a day.

Had he been allowed to do so, he would have placed everything he owned at the disposal of the two who had so generously aided him to keep the home he loved so well; but George stopped the show of gratitude, which was really becoming embarrassing, by saying:

"You will please us more, Mr. Simpson, by saying nothing about what we did, for we are likely to be repaid in a very substantial way; and if we are, you will get more for your wood-lot than you ever dreamed of."

"Is it something in regard to those two men who just left here?" asked Mr. Simpson, not in the least surprised by what George had said.

"What men do you mean?"

"There were two here when you first came in sight, but they left at once on account of some business, as I understood. They told me that they wanted to buy my wood-lot, and when I said [168] that I had already sold it, they offered to show good signs of oil if they could be paid for the prospecting they had done."

George, Ralph and Bob looked at each other in surprise. It seemed certain that Mr. Simpson's visitors must have been the men who had stolen the team, and yet it was hardly reasonable to suppose that they would venture back there so soon after having committed the crime.

"Can you describe them, Mr. Simpson?" asked George, feeling ill at ease because of the coming of these strangers, and yet not understanding why he did so.

"I can't say I can," replied the old man, slowly; "for, you see, I hain't much of a hand at that sort of thing, an' I didn't look at 'em sharp enough. It seems to me that they were youngish, not much older than you, an' they looked as if they had been havin' a pretty hard tramp."

"What time did they come here?"

"About an hour ago. They said they had jest come from Babcock, an' got mother to give 'em some breakfast."

"It don't seem as if there could be any question but that they are the same ones," said George, speaking slowly to his companions, and looking worried. "I can't tell why, but it troubles me to have them come back here."

"Don't be foolish, George," said Bob, speaking rather sharply. "What harm can they do you? Besides, if they should go to cutting up any capers, it would be the easiest thing in the world to [169] have them arrested for stealing your team, and I fancy that would settle them."

The boys had come, believing they should surprise Mr. Simpson by telling him there was a chance that oil might be found on the land he had sold so cheaply; but instead of doing so, the old man had startled them considerably.

"Well," said George, after a short pause, "we are going to leave our teams here with you, Mr. Simpson, while we start out prospecting the wood-lot. We believe those men who have just left are the ones who stole my team, and if you still feel that you would like to do me a favor, you will keep a sharp lookout over the stable while we are gone, for I do not think they would hesitate to steal it again if they got the chance."

Mr. Simpson promised to remain within sight of the stable-door all the time the boys were away, and as proof that he was able to defend the horses against any number of men, he brought out an old army musket, minus almost everything save the stock, which he held carefully and timidly in his hands, thereby causing his wife no little fear.

"If we should find oil, Mr. Simpson," said Ralph, lingering behind after the others had started, "George and I have agreed that you shall own an equal share of the lot with us."

Then he hurried away, joining the others quickly, in order that he might not hear the old gentleman's thanks or expostulations.

George, as well as Bob, believed they could find the place where the men claimed to have seen [170] signs of oil without any difficulty, and they started out on what proved to be a vain search; for, after they had walked several hours, they were no wiser than when they started.

It was plainly of no use to search in this way, and George started back to the house for his instruments, that he might locate the spot from the directions on the paper, which he still held in his hand.

The boys, glad of a rest, waited for his return, until, after he had been absent nearly an hour, when he could easily walk the distance in twenty minutes, Bob and Ralph started in search of him, leaving Jim and Dick there in case he should return.

Mr. Simpson both astonished and alarmed them by saying that George had not been to the house since he first left it, and then they began a hurried search, which resulted in nothing. They called him by name, started Jim and Dick out even to the remote portions of the lot; but without success.

Strange as it seemed, it was nevertheless true that George had mysteriously disappeared.

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CHAPTER XXII.

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A CRUEL DEED.

WHEN the boys met in the wood-lot at the spot where George had left them, after they had made the first hurried survey of the place, consternation was imprinted on every face. They knew that Harnett would not voluntarily have gone away without telling them, and an undefined but a very great fear took possession of them.

Each looked at the other as if fearing to speak that which was in his mind, and yet all were conscious that whatever was done to find their missing friend should be done at once.

It seemed so improbable that anything could have happened to him there without their knowing it, that no one ventured to put his suspicions into words, and each waited for the other to speak.

"It can do no good for us to stand here," said Ralph, after he had waited some time for a suggestion from Bob. "George is either not here, or else some accident has happened which prevents him from answering. If he had been here, and as he was when he left us, he must have heard us when we called. Now, what shall we do?"

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All three of the moonlighters stood looking at him in silent dismay. They were bewildered by the sudden disappearance, and Ralph understood that whatever steps were taken toward finding George must be directed by him, for his companions seemed incapable even of connected thought.

"In the first place," he said, "let's make a thorough search of the wood-lot, beginning from this point and working toward the house in the direction he disappeared. If we don't find him here, we will try to make up our minds what to do."

There was no dissenting voice raised against this proposition, and Ralph began the search by directing the boys to stand in a row, about ten feet apart, and then walk straight down to the fence, carefully examining every place in which George could have hidden.

In this way a lane, at least forty feet wide, was examined thoroughly, and as nothing was found by the time they reached the fence, the line was formed again ten feet further on, the march continuing until they reached a point abreast of the one they had started from.

No one spoke during this search, for it seemed as though they were hunting for the lifeless body of their friend, and when again they arrived at the fence, they ranged along in a new line, silently, afraid almost to look at the ground because of that which they might see.

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And at least a portion of their fears were to be realized, for as they walked along on this third sad journey, they first found a place where the bushes and ferns had been trampled down as if some desperate struggle had taken place, and then, a few feet further on, almost hidden in a pile of brushwood, they saw that for which they sought.

It was the body of George, looking as if all life had departed, the face beaten by cruel blows until it was nearly unrecognizable, the clothing torn, and lying still as death.

Even then no one spoke; no cry of alarm or of astonishment was given, for this was what they had been expecting to find during all the search.

Neither of the moonlighters had recovered from their first bewilderment, and, as if this show of helplessness on the part of his companions nerved him up, Ralph still preserved his presence of mind.

Kneeling down by the apparently lifeless body, Ralph unfastened or tore apart the clothing, until he could lay his hand over his friend's heart. After an instant's silence, during which it seemed to each boy that he could hear the pulsations of his own heart, Ralph said in a hard, unnatural voice, which no one would have recognized as his:

"He is not dead, for I can feel his heart beat feebly. One of you go for a physician, while the others help me carry him to the house."

"You take my horses, and drive first to Sawyer and then to Bradford for three or four of the best doctors you can find, and drive faster than you ever drove before," said Bob to Jim.

The latter, finding actual relief in having something definite to do, started off at full speed towards the farm-house, while Ralph began to make a rude kind of a litter. [174]

Two fence-rails with limbs of trees laid across them, the whole covered by the coats and vests of the boys, was the best that could be improvised in a short time, and on this George was laid as tenderly as possible.

It seemed to all the boys as if he must be reviving somewhat, for they fancied they could see him breathe as they moved him, and Bob was certain he had lifted one of his hands as if to touch his head.

It was a mournful procession they formed as they moved slowly towards the farm-house, Ralph and Bob carrying the litter, while Dick stood ready to help them whenever he might be needed.

At the fence they were met by both Mr. and Mrs. Simpson, who had, of course, learned the sad news from Jim, and had hurried out with almost as much sorrow in their hearts as if he had been a son of theirs, for they had learned to love George even before he had been the means of saving their homestead to them.

Thanks to the help which the old people were able to give, the wounded boy was carried much more quickly and easily along, and in a short time, which seemed very long to the anxious ones, he was lying on a bed in the farm-house.

Every effort was made to revive him as soon as he was placed in a comfortable position on the bed in the room, sweet-scented with herbs, and with such success that in a short time there was a movement of the eyelids, followed by a low moan which, though piteous, was welcomed by the boys gladly, for it told of life. [175]

From the time they had found him stricken down by some murderous hand, Ralph had noticed that George still held tightly clutched in his left hand a piece of paper.

He had hoped from the first that it might afford some clue to the murderous assailants, and had tried to remove it, but without success.

Now, however, when it seemed as if consciousness was returning, the hands unclasped from what had probably been a clutch at those who had attacked him, and the paper fell to the floor.

The first physician whom Jim had found entered at this moment, and, picking the paper up, Ralph held it until he should hear the medical man's decision.

He was disappointed in getting this very speedily, however, for the physician began a long and careful examination of the injured boy, in which he was assisted by the second doctor, who arrived ten minutes later.

George was in good hands now, and since they could do nothing to aid him, Ralph beckoned to Bob to leave the room, for he was anxious to learn what was contained in the paper, and wished that some one should share the secret with him.

"This is what George had in his hand when we found him," he said, when they were out of the house, "and I think it will, perhaps, explain who it was who tried to murder him."

Bob stood breathlessly waiting for Ralph to open the paper which was crumpled tightly up in that almost death clutch, and as he saw it, he uttered a cry of surprise and anger. [176]

It was a fragment of the description of the wood-lot which had been found in the carriage when the thieves left it.

"Those men have done this," cried Bob, as he clenched his hands in impotent rage—"the ones whom George would not help catch after they had stolen his team. They knew he had this paper, and when they saw him, they either tried simply to get possession of it, George resisting, or at the first attempted to kill him."

"They can't be very far from here," said Ralph, as if wondering what other crime they would attempt to commit before they left.

"No, and they shan't get very far, either. I'll send Dick over to Sawyer for the officers, and if it is possible, we'll have those fellows where they can't do any more mischief."

Dick was only too willing to go when he heard what Bob had to tell him, and in the team he had driven over in he started at nearly as rapid a pace as Jim had.

Very shortly after he had gone, Jim returned. The first physician was from Bradford, and he had met him on the road, while the second he had found in Sawyer, having gone there to visit a patient. Both were said to be very skillful, and Jim had sensibly concluded that there was no necessity of getting any more.

To him the boys told of the discovery they had made regarding the scrap of paper, and had they [177]

followed his advice, they would have started in search of the villains then and there, without waiting the tardy movements of the officers.

But both Ralph and Bob thought their place just then was with their friend, rather than searching for those who had assaulted him, and they persuaded Dick to forego his idea of making a personal search for the men.

It was not long that the boys were in suspense as to the report of the physicians, for hardly had they finished discussing the discovery they had made as to who had done the cruel deed, when one of the medical gentlemen came from George's room.

Unless, he said, there were internal injuries, of which they were then unable to learn, George's condition was not one of imminent danger. That he had been severely injured there could be no doubt; but there was every reason to believe that he would recover, unless some more serious wound than those already found had been given.

He had not recovered consciousness yet, and there was hardly any chance that he would for some time, while the physician barely intimated that it was possible, owing to the wounds on his head, that he might never fully recover his mental powers.

It was just such a report as medical men often make—one which leaves the anxious ones in quite as much suspense as before, and neither Ralph nor Bob was just certain whether it was favorable to their friend or not.

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CHAPTER XXIII.

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THE TOWN ORDINANCE.

The news which Dick carried to Sawyer was sufficient to create a great excitement in that naturally quiet little town. In addition to what looked like an attempted murder, was the fact that George Harnett, whom they had all respected before the conflagration, and admired after it, was the intended victim.

There was no need for Dick to urge that officers be sent to try to effect the capture of the scoundrels, for almost before he had finished telling the story, a large party of citizens started in search of the men, determined that they should answer for their crime.

Therefore, when Dick returned, it was with so large a following that the physicians rushed out in the greatest haste to insist on their keeping at a respectful distance from the house, lest the noise might affect their patient.

Bob and his partners were anxious to join in the search, and urged Ralph to accompany them, since he could do no good to George by remaining; but he refused to leave his friend, even though he could not aid him, and the party started without him, a look of determination on their faces that boded no good to the professed oil prospectors in case they should be caught.

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During all of that night Ralph remained with George, listening to his delirious ravings, as he supposed he was still battling for his life with the men, and just at daybreak Bob returned alone. The search had been even more successful than any of the party had dared to hope for when they set out, for the men had been captured in the woods about four miles from the place where the assault had been made and in the pocket of one of them was the paper from which one corner had been left in George's hand.

They had evidently believed that they would be securely hidden in the woods, for they had built a camp, and were in it asleep when they were found.

Bob had been one of the first to rush in upon them, and, seeing him, the men had shown fight; but the sight of the crowd behind him prevented any serious demonstrations, and after that their only fear had been that some one would attempt to do them an injury, a fear for which, at one time, it seemed as if there were very good grounds.

When the prisoners had been carried back to Sawyer, Bob had left the party, in order to report their success to Ralph, as well as to learn George's condition.

Until Harnett's friends could be informed of his situation, Ralph and Bob were looked upon as the only ones having a right to dictate as to what should be done for him, and Ralph was anxious to have the course they should pursue decided. With this in view, he had a long discussion with Bob as to what should be done, and the result of it was that he started at once for Bradford, to telegraph to George's mother, and to hire a nurse to take care of him.

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Mrs. Harnett, George's mother, lived in Maine, and it would necessarily be quite a long time

before she could reach her son, even if she got the telegram as soon as it was sent. Therefore, it was important that a nurse should be procured, at least until she could arrive, and decide what should be done with the patient.

After this was done, Ralph started to return, not wanting to be away any longer from his friend than possible, and as he neared Sawyer, he met the officer who had arrested George and Bob for violation of the town ordinance.

"Where is Mr. Hubbard?" asked the officer, after Ralph had given him all the particulars of George's condition.

"He is now at Mr. Simpson's, waiting there until I shall get back."

"Is he particularly needed there?"

"Oh, no. As for the matter of that, neither one of us will be actually needed after this forenoon, for I have just been to Bradford to engage a nurse for George until his mother shall get here. Why did you ask?"

"Well, you see before this assault was committed, it was decided to call the case one of carrying glycerine through the town, to-day. Now it has been decided, in view of the service Harnett [181] rendered at the conflagration, to drop the case against him, and only proceed against Hubbard. But if his presence was necessary to Harnett, we could postpone it easily enough."

"But George would feel very badly if the case against him was dropped," said Ralph, earnestly. "Before the arrest was made, his only hope was that it would be made, so that he might prove he had nothing to do with it. Isn't it possible to proceed against him, even if he isn't there?"

"And what if it is?" asked the officer, with a smile.

"If it is I would urge you to call the case against George at the same time as that against Bob, for I know, beyond a doubt, that he will be proven not guilty."

"I'll see what can be done; and if you and Hubbard can leave, come over about two o'clock this afternoon."

"We will be there," replied Ralph.

And then he drove on, rejoiced at the thought that even while his friend was sick, he could remove one cause of trouble from him.

When Bob was told of the interview Ralph had had, he was by no means so well pleased that the case was to be opened so soon.

"Why didn't you tell the officer that I couldn't be spared from George's side for a moment?" he asked. "That would have settled it, for just now every one is sympathizing with him."

"In the first place, it wouldn't have been true," replied Ralph, "and then again, if it has got to [182] come, the sooner it's over the better, I should think."

Bob made a wry face over the matter, for he had hoped that in the excitement caused by the attack on George, both the cases would be dropped, and since there could be no doubt about his conviction, that would have been the most pleasant way out of it, so far as he was concerned.

Ralph used all the arguments he could think of to persuade Bob to look at the matter in a philosophical light, and it was not until he urged the satisfaction it would give George, when he recovered, to know that he was cleared of the charge, that Bob would even admit that he was willing to go, although he knew he must do so.

As soon as the professional nurse arrived and began her duties, Bob and Ralph harnessed the former's team, and started first for the moonlighters' hut, where Jim had said he would be that day, for the purpose of getting him to testify in George's behalf.

This young moonlighter was quite as averse to appearing at court as his partner had been, for he feared the charge might be altered to include him, but Ralph persuaded him that such would hardly be probable, at the same time that he urged him to accompany them, for George's sake.

On arriving at Sawyer it was found that the authorities were willing to call George's case in consideration of the fact that his innocence could be easily proven, and the trial began.

Of course, with Bob, Jim and Ralph to testify in George's behalf, there was no doubt as to his [183] innocence in the matter, and quite as naturally, the testimony which cleared one convicted the other, for Bob had told the story exactly as the matter had happened.

George was found "not guilty," and public opinion being in favor just then of any of the friends of the injured man, Bob was let off with a reprimand and a fine of ten dollars.

Bob was in high glee over this easy settlement of the matter, as was Ralph, and when the constable handed them the forty dollars which he had taken as security for their appearance, the young moonlighter insisted on presenting him with five dollars of his twenty, as a "token of his appreciation."

During the ride back to the Simpson farm, and Jim accompanied them in order to remain there

over-night in case he should be needed, Bob unfolded a scheme which he declared he had been maturing for some time, although Ralph insisted that it had only occurred to him after his fortunate escape from the clutches of the law.

"We shall have no business for two or three weeks at least," he said; "and while George is so sick there is really nothing we can do for him. Now I propose that you and I find the signs of oil that those fellows claim to have found, and when George gets well the work will be all done for him."

"But can we do it?" asked Ralph, thinking that he would be of but little service, since his knowledge of the oil business was confined to what he had seen of the moonlighters' operations. [184]

"Of course we can. I have done a good deal of prospecting, and, except that I couldn't find the place they describe by measurements, I can do the work better than George, for he has had no experience whatever."

"I am willing to do it if I can," said Ralph, "for surely we can be doing no harm in trying to prove whether the property is valuable or not."

"No harm! Of course there wouldn't be any!" cried Bob, growing enthusiastic over his scheme. "And if we do find things as plain as I believe we shall, there will be no trouble in borrowing money enough to sink the well at once, so that when George gets out we could surprise him with a little oil property that would make his eyes stick out."

Ralph felt almost as if he was losing his breath at the "size" Bob's scheme was assuming, and he said, faintly:

"Oh, we wouldn't do that!"

"Indeed, but we would, and I reckon Harnett wouldn't feel very badly about it either."

"If you were sure of striking oil, I'm not sure but that father would advance the necessary money to do it," he said, falling in at once with Bob's scheme, he was so dazzled by it.

"That would be all the better," cried Bob, excitedly; "and I tell you what it is, Gurney, if I don't show you a five-hundred-barrel well in that same wood-lot, you shall have my head for a football."

Ralph was hardly in need of such a plaything, but Bob's scheme had so excited him that when he did finally succeed in getting to sleep that night, it was only to dream of wonderful wells spouting wonderfully pure oil. [185]

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CHAPTER XXIV. [186]

BOB'S INDUSTRY.

Bob Hubbard was not one to give up anything he had once decided upon without a trial, and when he told Ralph that between them they would find the oil and sink the well before George recovered, he intended to do it if it was within the range of possibilities.

Very many operators in the oil region looked upon Bob as one of the best prospectors there, and while they fully understood his reckless manner, and agreed that it could not be said that he was strictly truthful, they had the most perfect confidence in his reports on land.

Therefore, it was no vain boast when Bob said that if there were good signs of oil on the Simpson wood-lot, he could easily borrow money enough to sink a well, for almost any one of the capitalists of Bradford would have been willing to make the loan upon his representations.

This wood-lot of Simpson's had attracted Bob's attention some time before, as the reader already knows, and, despite the assertions of some oil prospectors to the contrary, he had always maintained that a good paying well would be found there. [187]

It had been his intention to buy the land; but he had neglected to do so, as he was in the habit of neglecting his own business until it was too late. But he would be satisfied to prove that he had been correct in his views by striking oil there, even if he was opening the property for some one else, and just then he saw the opportunity of doing a favor for his friend at the same time that he proved the truth of his own statements.

On the morning after he had spoken of his "scheme" to Ralph, he was up some time before the sun was, even though he had watched by George's side until midnight, and was only waiting for the professional nurse to relieve Ralph from his duty of watcher, before beginning the work he had proposed to do.

During the night it had seemed as if George had recovered consciousness for a few moments, although he had not spoken, and the physician, who had remained at the farm-house, was called to the patient's side.

This brief revival of consciousness, to be followed immediately by a fever, was what the medical man had predicted, and he then said that George would appear to be very much worse in the morning; but that it was the turning of the fever which would show whether he was ever to regain the full possession of all his faculties.

Therefore, when the morning came, and George, in a high fever, seemed to be very near death [188]
his friends were much less alarmed for his safety than they would have been, had the change not been expected.

It was unfortunate that he could not have been removed to the Kenniston farm, where he would have been nearer medical aid in case he should need it suddenly; but he could not have been taken where he would have received more tender or devoted care then he did from Mr. Simpson and his wife.

The only possible aid which either Ralph or Bob could have given, after they had relieved the nurse of the care of watching during the night, would have been in case they were needed to go to town for anything which the patient might require. Except for that, they might as well be out prospecting as remaining at the farm-house.

Therefore, in order that they might both be away, and feel perfectly at ease, Bob had arranged with Dick to come over and remain during the day with Jim, to act as messenger in case there was any necessity for it.

Bob's horses were there, and after breakfast, when Jim had arrived, and the nurse had resumed her duties, there was really nothing to prevent them from going where they pleased.

Much as he wanted to go with Bob, Ralph was uncertain as to whether he should leave his friend until after he had spoken with the physician regarding it, and then, learning that he could be of no possible assistance by remaining, he announced that he was ready to begin the work of prospecting again, which had been brought to such a sad end the day previous. [189]

Bob started out excited by the thought of what they would accomplish, and so intent upon his scheme that he rattled on with explanations of how this or that might be accomplished, until Ralph began to look upon sinking an oil well as mere child's play, and quite convinced that it could easily be done, even without capital.

Both the boys were satisfied that there were no signs of oil in such localities as they had examined the day previous, therefore there was no occasion for them to do that work over again, and Bob began his labors by starting through the wood-lot in an entirely different direction, which brought them to a small stream, or marsh, which ran directly across the land.

The water-course, if such it could be called, was nearly dried up, but Bob showed every signs of delight at finding it so easily, and said to Ralph, as he began to wade along its course, regardless alike of wet feet or mud-plashed clothing:

"Here is where we shall find the first signs, if there is any oil around here. Follow me, and sing out when you see any greasy-looking water in these little pools."

It is quite probable that Ralph would have waded in streams which were almost entirely covered with oil, and yet never have "sung out" once, for he was at a loss to know how oil-covered water should look; but before they had traveled twenty yards, Bob said, excitedly:

"Why don't you say something? I thought you would like to be the first one to discover signs on [190]
your own land, so I have held my tongue for the last five minutes, expecting to hear you shout."

"But what shall I say?" asked Ralph, in surprise. "I haven't seen any oil yet."

"Well, you're a fine prospector, you are!" and Bob looked at his companion as if in the most perfect amazement that he did not understand fully the business which he had had no experience in. "What do you call *that*?" and Bob pointed to the water-pools that were covered with something which showed different colors, not unlike a soap-bubble.

"I've seen that queer-looking water for some time," replied Ralph, innocently; "but that isn't oil."

"You may think so," said Bob, with a laugh, "but you let some of these oil operators from Bradford see that, and then it would do your heart good to hear them offer you big prices for the land. That's oil, my boy, and it shows up as plain as the nose on your face. We'll follow this swale up until we find where the oil ceases, and then I'll show you a place where you can sink a well without a possibility of losing any money by the operation."

Ralph was now quite as eager and excited as his companion was, and the two splashed on through the mud and water, feeling much as gold-seekers do when they believe they are following up the leads to that precious metal.

Up the marshy land they walked until they were very nearly in the center of the lot, and then [191]
Bob stopped, with a gesture of satisfaction.

At this point the difference in the water was very marked, the line of oil, as it oozed out from a little bank, showing clearly, while above the water was pure.

"There's one thing certain," said Bob, triumphantly, as he stood upon the sponge-like bank which afforded him so much satisfaction to see. "Those who have laughed at me because I insisted that the oil belt extended in this direction would feel kind of foolish if they could see this, wouldn't they?"

"But is it what you might call a good showing?" asked Ralph, still incredulous that this land, which they had purchased only through charity for Mr. Simpson, should prove so valuable.

It seemed to him that Bob must be mistaken, or those living in the vicinity would have discovered it some time before.

"Well, I should say it was a good showing," cried Bob, excitedly. "Why, Gurney, there isn't one well out of twenty that are sunk which looms up like this. It will yield a thousand barrels if it yields a pint."

The only question, then, as to whether it was really valuable property, it would seem, was whether it would yield the pint; and, if one could judge from Bob's face, there was no doubt about that.

He was radiantly triumphant—not that he had discovered the oil, for others had done that before him, but that his views on the location of the oil belt had proved correct, and he was [192] determined that by his efforts the supply should be made to yield, even though he could have no pecuniary interest in the matter.

"We'll sink the well here, and I'll begin the work this very afternoon," he said. "But first we must go back to the house, and we'll mark our way, so that there'll be no difficulty about finding the spot again."

Then Bob started toward the farm-house, walking rapidly, as if his feet could hardly be made to keep pace with his thoughts, and breaking off the tops of the bushes to mark the way.

"But how are you going to work without money?" asked Ralph, almost doubting if his companion was quite right in his mind.

"Do you think that a sight of that place isn't as good as a big bank account? Why, we only need about three thousand dollars to do it all."

"Three—thousand—dollars!" echoed Ralph.

"That's all. You write to your father, tell him what we have found, and ask him to send the money right on," said Bob, in a matter-of-fact tone.

"And do you suppose he would send such an amount of money simply for the asking?"

And Ralph's doubts in regard to the moonlighter's sanity increased each moment.

"It don't make much difference whether he does or not," was the careless reply. "I can get everything we need to go to work with on the strength of that showing, and I tell you that we'll have that well flowing just as soon as possible. But you write to your father, ask him to come on [193] and see what we have got, and, after he has talked with those who are in the business here, he won't hesitate about the money."

"Yes, I can do that," said Ralph, slowly, but doubting very much whether he could accomplish anything by it. "But it will take three or four days at least before we can hear from him."

"That don't make any difference, for it won't delay us. I'm going to start right out to buy the engine, and by the time we hear from him, we shall be at work."

By this time they were at the stable, and Bob began harnessing his horses, in proof of what he said.

"I wouldn't do that," expostulated Ralph. "It may not be as good as you think it is, and you may get into an awful lot of trouble about it."

"Look here, Gurney," said Bob, impressively. "There's oil there—plenty of it—and I know what I'm about. You just let me alone, and by the time Harnett is able to understand anything, I'll be ready to prove to him that both he and you are rich, all through your charitable idea of buying Simpson's wood-lot."

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CHAPTER XXV. [194]

THE WORK BEGUN.

AFTER deciding in his own mind that he would sink a well in the place he had found, taking the work and debts upon himself when it was all to be for the pecuniary advantage of his friend, Bob was not one to lose any time.

As soon as he got back to the house and could harness his horses, he had started for Bradford to make arrangements for the purchase, on credit, of such machinery as was needed, and all this had been done so quickly that Jim and Dick were not aware he had returned from prospecting until they saw him driving away.

As a matter of course they questioned Ralph as to why their partner had left so hurriedly, and his reply excited them wonderfully.

He told them of what Bob had found, and then he realized how good the evidences of oil were, for the boys were in a perfect fever of delight as he explained what they had seen. Then he told them of what he thought was a mad scheme on Bob's part, his intention to begin sinking a well even before he had any money to carry on the work, and instead of being surprised at their [195] partner's rashness, as he had expected they would be, they seemed to think it a very natural course for him to pursue.

They had quite as "wild" an attack as Bob had had, and although Ralph was surprised at it then, he soon grew accustomed to such phases of the "oil fever," after he had seen more of the business.

Jim and Dick insisted on going out to see what their partner had discovered, not satisfied with Ralph's description, and while they were gone he tried to convince himself that this possibility of his becoming rich, even before he had been obliged to struggle with the world, was true, and not a dream.

He was sitting on the wood-pile, arguing to himself as to whether Bob might not be mistaken, when Mr. Simpson came out of the house with the report that George was sleeping, and he decided to tell him the news, to see if he would be as confident as the others.

But before he could speak, Jim and Dick came up, panting, but triumphant.

"That's the biggest thing I ever saw!" said Jim, as he wiped the perspiration from his face, and then turning to Mr. Simpson, he added, "That wood-lot is worth about a thousand times as much as you got for it."

"Eh? What's that?" asked the old man, with his hand to his ear, as if distrustful that it had performed its duty correctly.

"Why, Bob has found the oil."

"Yes," added Dick, "and it shows up better than anything I ever saw around here."

"It is true, Mr. Simpson," said Ralph, as the old man still looked incredulous. "Bob found signs [196] of oil this morning, which he says are wonderfully good. I don't wonder that you can't believe it, for I haven't succeeded yet, and I was with Bob when he found it."

"Oil on the wood-lot!" repeated Mr. Simpson, in a dazed sort of way.

"Yes, sir, and tanks of it!" replied Jim.

"I am more glad than I can say," replied the old man, fervently, "for now you and Mr. Harnett will be rewarded for your generosity to an old man whom you hardly knew or cared for. It was not to be that I should have it, and it wouldn't have done me much good if I had, for mother an' I are most ready to leave this world, an' we haven't a child or a chick to be gladdened by the money. Why, Mr. Gurney, I'm as pleased for you as if it was all mine."

And Mr. Simpson shook the boy by the hand in a hearty way that left no doubt of the truth of what he said.

"But if there is oil there, Mr. Simpson, you own as much as George and I do, for we settled on that yesterday."

"No, no!" and the old man shook his head decidedly. "When I sold the land, I believed I was getting the full value for it, and you didn't care whether it was worth what you paid or not. What you bought is yours, and there's no gainsaying that. I suspected there was somethin' more'n wood on that land when I went to pay Massie the money, for when he found that I had the full amount, he offered to pay me my price for the wood-lot, and when I told him I'd sold it, he offered [197] to give me the whole mortgage just for that piece of land."

"There!" exclaimed Ralph, as if Mr. Simpson had just told him something which it was to his advantage to hear. "Now you can see why we should give you one-third of the land. If you had come to us then, and told us that you had a better offer for it, we should have been only too well pleased to give it up. Now, if what Bob says is true, you shall still own a third of the lot."

Mr. Simpson shook his head, to show he would not permit of such generosity, and Ralph did not care to discuss the matter any further, for he and George had already decided what to do.

"If what Bob says is true!" cried Jim. "Why, there's no question about it, for there the oil is where you can see it for yourself."

"Still, it may not turn out as he expects," objected Ralph, as if determined not to believe in his good fortune; and the moonlighters, really angry at such obstinacy, refused to argue with him any longer.

They insisted that Mr. Simpson should go with them to see the fortune that had been his, without his being aware of the fact, and while they were away Bob returned.

He had two men with him, who appeared as intent on business as Bob did, for all three walked past Ralph without speaking, going directly into the wood-lot.

During fully an hour, Ralph sat on the wood-pile, wondering if it could be possible that he was [198] wrong in refusing to believe what all the others seemed so certain of, and then Bob and the men came back, accompanied by Mr. Simpson and the two moonlighters, all looking as if they could hardly contain themselves because of joy.

"We will start the engine and lumber right up here, Mr. Hubbard," said one of the men, as he passed Ralph, "and you can send for what you want, with the understanding that the owners of the land will ratify all your bargains."

"Well, as for that, you can judge for yourselves, so far as one of the owners is concerned; the other is not able to transact any business," said Bob, turning suddenly toward Ralph, and, greatly to that young gentleman's surprise, saying, "Gentlemen, this is Mr. Ralph Gurney, who owns one-half the property, as Mr. Simpson has told you."

"You are a very fortunate young man," said the gentleman who had been speaking with Bob. "You authorize Mr. Hubbard to act for you, I suppose?"

"Yes, sir," replied Ralph, too much dazed to know exactly what he was saying.

"There! what did I tell you?" cried Bob, as Jim drove away with the men, in order to bring the team back. "They will supply everything we need to open the well, and simply because they have seen what you did not think was of very much account. I have hired the men to build the derrick, and before you go to bed to-night you will have seen the work begun on your oil well."

"But, Bob," asked Ralph, in a tone that was almost piteous, and which sounded so comical, [199] under the circumstances, that even Mr. Simpson laughed heartily at it, "do they think the same about it that you do?"

"Well, you heard what was said about supplying anything we needed, and people don't say such things, even up this way, unless they mean them. Now we shall need some considerable money, and I advise you to write to your father, telling him of what you own, and asking him to come on here prepared to help you. If he won't do it I can get all the money we need; but we shall have to pay considerable for the use of it."

Ralph made no objection, nor advanced any further argument; he was in that condition of mind when he was not capable of any resistance, and he obeyed Bob's orders as meekly as if there was no way by which he could refuse.

Ralph's letter was by no means one of such glowing description as Bob would have written. It was a plain statement of facts, begun by an account of how he and George came to buy the property, of the chase for the thieves, when they had their first intimation of the value of the property, of the accident to George, of Bob's discovery, and lastly of the opinion of the Bradford merchants, who were ready to supply, on credit, everything which was necessary for the opening of the well.

When the letter was read to Bob in its entirety, he did not disapprove of it, nor was he very much pleased. All he ventured to say was:

"It is lucky for you, Gurney, that the oil showed up so plainly that those who know a gold dollar [200] when they see it were not so frightened about giving credit as you are about stating facts."

Then Dick was sent to Sawyer to post the letter, and while he was away the workmen whom Bob had engaged had arrived.

Ralph went with him when he directed them to clear away for the erection of the derrick and engine-house, and by the time the first load of lumber had arrived, he had begun to feel the effects of the oil fever.

The preparations going on everywhere around, the comments of the workmen as they saw the show of oil, the ringing blows of axes, and shouts of the teamsters, all lent an air of realism to Bob's words which Ralph had failed to see or feel before.

It was for him, even though it had been against his wishes, that all these men were working, and for him would accrue the profits, if indeed there were any.

Bob had been as good as his word; before Ralph went to bed that night he had seen the work begun, and already was he beginning to feel that perhaps all Bob's predictions might be verified.

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CHAPTER XXVI.

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DRILLING AN OIL WELL.

THERE was no material change in George's condition on the morning after work had been begun on the oil well. The physicians declared that he was getting along as well as could be hoped for, and the nurse gave it as her opinion that he would recover much sooner than any one had believed. Therefore, the boys were not troubled about their friend more than might be expected.

On this day, work was begun on the derrick, and, as may be imagined, all the boys were on the spot to see it, Ralph's belief in the success of the venture growing stronger and stronger as the framework arose in the air.

On the third day George's mother arrived, and the boys were thus relieved of all responsibility, so far as the care of their friend was concerned.

It was on the evening of the same day that Mrs. Harnett came that Ralph's father arrived.

After receiving his son's letter, he had thought the matter of sufficient importance, somewhat to Ralph's surprise, to warrant his paying a visit to the oil fields, and had written to Ralph to meet him at Bradford.

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Despite the fact that Bob could borrow on the strength of the property as much money as he needed to carry on the work, he was very anxious to convince Mr. Gurney of the value of his scheme, and on the day when that gentleman was to arrive, insisted that Ralph should go to Bradford with him early in the afternoon, in order that he might be able to arrange with the gentlemen of whom they were purchasing their supplies to meet Mr. Gurney, and tell him exactly what they thought of the proposed well.

Thanks to Bob's activity, Mr. Gurney was able to see all those who had inspected the property on that same evening, and was considerably surprised by these interviews.

After receiving Ralph's letter, he had thought that possibly the boys might have a site for a well which would pay to open, and he had come on believing that it was not a matter of very great importance.

When he had been introduced to Bob, and had heard that young gentleman's flowery description of the vast amount of wealth which was only waiting to be brought to the surface of the earth, he was disposed to look upon it as a visionary scheme, the value of which only existed in the moonlighter's mind.

Bob had been accustomed to have his statements received in that same way, and for that reason had arranged for Mr. Gurney to meet those whose judgment he could fully rely upon.

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These gentlemen assured him that the well promised to be a rich one; that the signs of oil were remarkably good, and that they had no hesitation in agreeing with Bob, as they had done, to supply anything which might be needed to open the well.

Thus, even before he had seen the property, Mr. Gurney believed that his son was in a fair way to enrich himself through his deed of charity.

In the present crowded condition of the Simpson farm-house Mr. Gurney could find no accommodations for living there, and, since he was to remain in Bradford, the boys had made their arrangements to remain there also over night, in order that they might take him out to the oil-well early in the morning.

On the following day, Mr. Gurney drove out to look at the property. He saw that the work was well under way, and heard sufficient from the workmen to convince him of the fact that every one who had seen the place believed a well would yield plentifully.

Mr. Gurney's business would not permit of his remaining in the oil region but one day, and when Ralph drove him to the depot that night, he gave him formal permission to draw on him at sight for all necessary expenses.

After this, had it been possible, Bob would have hurried the work still faster along, but he had already urged matters on as fast as possible, and all he could do was to insist on Ralph, Jim and Dick doing as much work as one of the laborers, he setting the example.

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The days went on all too short for the work that each one wanted to see done, and wearily for the invalid, who was beginning slowly to recover. The fever had abated, and with the doctor's permission, the boys had an interview with their friend, who had descended within the shadows of the Valley of Death.

On the night when the derrick was completed, the engine placed and housed, and the drills in position, ready for work, Bob and Ralph had a long and heated discussion as to whether George should be told of what was being done.

Bob insisted that he should know nothing about it until the day on which they struck oil, while

Ralph argued that if it was such a certainty that oil would be found, George should be allowed to share in the pleasure of digging for it.

Already had the young engineer begun to worry about the loss his business would sustain because of his illness, and although he had not spoken of it, Ralph fancied he could see that he was also troubled about the expense which he must necessarily be under.

All this, Ralph argued, would be taken from George's mind if he was told of what was being done, and after a long discussion, Bob agreed that the important news should be told on the following day, provided the physician agreed that the patient would not suffer from the excitement.

On the following morning, all the boys were at the proposed well before any of the workmen arrived, in order that they might see the drills enter the ground, and by the time that important ceremony was over, it was time for the physician to make his morning call. [205]

When he did come, Ralph told him just what he thought George had on his mind, in the way of trouble, and then stated what it was he proposed doing, in case there was no objection to it.

"Not the slightest objection, my boy," said the medical gentleman, heartily. "Good news seldom kills, and from what I learn, it is only that which you have to tell. I think, as you do, that it will benefit the patient, and you have my permission to unfold your budget of news after I have dressed his wounds."

Half an hour later, the doctor had left the house, and Ralph and Bob entered the invalid's room, as they had every morning since he had been able to recognize them.

In reply to their usual inquiry as to how he felt, George said, gloomily:

"I should feel all right if I only had a little more strength. It is hard to know that I shall have to lie here a long time, simply waiting to get strong, and all the business I had succeeded in getting, done by some one else. But perhaps I couldn't have kept what I had after that scrape about the glycerine."

"All that is settled, George," said Ralph. "I persuaded them to call your case the next day after you were hurt, when Bob's case came on. He and Jim and I told the story exactly as it was, and you were acquitted, while he was fined ten dollars. I should have told you before, but that we were afraid of exciting you."

"Such excitement would do me good rather than harm," said George, with a smile, "for I have [206] worried about that every day I have been here."

"Then I will give you more of the same sort, only better," replied Ralph, with a meaning look at Bob. "The day after you were hurt, we hunted for the oil, and Bob found it just——"

"I should say we did find it," interrupted Bob, excitedly, and despite Ralph's warning looks. "It is the richest spot you ever saw, and there's a thousand-barrel well there, if there's a drop."

George opened his eyes wide with astonishment, and then closing them wearily, he said:

"I'm willing to take your word for it that you found signs of oil; but I would rather hear what some one else thought as to the size of the well."

"You shall hear," cried Bob, growing more excited, and forgetting all caution. "I brought Dodd and Mapleson out here, and after they had looked at it, they said they were willing to advance everything for the opening. Then we commenced work——"

"You commenced work?" cried George, attempting to raise himself in the bed, and falling back from sheer exhaustion.

"Yes, George," said Ralph, as he motioned Bob to remain quiet. "Every one said we'd be sure to strike oil, and Bob has started it for you. He had nothing to do for a while, and he wanted to surprise you. I sent for father, and after he had talked with some of the men, he told us we might draw on him for what money we needed."

George lay perfectly still and looked at Ralph as if he could not believe that which he heard, [207] and Bob, forgetting himself again, cried out:

"The derrick's already built, the engine's up, and we commenced drilling this morning. I tell you what it is, Harnett, before you're able to get around again, we'll have a thousand-barrel well flowing that you can call your own; and, as for engineering, why, you needn't worry your head about that any more, for you'll have all the money you want."

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CHAPTER XXVII. [208]

"THE HARNETT."

It surely seemed as if the good news which Ralph and Bob had imparted to him was all that was needed to cause George's rapid improvement. From the day when they had told him of what they had done and were doing, his recovery was so rapid that at the end of a week he was sufficiently strong to sit up a short time each day, and the physician predicted that in another week he would be able to take a walk out of doors.

Meantime, the work at the well had progressed most favorably. There had been no serious breakages, no vexatious delays, no trouble of any important character. In fact, the workmen expressed it as their conviction that it would be a "lucky well," because of the singular freedom from accidents with which the entire work had been attended. Bob was in the highest possible state of excitement all the time. Each morning he anticipated that they would have some trouble which would delay them, when he was anxious to have the work completed as soon as possible, and each night, after matters had gone on smoothly, he held forth to George and Ralph of the [209] wonderful "luck" they had had, which must be taken as an augury of that which was to come.

Ralph divided his time equally between George and the scene of operations. In the early morning, he would walk out to the well, stay there an hour, and then return to report progress, continuing his alternate visits to the well and the invalid, until George knew as much of what was going on as if he had superintended it.

Now, every oil well is christened with some name, which is supposed to be suggestive of the manner in which it has been discovered, or to do honor to some person who may or may not be interested in it; therefore, it is not to be supposed that a name for this pet of Bob's had not been discussed even before work had been begun on it.

Each one of the boys had proposed some appellation, Bob's favorite being "The Invalid," in honor of George, and because, as he said, it had really had a chance of an existence through Harnett's illness, for he stoutly contended that had the senior owner been well, he would have been so cautious about opening it on credit, that all of them would have grown gray-headed before they saw it flowing.

Jim and Dick thought that, since Bob had really been the one to open it, in case oil was struck, it should be called "The Moonlighter," in honor of the one who had done all the work, when there was no chance that he could be benefited by its success.

George wanted to call it "The Gurney," and his suggestion gave to Bob and Ralph just the name the well should bear in case it answered their expectations in regard to its yield. [210]

"We will call it 'The Harnett,'" said Ralph, more decidedly than he had yet said anything in regard to the "scheme," and since Bob was in favor of this, it came to be considered a settled fact that that should be the name. After that conversation, old Mr. Simpson never spoke of it save as "The Harnett," and the boys soon learned to follow his example, until even George gave it that title.

Work went on rapidly, until the drills were boring eight hundred feet below the surface, and it was hourly expected that bed-rock would be struck, when George broached to Ralph a matter he had had on his mind from the hour he first learned that "The Harnett" was being opened.

"Do you remember, Ralph, what we said about giving Mr. Simpson a share in the land if oil was found there?" he asked, when Ralph came in to tell him that the rock had not been struck, but that Bob believed it would be before night.

"Yes, and I still think we ought to do so," replied the junior partner, quickly. "After he had taken our money, Massie offered to give up the whole of the mortgage for a deed of the wood-lot, and he refused, for he considered himself bound to us, even though he knew we only bought it to help him along."

"And what about Bob?" asked George, meaningly. "What he says about our hesitating to begin work before we had money of our own to carry it through, is nearly true, and if oil is struck there [211] we shall have him to thank for it."

"I know that, and I have been meaning to talk with you about it. Why can't we give Mr. Simpson and him an equal share with us? I think they really ought to have it."

"So do I, and my proposition is that we give to each of them an undivided fourth of the entire property, they to share equally with us in everything."

"And I agree to that fully," replied Ralph, quickly. "I have wanted to propose something of the kind, but was afraid you wouldn't agree to it, because of Bob's being a moonlighter, and having given you so much trouble."

"But if 'The Harnett' is a success, we must attribute it all to the trouble Bob made for us. If the team hadn't been stolen we should not have been in Bradford to meet Mr. Simpson, and if it hadn't been for the theft we never should have imagined that there was any oil on the property. Besides, if Bob owns an interest here, you'll find that he won't do any more moonlighting."

"Well," said Ralph, anxious that their good intentions should be carried into effect as soon as possible, "when shall we give them their share? Now, or after we find whether there is oil in 'The Harnett?'"

"Now. You drive right into town, have the deeds made out, and bring them here so that I can sign them with you."

It was early in the day, and Ralph would have plenty of time to make all the arrangements and yet be back before the drilling ceased, unless, of course, the rock was struck almost immediately. [212] Therefore he started at once, refusing to answer any of the questions which Mr. Simpson and Bob put to him as to what had called him in town so suddenly.

Of course neither of those whom he had left in an aggravated suspense could have any idea of his errand, and his sudden reticence after he had been in the habit of telling them all he was going to do, mystified them considerably, Bob in particular being greatly exercised over it.

"I hope Gurney hasn't got on his ear about anything," he said, to George, after he had watched Ralph drive away. "He's gone into town as glum as a judge, and won't say a word."

"What makes you think there is anything the matter?" asked George, with a smile. "Have you and he been having any trouble?"

"Not that I know of, except that he might have got cross when he was at the well, and thought I ought to have treated one of the proprietors with a little more deference. I was helping set the drills when he came out last, and I'm not sure but that I spoke sharply when I answered his questions; but I didn't intend to."

"I guess there's nothing the matter with him," said George, rather enjoying the moonlighter's perplexity, knowing how soon it would be ended. "You probably were a trifle cross, when he was there, and, being guilty, fancied that he spoke or acted differently from usual."

"I didn't fancy it, for he was queer. I asked him where he was going, and so did Mr. Simpson; [213] but he wouldn't answer either of us."

"I'll find out what the trouble is when he comes back, and let you know," replied George.

And with this answer, Bob went back to his work, thinking it very singular that Ralph, who had always been so good-natured, should have suddenly become so crusty.

Twice during the remainder of the forenoon, Bob came to the house with some trifling excuse for so doing, but really to learn if Ralph had returned; and while he was there the last time, talking with George about the probabilities of striking sand or gravel rock, the junior partner returned.

He had with him some official-looking documents, and, as he entered the house, he said to Bob, speaking quite sharply without any intention of so doing, and yet resolving all the moonlighter's suspicions into certainties:

"I want some witnesses to George's signature. Will you bring Mr. Simpson, Jim and Dick here?"

Bob arose silently to comply with the request, looked at Ralph wonderingly and reproachfully an instant, and then left the room.

While he was absent, George told his friend of the moonlighter's trouble, and the two were making merry over it, when he returned with the witnesses Ralph had asked for.

The papers were handed to George, who signed both of them, and then asked Jim and Dick to sign their names as witnesses to his signature. Ralph had already signed them while in town.

Then, purposely taking considerable time about it, Ralph examined the documents as if to make [214] sure that all was correct, and said:

"Mr. Simpson, after George and I learned there was a chance that oil would be found on your wood-lot, we agreed that you should share equally with us in whatever might come of it. For that purpose I went into town, and have had a deed drawn up, giving you an equal share with us."

"But I don't want none of it," said the old man, in a trembling voice, while there was a suspicious moisture in his eyes. "I sold the land to you as I'd a' sold it to anybody else, and whatever's there you own."

"But the deed is made out now, and there is no use for you to protest against it," said George; and, without giving the old man time to reply, he added, as he turned to Ralph: "Now I understand that there has been some trouble between you and Bob, or he fancies there has."

Bob motioned to George to be silent; but it was too late, and Ralph said:

"The only trouble is that I chose to go away this morning without telling him where I was going. Then I owned one-half of the wood-lot, with all there is or may be on it, and since it was the last time I should have the right to do anything regarding it without his knowledge, I refused to tell him where I was going. But now that he owns an equal share with you, Mr. Simpson and me, he will have a perfect right to question me."

Bob looked up in blank amazement, but made no attempt to speak, and after waiting several [215]

moments, during which no one save the two original partners seemed to understand the situation, Ralph said, as he handed Bob one of the documents:

"Believing that but for you 'The Harnett' would not have been opened, at least for some time, we have thought it best to divide the property into fourths, one of which belongs to you."

Perhaps for the first time in his life, Bob was unable to make any reply, and he walked quickly out of the room to the wood-pile, where he sat for some time as if trying to make himself believe that what Ralph had said was true.

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CHAPTER XXVIII.

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RED ROCK.

THE idea that Ralph and George would voluntarily give him a portion of what he considered to be very valuable property, was the farthest thought from Bob's mind. He had gone to work to open the well simply because he was anxious to prove to those who had declared he knew nothing about it, that there was a large deposit of oil where he had always insisted there must be. If any one had said to him that he was entitled to any considerable reward because he had given up his own business to improve the value of his friend's property, he would have said truly that he had not neglected his own business, since just at that time there was no work for moonlighters to do.

He had started in on the work with no idea of being paid for his services, although if oil was found, and he had needed any small amount of money, he would not have hesitated to ask for it. The work had been begun by him upon the impulse of the moment, and this making him an equal owner in the well, simply because of what he had done, surprised him even more than it did any one else.

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It was after he had been sitting on the wood-pile long enough to understand why this property had been given him, reading first the deed, and then looking toward the wood-lot, where he could hear the sounds of activity, that he entered the house, where both his old and his new partners were discussing, as they had ever since the work had begun, the probabilities of finding oil.

"I tell you what it is, boys," he said to George and Ralph, "this thing ain't just straight. You've got no right, in the first place, to give away a quarter of that property before you know what it's worth, and then, again, if you paid me ten times over for what I've done, it wouldn't amount to this. Now, if you think you'd feel better to pay me for my work, take back this deed, and so long as I have charge of 'The Harnett,' give me one barrel in every twenty you take out. That will be mighty big pay, and a good deal more than I am worth."

"But I suppose you'd be glad to own a portion of a well, Bob, and especially as big a one as you insist this is going to be," said George.

"So I would like to own one, and I'd rather have this one quarter, so far as money goes, than half of any well I know of. But you see this don't belong to me, for I haven't earned it, and you haven't the right to give away so much."

"But we have given it away, and you can't insist upon the size of the gift, because none of us know whether, instead of being a benefit, it will not saddle a debt on you of one quarter of the expense of sinking the well," said Ralph.

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"I know that it won't!" cried Bob, earnestly, "and so do we all, for we're sure of striking a big flow."

"Well, Bob, you've got the deed," interrupted George, "and since we want to make you one of the owners of 'The Harnett,' we'll say to you as we did to Mr. Simpson—you've got the deed, and you can't help yourself."

Bob made no further reply; but five minutes later the boys saw him and Mr. Simpson perched high up on the wood-pile, talking very earnestly about something, which they quite naturally concluded was the gift they had just received, and on commenting upon it, Mrs. Harnett, although she knew there was very little necessity for it, advised the boys to insist upon the acceptance of the gift, for she believed both the recipients deserved what they considered such good fortune.

Both Ralph and George were perfectly satisfied with what they had done, and in an hour after the presentation, all the partners were discussing the chances of striking oil, much as they had every day before when two of them had no idea they were to become part owners.

The doctor's visits had grown less frequent since George had begun to recover so rapidly, and

it had been three days since he had seen the patient.

George had insisted that he was perfectly able to walk as far as "The Harnett," and would have done so had not his mother and his friends urged so strongly for him to wait until he should see the doctor again.

[219] It was on this day, just after George had eaten what any one would consider a hearty dinner for an invalid, that the physician called, and almost as soon as he appeared, George asked his opinion about his taking a little out-door exercise.

"I see no reason why you should not do so," replied the doctor, "providing you may be trusted to act as your own physician, and come in before you get tired."

This George was positive he would be able to do, and almost before the doctor had left the house, he was planning a visit to "The Harnett," but that his mother objected to at once, since it would be impossible for him to ride, and it would be much too long a walk.

He was anxious to see the work, but, under the pressure of advice from all his friends, he consented to defer seeing "The Harnett" until later, and take a ride with Ralph instead. The horses were harnessed into his own carriage, which was made even more comfortable than ever by a profusion of Mrs. Simpson's pillows, and, assisted by all, the invalid started for his first out-door exercise since the murderous assault upon him.

George wanted to drive through Sawyer, for since he had been cleared of the charge against him, he was anxious to meet his friends there, and Ralph willingly drove in that direction.

Upon arriving at the town, there was every reason to fear that he would not get as his own physician, as the doctor advised, for he was warmly welcomed by every one, whether stranger or friend, until his reception was a perfect ovation. Over and over again was he thanked for the [220] assistance he had rendered during the conflagration, and the congratulations on his recovery poured in on every side.

Among the cordial welcomes he received, none was more hearty than that from the officer who had arrested him the night he was starting in pursuit of the horse-thieves, and from him Ralph and George heard some news which interested them.

The men who had committed the assault were in the jail at Bradford, awaiting their examination, which was to take place as soon as their victim's recovery was certain, and the officer asked when George would be able to appear as a witness.

The senior owner of "The Harnett" had no desire, even then, that these men should be punished, but since the matter was one in which he could have no choice, and since he would be obliged to attend the examination, he declared that he could go at as early a date as might be set.

Evidently anxious to have the matter off his hands as soon as possible, the officer said:

"Then if you feel able to drive into town to-morrow, we will hold the examination. It will not take very much of your time, and if in the morning you do not feel able to attempt it, don't hesitate to send me word, and it shall be postponed."

"I don't think there is any doubt but that I shall be here," said George.

And then, after bidding the kindly-disposed officer good-by, he confessed to Ralph that he should be obliged to return home.

[221] The meeting with so many in town had tired him more than the ride of two hours could have done, and Ralph began to blame himself for having permitted him to stay so long, even though he could hardly have prevented it if he had tried.

But during the ride back, the weary look on the invalid's face disappeared under the refreshing influence of the quiet drive, and by the time they turned into the lane which led to the Simpson farm-house, he looked quite as bright as when he started.

The lane was nearly a quarter of a mile long, and when they first entered it, Ralph was aware that something unusual had occurred, and he trembled lest some accident had happened, but as soon as he could distinguish them more plainly, he understood that the gathering was caused by joy more than sorrow.

Bob, Jim and Dick were standing in front of the house, surrounded by some of the workmen from the well, and Mr. and Mrs. Simpson were hurrying from one to the other, much as if they were serving out refreshments.

"What can be the matter?" asked Ralph, anxiously, as he hurried the horses along. "Do you suppose they have struck oil already?"

"No, that couldn't be possible," replied George. "I rather fancy that Bob and Mr. Simpson are celebrating the happy event of being admitted to the ownership of the well."

[222] Ralph was satisfied that such was the case, and he pulled the horses in, unwilling to arrive at a scene where he feared he might be obliged to listen to thanks for what they had done.

Before many minutes, however, the boys could see that those at the house were shouting to them, and when they arrived within hearing distance, they recognized Bob's voice, as he shouted:

"Bed-rock! bed-rock!"

And then went up a shout from all that was nearly deafening.

"They have got through to the rock," cried George, his pale face flushing with excitement.

And in a moment the carriage was surrounded by partners and workmen, as each one tried to tell the good news that the drills had struck the rock at a depth of eight hundred and forty feet.

"What have you found?" asked George, as soon as he could make himself heard.

"Sandstone," replied Bob, "and we shall be obliged to try glycerine."

"The moonlighters will open the moonlighter's well!" cried Dick, as if an immense amount of sport was to be had from such an operation.

"Indeed the moonlighters shall have nothing to do with it," replied Bob, with no small show of dignity, and to the great surprise of all. "There'll be no sneaking around to shoot this well, I can promise you that, for we'll have her opened in the daylight, squarely, or not at all."

Jim and Dick could hardly believe that which they heard. That their old partner, one of the most successful moonlighters in the oil regions, should object to having a well, in which he had a quarter interest, opened as he had opened wells for others, was something too incredible to be true. There must have been some mistake about it, they thought, and they would shoot the well by moonlight as soon as Bob should consider the matter more fully. [223]

But all this time George was still in the carriage, and as soon as the boys realized this, they began to make arrangements for helping him out, content to wait to tell the good news more fully after he should be in his room once more.

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CHAPTER XXIX. [224]

THE EXAMINATION.

BEYOND the fact that the drills had struck the rock, and that it was of such a nature that they could not work in it, but would necessitate the use of glycerine, but little more remained to be told after that first announcement.

But yet all the boys crowded into George's room and insisted on trying to tell him something new regarding the important fact.

The drills had struck the rock very shortly after Ralph and George had started out, and in their rejoicing that the work was so nearly over, Mr. and Mrs. Simpson had insisted that all hands should come to the house, where a generous luncheon of preserves and bread and butter was passed around in honor of the happy event.

That was all any of them could tell, and then came the question of shooting the well, Jim and Dick looking anxiously at their former partner to hear him retract those words so traitorous to moonlighting generally.

Both Ralph and George were as glad as they were surprised to hear Bob exclaim against having moonlighters open "The Harnett." They would have opposed any such proposition had he made it; but since he himself objected to it, the matter was simple enough. [225]

"I will drive down to town to-night and arrange with Roberts Brothers to send a man up here to-morrow," said Bob, "and before to-morrow night we will know just what 'The Harnett' is worth."

"But, Bob," cried Dick, "you don't mean to say that after we have shot the well that you're goin' to pay them more than it's worth for doin' it no better than any of them can."

"That's just what I do mean to tell them, my son," replied Bob, with a mingled air of authority and patronage.

"Why?"

"Well, in the first place, it will avoid any trouble. In the second place, it don't look well to be sneakin' 'round as moonlighters have to do, and in the third place, we want 'The Harnett' opened square."

"But you always said moonlighting was square, and that you wouldn't even let the regular men come near a well of yours," urged Jim.

And from his tone it was easy to understand that this opening of "The Harnett" was a matter upon which he and Dick had quite set their hearts.

"That was before I owned an interest in a well myself, boys," replied Bob. "Mind you, I don't say now that moonlightin' isn't square, for I believe it is; but when it's such a stunner of a well as this that's to be shot, I say that it hain't best to give anybody a chance to raise a question about it."

[226] It was evident to all from that moment that Bob Hubbard, the oil producer, was to be a very different sort of a party from Bob Hubbard, the moonlighter, and all save his old partners were delighted at the change.

"Then have you given up moonlightin' entirely, Bob?" asked Dick, with a world of reproach in his voice.

"Indeed I have," was the emphatic reply. "I'm still ready to say that it's all right and legitimate; but I'm through with it."

"Then, just for the sake of old times, Bob, an' seein's how we haven't come into possession of quarter of an oil-well, let us open your well for you," pleaded Jim.

And all present understood that he and Dick, having been interested in the well from the time it was first discovered, were anxious to do something toward opening it.

"I'll tell you how it can be done," said George, desirous of granting Jim and Dick the very slight favor which they asked, and yet quite as unwilling as was Bob that the work should be done in any way which could be called illegal. "Bob can go to the torpedo people, pay them for the charge, get the cartridges and glycerine, with the express understanding that he is to do the work himself. That would make matters right all around, and you can fancy that you are moonlighting again."

[227] It was a happy thought, this one of George's, and every one present, even including Mr. Simpson, hailed it with joy. It was an arrangement which would please all of them very much better than to have any strangers doing the work, and Bob would have started at once to attend to it, if Ralph had not stopped him by telling him of the examination which he would be obliged to attend next day.

"Since you will be obliged to go with us, you had better wait until to-morrow. You can have the tubing started on the road at the same time, and on the next day we can shoot the well," suggested George.

Bob was not at all inclined to wait forty-eight hours when half that time would suffice to decide whether "The Harnett" was a wonderful success or a dismal failure; but since he would be obliged to be present at the examination, which would occupy a portion of the day, he tried to content himself as best he could.

The remainder of that day was spent in discussing plans for the future, Bob entering into a profound calculation of the amount of material they would need to build a tank, for he was so certain they would strike oil, that he would have had no hesitation in beginning work on the tank even before the well was opened.

On the following morning, George was feeling so well and looking so bright that there could no longer be any fear he had over-exerted himself the day before, and preparations were begun at once for the ride into town.

[228] Ralph and George were to drive in with the latter's team, while the old firm of moonlighters, with Mr. Simpson, were to go in Bob's double-seated wagon. Everything was taken which it was thought the invalid might need, and the party started, all of them wishing the journey had some other motive than that of assuring punishment to others, even though they were guilty.

On arriving in town, they were met by the officer whom they had spoken with the day before, and he told them, after they had found a comfortable seat in the court-room, of all that had been learned of the prisoners.

Their names were William Dean and Henry Ramsdell, and they had worked for some time in Oil City for a civil engineer there. By this means they had learned the oil business, and had shown an especial aptitude for prospecting. There they committed what may or may not have been their first crime, for no one knew where they had lived before they appeared in Oil City. They robbed their employer of nearly two hundred dollars, and it is probable that it was after that money was spent that they had stolen George's team.

The examination did not last very long. George told of the theft of his team, of his pursuing the thieves, in company with Ralph and Bob, and of all that occurred up to the time he left his companions to go to Mr. Simpson's for his instruments.

"Then," he said, "when I had got nearly half way from where I had left my friends at the house, these men stepped from among the bushes directly in front of me, and one demanded the paper which I held in my hand. I refused to give it to him, and as I did so, before I had time to act on the defensive, the elder of the men struck me full in the face. I at once began to defend myself, but it [229] was two to one, and in a very short time a blow on the head from some hard substance felled me to the ground, unconscious."

That was all George could tell, and Ralph and Bob were both called to the stand to testify to what they knew, both of the theft of the team and of the finding of George.

Mr. Simpson, Jim and Dick were also ready to testify as to the condition of George when they found him and when they carried him into the house, but their evidence was not needed then, nor was the doctor's, who had examined and attended the wounded youth.

Beyond asking one or two unimportant questions of each witness, the accused had nothing to say for themselves, or in contradiction of what had been testified to, and the judge committed them without bail for trial at the next term of court.

As soon as the examination was over, Bob went to the office of the torpedo works, and there contracted for the necessary amount of material to "shoot" the well, and also stipulated that he be given permission to do the work.

At first this was refused peremptorily, on the ground that it was a dangerous operation, and that he would probably succeed only in killing himself.

Bob understood at once that he was not recognized, and he asked if Mr. Newcombe was in the building. That gentleman was in, and appeared very shortly after he was sent for, greeting Bob as [230] heartily as if they had always been the best of friends rather than enemies.

"Mr. Newcombe, I have come for an eighty-quart charge, with the stipulation that I can work it myself in the well on the Simpson farm, of which I own one quarter. This gentleman refuses, because he is afraid I may kill myself. Won't you vouch for my skill in the matter?"

"Indeed I will," was the hearty reply; "and if you will buy all your charges in the same manner, I shall have very much less work to do."

"I've stopped all that work now," said Bob, solemnly, "and so far as I am concerned, you won't have another night's drive for moonlighters."

Of course, after Mr. Newcombe's introduction, Bob had no difficulty in gaining the desired permission, and he joined those who were waiting for him outside, happy in the thought that, as he expressed it, "'The Harnett' would have a chance next day to show what she could do."

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CHAPTER XXX. [231]

LEGAL MOONLIGHTERS.

WHEN the boys arrived at the Simpson farm-house, after the close of the examination, there was very little they could do save talk over that which was to be done on the morrow, when the value of "The Harnett" was to be decided.

A portion of the tubing to be used in case there was any flow of oil, was already on the ground, and the remainder would be hauled by noon of the next day at the latest. There were no cartridges to prepare, for the Torpedo Company's workmen would attend to all that, delivering both the tin cases and the glycerine ready for use.

Everything was done that could be, and in a few hours more the casing of rock, which might or might not cover a large deposit of oil, would be blown out.

As sanguine as Bob had been from the first that a large yield of oil would be found, he was exceedingly nervous now that the time for the question to be settled was near at hand. Not but that he was still as positive as ever that they should strike oil, but he began to fear that it might not be found in such quantity as he had imagined.

He would talk for a few moments with the boys, then find some pretext for going to the well, [232] over which a guard had been set to prevent any evil-disposed parties from tampering with it, and once there he was quite as eager to get back to his partners as he had been to leave them. In fact, he was in the highest degree nervous, and had not the others been afflicted in a similar way, they would have noticed his condition.

Mr. Simpson was in such a disturbed mental condition that he went about his work in a dazed sort of way, until his wife insisted on his sitting on the wood-pile, where if he did no good he could at least do no harm, while she did the chores for him.

On hearing Bob say, for at least the tenth time since he returned from town, that everything was all right at the well, the old man did "pull himself together" sufficiently to do the milking, and then no sooner had he performed that task than he forgot what he had done, and tried to do the whole work over again, remembering his previous accomplishment only when one of the cows kicked the empty pail over, and very nearly served him in the same way.

Jim and Dick were not as anxious regarding the yield of the well; therefore, they were in a state of excitement only because they were to be at what would be very nearly their old moonlighting

tricks again, and were simply impatient for the time to come when they could be at work.

They spent their time sitting on a rather sharp rail of the fence, bemoaning Bob's obstinacy in not having the well shot in regular moonlighter's fashion, without being so weak-kneed as to buy [233] the right to do simply what no one ought to be allowed to prevent him from doing.

Ralph and George were inwardly as excited as any one else, but outwardly very much more calm. They sat in the latter's room, talking over the prospects of striking a goodly quantity of oil, while, despite all they could do, the conversation would come around to what the result would be in case "The Harnett" proved to be a dry well. They knew that all the bills had been contracted in their names, since they were the sole owners at the time the work was commenced, and in case of a failure, they would find themselves burdened with such a load of debt that it would take them a very long time to clear it off.

Even at that late hour they regretted that Bob had commenced to sink the well, and it is extremely probable that if it had been possible to undo all that had been done, leaving the land exactly as it was before the signs of oil were discovered, they would gladly have agreed to forego all their dream of wealth.

Whether Mrs. Harnett and Mrs. Simpson also suffered from suspense that evening it is hard to say; but certain it is that they were more silent than usual, and the former sewed remarkably fast, while the latter's knitting-needles clicked with unusual force.

It was a trying time for all in that house. Had it been daylight, when they could have been at work, the hours would not have seemed nearly as long; but, in the evening, the time passed so [234] slowly that it almost seemed as if there was a conspiracy of the clocks, and that their hands were only moving about half as fast as they should have done.

Then came the night, when every one went to bed and tried to sleep; but three in that household succeeded very badly, and who those three were may be very easily imagined.

Next morning, every one was up so early that the hens were frightened from their roosts half an hour before their regular time, and the breakfast had been eaten fully an hour before it was customary to begin to prepare it.

George showed the effects of his anxiety very plainly, and had his mother not feared the suspense would be worse for him than the fatigue, she would have tried to induce him to remain in the house instead of going to the well as had been agreed upon.

Bob, who had visited the scene of operations before breakfast, again announced that "everything was all right," and that one more load of tubing would give them sufficient.

Under the pretext that there were a great many things which it was necessary for him to attend to, while everyone knew he was simply inventing work for the purpose of hiding his anxiety, he insisted that Ralph, Jim and Dick should help George out to the well when he was ready to come, and then he hurried away.

The charge would not be exploded until nearly noon, and on the night before it had been agreed that George should not venture out until a short time before the decisive moment; but [235] now that the time was so near at hand, he could not remain in the house, and the result was that his mother and Ralph agreed he should go at once.

An easy chair was carried out in the grove, and placed at a safe distance from the well, but where he could have a good view of what was going on. Then, with Ralph at one side, Dick at the other, Mrs. Simpson ahead, carrying a foot-stool and a fan, and his mother in the rear, with a bottle of salts and an umbrella, the cortege started, its general dignity sadly marred when the party were obliged to climb the fence.

Bob was nowhere to be seen when the invalid and his attendants arrived at the reserved seat, but before he was comfortably seated the superintendent came up with another announcement that "everything was all right," and aided them in disposing of George.

He was comfortably seated under a large tree, with Mrs. Harnett and Mrs. Simpson on either side of him, and, so far as could be judged, was quite as well off there as he would have been in the house. Once he was where he could see what was going on, and viewing the works for the first time, the haggard look left his face, thus showing the wisdom of his friends in not preventing him from coming when he wanted to.

The first arrival, after the spectators had assembled, was the last load of tubing, and Bob's only trouble was, or he professed that it was, that they would lose so much oil before they could make [236] arrangements for storing it.

As the time went on, Bob was the only one who had anything to do, and those who watched him insisted that he simply did the same work over and over again.

Finally, when every one began to fear that the Torpedo Company had entirely forgotten their contract, a wagon, similar to the one owned by Bob, drove up with the long tin tubes on the uprights, and the box evidently stored with the dangerous liquid.

In an instant the moonlighters were changed boys. All their nervousness or listlessness was gone, and in its place a bustling, consequential air that was almost ludicrous.

All three of the boys helped unload the wagon, and when the driver attempted to do his share, they plainly told him that all he would be allowed to do was to fasten his horses, if he wanted to see the operation, or to drive away if he was not interested in it. He chose the latter course, and, save for the workmen, the party most interested in "The Harnett" were left alone.

Bob critically examined the cartridges, making many unfavorable comparisons between them and the ones he had been in the habit of making, and then began the work of fastening the reel to the derrick, as well as setting the upright in position, which served as a guide to the rope that was to lower the cartridges in position.

When that was done—and the moonlighters did not hurry in their work, anxious as they had [237] been before, for they were determined that this last shot of theirs should be a perfect success—the more delicate task of filling the cartridges was begun.

There were four of these, each capable of holding twenty quarts, and the spectators were not wholly at their ease, as can after can of the explosive fluid was poured into these frail-looking vessels, even though the moonlighters handled it much more carefully than Ralph had seen them handle that which had been used at the Hoxie well, on the famous night when Mr. Newcombe guarded their hut for them.

As each tube was filled, the boys lowered it into position in the well, and the nervous anxiety which had assailed them the night before again took possession of Ralph and George.

At last everything was ready for the launching of the iron bolt, which was to call into activity the explosive mass, that was to shatter the rock under which it was hoped the oil was concealed. The moment had come when the value or worthlessness of "The Harnett" was to be decided.

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CHAPTER XXXI. [238]

THE SHOT.

It is barely possible that when Bob stood over the aperture with the iron poised in his hands which was to be the means of opening to them the mystery of the well, there was just a shade of fear at his heart that he had been mistaken in the signs, and that an upward rush of water, would be all that would follow the explosion.

His partners noted a look of almost painful hesitation on his face for an instant, and, then, as it vanished, he dropped the go-devil, retreating to where the group of anxious watchers were gathered around George's chair.

The seconds that followed the dropping of the iron were wonderfully long ones, and it seemed as if each one present ceased to breathe, as the time had come when the value or worthlessness of the well was to be decided.

Then was heard three distinct reports, somewhat louder than had been heard at the Hoxie well, because of the charge being nearer the surface of the earth, and this was followed by the black, noisome vapor that wreathed slowly around the aperture as if sent by the demons of the earth to [239] keep back those venturesome mortals who would seek to penetrate their secrets.

No one spoke, and each eye was riveted upon the mouth of the well, to read there the story which was soon told. First came a shower of water, breaking into drops as it reached the surface, sparkling in the sun like diamonds, and then uprose, not slowly and waveringly as Ralph had seen it once before, but shooting quickly in the air, a transparent, greenish column of oil, that broke amid the timbers of the derrick, shattering into splinters the smaller joists and scattering them in every direction.

It was clearly and unmistakably oil, not in any small quantity, or sent with any slight force; but a discharge which, from its volume and intensity, showed how vast was the reservoir from which it had come, how great the strength of confined gas that sent it heavenward.

For nearly five minutes the spectators sat watching the flow of oil which told of the value of "The Harnett," until Bob broke the spell that bound them, by shouting:

"Hurrah for 'The Harnett!' Hurrah for petroleum!"

In an instant all present, even including George, burst into loud shouts of welcome to the long-confined and valuable product of the earth which was theirs.

During the thirty minutes that the new well spouted, congratulations were poured in on Bob from all sides, for through his efforts had this work been done, and without him it might have [240] been many years before such a scene would have been witnessed on the Simpson wood-lot.

The partners hardly knew how to express their joy. George was quietly happy; but the unusual brilliancy of his eyes and the flush on his cheeks told of the deep but suppressed excitement under which he was laboring. In that steady upward flow of oil he saw a competency for himself and his mother, which he had not dreamed he should secure during many long years of toil, and as he clasped her fervently by the hand, she knew that it was of the many things this well would produce which would add to her comfort that he was thinking.

Old Mr. Simpson and his wife stood with clasped hands, looking at the representation of wealth which was pouring out before them, and in their eyes, even as they gazed, was a far-away look, as if they were thinking of their loved ones who, when on this earth, had been deprived of many of the necessaries of life, while wealth beyond their wildest imaginings lay beneath their very feet.

Ralph was laboring under the most intense excitement, which he strove vainly to suppress. He had not, like George, been obliged to battle with the world for those things which money can buy; but he saw before him a course already marked out, which he had believed he would be obliged to struggle very hard to reach.

Now he was rich, and all those things he had desired could be his.

Jim and Dick were loud in their demonstrations of joy that their last shot had produced such [241]
magnificent results; but their old partner, Bob, outstripped them all in loud rejoicings. He had demonstrated beyond the possibility of an argument that his location of the oil belt in the vicinity was correct, and he had done so even as against the theories of those older and more experienced in the business than himself.

In addition, one-quarter of all this was his, and he was what he had long dreamed of being—an oil producer.

The length of time which the well flowed demonstrated the fact that, if it would not produce a thousand barrels of oil per day, the yield would not fall far short of that, and when it finally ceased flowing, Bob was transformed into the steady, hard-working superintendent he had been since the work was first commenced.

It was necessary that something be done at once to save all this oil which was now going to waste, and he directed the workmen at once how they should begin.

Unknown to his partners, Bob had already made arrangements for the building of a tank, and, as soon as the workmen were engaged with the tubing, he started Jim off to town with a message to the contractors that no time might be lost in getting at the work.

Before Jim left, Ralph gave him a message which he wanted him to send to his father. It was short, containing only these words:

"Well just opened. Good for eight hundred barrels per day." [242]

On reading it, Bob insisted that the eight hundred should be changed to one thousand, since that would probably be nearer the actual yield; but Ralph let it remain as it was, preferring to be two hundred barrels short of the actual yield rather than two hundred barrels over.

Mrs. Harnett persuaded George to return to the house as soon as the first flow had ceased; and, aided by Ralph and Mr. Simpson—for the others were too busy to be able to help him—he went back, fancying, as soon as he was away from the well, that he had dreamed of the wonderful things he had seen, and that it could not be a reality.

His friends were not certain whether he had been injured or benefited by the excitement; but he was so thoroughly tired out when he reached his room that he was obliged to go to bed at once, and there he fell into a long, sweet sleep, from which he did not awaken until evening.

As may be imagined, everything was in the greatest state of activity around "The Harnett" during the remainder of that day and all the night, making ready to save the oil which then was being lost, and before the morning came, those who were working at the well decided that even Bob's estimate of a thousand barrels was too small.

"The Harnett" was flowing at the rate of twelve hundred barrels of oil per day, and that represented at least as many dollars, although the price of oil might fall much lower than it then [243]
was, when the supply exceeded the demand.

"If there is anybody that thinks now that the oil-belt don't extend up this way, I should like to have them come up and take a squint at 'The Harnett.' She's spouting like a daisy, and I knew she would, from the first," said Bob, as he came in to breakfast next morning, after having worked all night, his joy so great that he did not even feel the fatigue.

George seemed almost well on this morning, and he took his seat with the others at the breakfast-table, much as if he was as strong as any of them, while his looks did not belie his actions.

"I knew you'd be well this morning," said Bob, gleefully, "for no matter how weak you were, such a sight as you saw yesterday would put the strength into you."

And then the ex-moonlighter's tongue rattled on as if it had, as motive power, a greater force than that which sent the oil up through "The Harnett."

Bob was as full of business as ever on this morning. By common consent, and without the necessity of any conversation on the matter, he had been tacitly accepted as superintendent, and it was not possible for him, just then, to spend many idle moments.

Already had the work on the tank been begun, and until it was finished, "The Harnett" would be connected with an empty one, about two miles away, the tubing being already nearly in position.

Bob had sent, the night before, for more workmen, and he confidently expected that by night [244] all the product of "The Harnett" could be saved.

Old Pete, who had acted as a sort of watchman and guard for Bob when he was a moonlighter, had been sent for to fill a similar position at the well, and very many schemes were in progress.

A house was to be built for the accommodation of the workmen, and this Bob insisted Ralph should attend to at once, as it was needed sadly.

Mr. Simpson was charged with making a road to lead from the highway to the well, and since George was not strong enough to do any other work, he was made book-keeper and cashier, as well as general financier.

Jim and Dick were both hired by the owners of "The Harnett," one to act as general messenger and clerk to George, and the other for such important duties as the partners might not be able to attend to.

In fact, before sunset of the day after the well had been opened, each one of the owners was hard at work, and when they had ceased their labors for the day, gathering in George's room, now turned office, for a chat, Bob rather startled them by the information that it was his purpose to sink another well close by the house, as soon as he should get matters straightened out at "The Harnett."

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CHAPTER XXXII. [245]

MASSIE'S SCHEME.

DURING the following week, matters went on very smoothly at the well newly opened on Mr. Simpson's wood-lot.

George had continued steadily to improve, and looked quite like his old self, so much good had prosperity done for him. His mother, recognizing the fact that she could no longer be of service to him, and feeling not exactly at home in the rather limited accommodations which the Simpson house afforded, had gone home, while the three boys had settled down as regular boarders, or, rather, guests at the Simpson farm.

The road had been built, the house for the workmen was well under way, and the tank completed. By having this storage place near at hand, the value of "The Harnett" could be definitely settled, and it was found that the well was producing a trifle over twelve hundred barrels of oil every twenty-four hours.

The money which Mr. Gurney had advanced had already been repaid, and it was George's intention to settle for the machinery and tools in a few days more, for they were all anxious to be [246] free from debt.

Ralph's father had replied to the telegram by a letter of congratulation, and had promised to come up there to see the property before Ralph's vacation had expired, for it was by no means the young oil producer's intention to neglect his studies. While the other partners attended to the work at the well, it was his purpose to return to college to finish the regular course he had started on.

It did not seem possible that, now the well was open and flowing so freely, anything could happen to prevent them from becoming wealthy, and that in a comparatively short time; but from this dream of fancied security they were destined to be rather rudely awakened.

One morning, when they were all at the well, while Bob was trying, as he had every day since he first saw oil from "The Harnett," to convince them of the wisdom of boring another well just outside the limits of their own property, but on that of Mr. Simpson's, which was entirely at their service, two men drove up directly in front of them.

Visitors had been so plenty at the well, that neither of the partners paid much attention to these new arrivals. Every one near there had heard Bob Hubbard's predictions that the oil belt

embraced Mr. Simpson's property, but without believing him, and when the news went out that he had struck a twelve-hundred-barrel well just where every one believed there was no oil, it seemed as if the people must see it before they could be convinced it was really there. [247]

Almost a constant stream of visitors had been at the well from the day it was opened, and Bob, believing these two men had come simply to assure themselves that what others had said was true, paid no attention to them, but continued his argument with George, as showing how they could open another well further down the gully that should pay as well as this one.

"Can we see Mr. George Harnett and Mr. Ralph Gurney?" asked one of the men, as both advanced toward the lucky owners of "The Harnett."

"Those are the gentlemen," said Bob, carelessly, as he pointed to George and Ralph, and then turned away to attend to some work, believing the visitors had only idle questions to ask.

"And are you Robert Hubbard?" asked the second man, stepping in front of Bob in such a manner as to prevent his leaving the place.

"I am."

"And this, I presume, is Mr. Daniel Simpson?" continued the man, as he pointed to the fourth partner, who had not yet gotten over his surprise at seeing oil flow on his land.

"It is," said Bob, sharply. "Is there any one else around here you wish to see? If there is, call the roll now, for we have nothing else to do but stand up for inspection."

"You four are all we have any business with just now, although in a few moments we shall want to see all who are at work here," said the man who had first spoken; and then, as he produced an official-looking document from his pocket, he added, "Here is an injunction from the court, restraining you from trespassing any further on this property, and from removing anything from it. Here, also, are summonses for you to appear in a suit for ten thousand dollars damages, brought against you by Marcus Massie." [248]

"Massie!" exclaimed Bob, while the others looked at the documents in speechless astonishment. "What have we got to do with him? We don't owe him any money."

"He claims that you have damaged him to the amount named by opening this well without his knowledge or consent," replied the man.

"Well, I like that!" cried Bob, angrily. "Of course we opened it without his knowledge or consent, and perhaps you can tell us why it would have been necessary to consult him about it. What has he got to do with us?"

"Since the well is on his land, and since you have been converting the oil to your own use, he thinks he has a great deal to do with it," replied the second man, who looked very much like a lawyer, while the other was evidently an officer of some kind.

"His land!" cried George; and then all four of the partners looked at each other in a dazed way, as if they had suddenly been deprived of the power of speech.

"Yes, his land," replied the lawyer. "He had a mortgage on all this property, which he foreclosed, and he proposes to take possession of the house at once." [249]

"But—but I paid that mortgage!" cried Mr. Simpson, in a trembling voice. "I paid that mortgage, and have got it now."

"Yes," was the quiet reply. "I understand that by some means you have got the instrument itself in your possession, but if you had got it because you had paid the amount due, you would have received and had recorded a release from Mr. Massie. Have you got that?"

"A release!" repeated the old man, in bewilderment. "I don't rightly understand you. I paid my money and got the mortgage. Wasn't that enough?"

"*If* you had paid the money," replied the lawyer, with a decided emphasis on the first word, "you would have received a release, and that would have been recorded with the mortgage, otherwise that instrument is in full force."

"But I paid it! I paid it!" wailed the old man.

"I know you did, Mr. Simpson," said George, sternly, "and so does Massie. This is a sharp trick on his part to force us into buying his imaginary claim off, for he tried very hard to get hold of this property in the first place, and would have succeeded if he had not tried to get too much. We will consult a lawyer at once."

"In the meantime, gentlemen," said the lawyer, "I warn you against removing any more oil, or interfering in any way with my client's property."

"I don't suppose you have got an order of the court to prevent the well from flowing, have you?" asked Bob, angrily, making what seemed such unnecessary movements with his hands, that the lawyer stepped several paces backward very quickly. [250]

"This officer will remain in charge of such property as you may own here, since it is attached by Mr. Massie," said the lawyer, evidently thinking it best for him to depart, and getting into the

carriage with a celerity that hardly seemed possible in one of his age.

"Oh, he will, will he?" cried Bob, savagely. "Well, I shall stay here in charge of him, and I promise you he won't do anything more here than the law permits him to."

"What *can* we do?" asked Ralph, as the lawyer drove away, and the officer sauntered around the premises like one who already owned them.

"I don't know what we can do now, except to go into town and consult a lawyer. There is no question but that Massie is trying a little sharp practice, and if it is a possible thing, he will get the best of us," said George. "Ralph, you and I will go into town, while Bob stays here. I suppose we had better take Mr. Simpson with us, so that he can tell all the particulars of paying the money."

"We will telegraph for father," cried Ralph, as if the thought has just occurred to him. "He is a lawyer, and he will help us through with it."

"That's a good idea," replied George; "but we will also see a lawyer in town, so as to know exactly what we ought to do now."

[251] Mr. Simpson followed Ralph and George as they went to the stable, and from time to time he repeated half to himself, as he passed his hand over his forehead, as if to collect his scattered senses:

"I paid the mortgage—I paid the mortgage."

"We know you did, Mr. Simpson, and it will be hard if we can't prove it. At all events, he has not got possession of the property yet, and I do not believe he ever will."

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CHAPTER XXXIII.

[252]

HOLDING POSSESSION.

It was a mournful-looking superintendent Bob made when his partners had left him alone with the officer who was acting as keeper of the property Massie had attached in pursuance of his swindling scheme.

Bob had a wholesome dread of openly defying the law. In a case like moonlighting, where the question of legality had never been definitely settled, he had been prompt enough to take his chances as to whether he was proceeding in strict accordance with, or directly against, the law; but in the present case, where the man whom he would have been most pleased to forcibly eject from the premises was armed with all the powers of the court, Bob was obliged to content himself with thinking what he would like to do.

As the officer sat there near the engine-house, doing no more than was absolutely his duty, Bob looked upon him as simply Mr. Massie's representative, and the temptation to vent his anger by some act of violence was very great.

[253] He restrained himself, however, from saying or doing anything that would entangle him in the meshes of the law; but in order to preserve this outward tranquility, he was obliged to ease his mind in some way, which he did by actually glowering at the innocent officer as though he would "wither him with a glance."

Of course there was a certain amount of work which it was absolutely necessary to do, such as caring for the oil, attending to the engine which forced the oil into the tank, and such things as even the law might not be able to restrain. But the work on the buildings, the sinking of pipes in order to get a supply of gas for illuminating purposes, extending the road from the well to the house, and all that labor which was for the purpose of improvement of the property, was necessarily at an end.

Had George remained, his prudence would have dictated the discharge of all their force of workmen who were not employed exclusively on the well, until the question at law had been settled. But to Bob such a course seemed too much like submitting to what was a deliberate wrong, perpetrated under the guise of justice, and he preferred the expense, rather than even the semblance of "backing down."

The officer may or may not have had a disagreeable time in the pursuance of his duty while Ralph and George were in town; but to Bob it was certainly anything but pleasant, since he had great difficulty in not coming to an open conflict with this personification of law, brought in to aid fraud.

It seemed to the ex-moonlighter as if his companions would never return, and once at least

during every ten minutes he walked toward the house, in the hope of seeing them as they came up the lane. [254]

It was not until quite two hours past noon that his vigil was rewarded, and then he saw them coming toward the house with a fourth party in the wagon, whom he rightly conjectured was the lawyer whom they had been to consult.

"Well," he cried, even before they had had time to alight from the wagon; "how have you made out?"

"I haven't got time to tell you now," said George, hurriedly; "but you will hear it all when we are through with what we have to do. Mr. Hillman, the lawyer whom we consulted, and who has come out with us, says that the first and main thing to do is to hold possession, not only of the wood-lot, but of the farm. Massie will attempt this very afternoon to get his men in here, as his lawyer threatened, and if he succeeds we shall be the ones who will have to sue him, instead of his being the outside party, as he is now."

"Can we prevent any one from coming here?" asked Bob, quickly.

"Certainly you can, and must," replied the lawyer. "No one can come here without your permission until after the matter has been decided in court, and you must be careful that no one does."

"That settles it, then," said Bob, gleefully, as he started towards the well. "The first thing I'll do will be to fire out that fellow Massie has got here, and he won't be handled very tenderly either."

"Stop!" cried the lawyer, obliged to speak very loudly, for Bob was some distance away before he had ceased speaking. "That man has a perfect right to be here, for he represents the court in the matter of holding certain movable property until the suit can be decided. What you are to do is simply to prevent unauthorized persons from gaining admittance." [255]

"But how is that going to help matters?"

And Bob was again disconsolate because this revenge had been denied him.

"I prefer to wait until Mr. Gurney can get here before I decide fully on just what shall be done," replied Mr. Hillman. "He stands very high as a lawyer, and his advice in the matter will be worth much more than mine."

"Well," asked the moonlighter, impatiently, "how are we going to prevent any one from coming on the land?"

"That is a very easy matter. With your workmen and yourselves, you ought to form a regular patrol at those few points at which a person could enter, and the law will sustain you in keeping any one away, who does not come armed with an order from the court, even though you use force."

That was sufficient for Bob. Legally entitled to act on the offensive, under certain circumstances, and to defend his and Mr. Simpson's property against all save those coming in the name of the law, there was an opportunity for him to work off some of the anger which he had found so difficult to restrain during the forenoon.

George and Ralph were perfectly willing to let him attend to the defenses, they acting under his orders, and Bob set to work with a feverish energy that boded ill for the perfecting of Mr. Massie's scheme. [256]

Pete was ordered to take up his position at the entrance of the lane which led to the Simpson house, and Mr. Simpson was detailed to see that the negro did his duty. A stout club was all he was allowed as a weapon; but this would be sufficient, it was thought.

Four of the workmen, under the immediate supervision of Jim, were stationed at the road leading to the well, and their orders were peremptory against allowing any one to enter unless with the express permission of Mr. Hillman, who, if any papers purporting to be orders from the court were presented, would first examine them to learn if they were correct.

Four more men, under Dick, were stationed along the front of the property, with orders to patrol the entire line, and three others were stationed around the house, under Ralph's charge.

Bob intended to have a personal supervision of all the points of defense, and in order that he might move about more readily, he had one of his horses saddled, by which means of locomotion he could visit each of his sentries at least once every half hour.

The officer who had been stationed at the works as keeper of the property Massie had attached, was informed that he would be considered a trespasser, and treated as such, if he attempted to go anywhere except just where those articles were which he was expected to guard. [257]

George and the lawyer were thus left free from any duty of guarding the place, and this Bob very wisely concluded was necessary, since they might be obliged to go to town at any moment.

Mrs. Simpson was set at work cooking up a quantity of food for the defenders of the castle, and this Bob proposed to carry to them himself, for he did not intend that one of his men should leave his post, even for a moment.

After all this was done, Bob had time to talk with George and Mr. Hillman relative to the interview that had been held in town.

Mr. Simpson had remained in the same dazed condition he had fallen into when Massie's attorney first appeared, and had been unable to repeat a single word of the interview he had had with the money-lender when he paid off the mortgage, or to remember what had been done at the time.

The records had been searched, however, and no release had been found; therefore, it was plain that Mr. Simpson's ignorance of such matters had caused him to neglect to ask for one.

The probabilities were that Mr. Massie, after learning of the valuable well which had been found on this property which might have been his had he not tried to gain possession of the whole farm, had taken advantage of this oversight on the part of his debtor, and, although he had been repaid the borrowed money, intended to deny that he had ever received it. [258]

That Mr. Hillman had fears of the ultimate result was shown by his desire to consult with Mr. Gurney before taking any steps in the matter, other than to hold possession of the property, and all the partners save Mr. Simpson, who did not seem to be able to understand anything just then, felt that there was a possibility that they might lose "The Harnett" after all their labor and rejoicing.

Bob was by no means easy in his mind when he left Mr. Hillman and George to begin his rounds of the outposts; but he was determined that, since all they could do was to hold possession, no one not legally entitled to it should gain admittance to the place.

For two hours, during which Bob had made his rounds four times, nothing had been seen to indicate that any one had even a desire to enter the Simpson farm, and then, while Bob was talking with the old man, trying to force him to remember all he had done while at Mr. Massie's office, three wagons filled with men were seen down the road coming directly toward the place.

There could be no question but that this was the money-lender's party coming to take possession, and they were in larger force than any one had anticipated.

Riding quickly to the house, Bob ordered Ralph and his men to join Pete and Mr. Simpson, and then he called in Dick and his men, giving these last orders to proceed at once to support Jim, in case any of the newcomers attempted to go that way. [259]

He thought, however, that the greatest trouble would be had at the lane, and he believed he was fully prepared for it.

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CHAPTER XXXIV. [260]

THE MISSING WITNESS.

Bob had hardly called the main portion of his men to the point which was threatened by the money-lender's party, when the wagons reached the entrance to the lane, and the occupants began to get out.

"You cannot enter here!" cried Bob, as the first man started toward the lane, as if he would force his way past those who were guarding the entrance.

"I am sent here by the owner of the property, and it is my intention not only to go in, but to drive away those who are intruding here," replied the man, in an offensive tone.

"Well," cried Bob, the anger which he had kept under control with greatest difficulty during the day now gaining the ascendancy, "it may first be necessary for you to get in before you drive any one out, and I warn you that you attempt to enter at your peril. I am here by the orders of the true owner of the property, and it will be a mighty hard show for you to get in, since my instructions are to keep every one out."

By this time Mr. Hillman had arrived at the scene of the threatened trouble, and he said, loudly, so that all might hear him: [261]

"Gentlemen, the owner of this property is Mr. Daniel Simpson, my client. Acting under my advice, he refuses to allow any one to enter on his farm, and for that purpose has a body of men here to defend his rights. I warn you that you will be rendering yourselves liable to prosecution if you attempt to enter here against his express orders to the contrary."

For a moment those who had been sent by Massie retreated to the wagons, as if unwilling to do anything which might bring them in conflict with the majesty of the law, and it seemed very much as if they were going to leave the place, when the lawyer who had first visited the well, and who

had accompanied them, called out:

"You know very well that this is Mr. Massie's property, since he has foreclosed the mortgage he held upon it, and if, in obeying his orders, you do anything which renders you liable to the law, it will be him, not you, who will be obliged to answer for your actions. I insist upon your going into the lane."

"It will be their heads which will get cracked, at all events, if they attempt to come in here!" cried Bob, almost beside himself with rage; "and if you think we haven't the right or the inclination to knock down the first man who tries to come in, why don't you lead the way, to shew that you are not frightened?"

[262] Although Mr. Hillman would have prevented Bob from speaking, if he had been able to do so, the speech had had its effect, for the men cried out to the lawyer:

"Yes, you lead the way, and we will follow you!"

Leaping from his horse and seizing Pete's club, Bob cried out:

"Show your men that you have a right to come in here, and I will show them what they may expect if they try to follow, by an example on your own head."

The legal gentleman was not as eager to lead the way as he was to urge the men on, and instead of going boldly up to Bob, he tried to induce his men to go in. But none of them would make the attempt, because of the formidable array before them, and seeing how useless his efforts would be in this direction, the lawyer called one of the men to him, talking to him in a low tone.

Bob, divining just what was being said, and fearful lest he should be outwitted finally, went to each one of his men, and ordered them to start for the road that led to the well the instant they should see the intruders get into their wagons.

This order was given none too quickly, for almost before Bob had given his directions to the last man, Massie's party clambered into their wagons, and started down the road at a sharp gallop.

"Come on, every one of you!" shouted Bob, as he forced his horse to leap the fence.

[263] By, riding at full speed, he succeeded in getting ahead of those who would take possession of that to which their employer had no rights.

Of course, it was not possible for Bob's force to get over the ground as quickly as he did; but they ran as fast as possible, leaving only Mr. Hillman, Mr. Simpson, George and Pete to guard the entrance to the lane.

Bob arrived at the place where Jim and his men were stationed a few seconds before the would-be invaders did, and in as few words as possible, told them what had occurred at the lane.

"Strike the first man who attempts to enter," he shouted, "and strike him hard!"

By that time the lawyer and his party had alighted and were marching in a solid body up to the road, evidently believing they could force their way through before the others could arrive.

Instead of dismounting from his horse this time, Bob grasped a club that was being raised by one of the men, and urged his horse at full speed among those who were attempting to force an entrance.

They had come out there in Mr. Massie's employ, believing that there might be some little difficulty about entering, which their very numbers would dispel at once, but by no means anticipating such a vigorous resistance. It did not suit them to measure strength with these who at last *appeared* to have right on their side, and they fled before Bob's charge with the greatest precipitation.

[264] Bob was careful not to follow them into the highway; for, though he had no very extensive acquaintance with the law, he rightly conjectured that if he did this, he might be exceeding the powers Mr. Hillman had said were his; but he stood on the very line of his property, swinging his club in a fashion that would make it uncomfortable for anyone who might get within its reach.

"You should be ashamed of yourselves," he cried, anxious to hold them in check by any means until the remainder of his army could arrive upon the scene, "to attempt even to aid Massie in depriving an old man of his hard-earned rights. Mr. Simpson paid the money-lender all the money he had borrowed; but not knowing anything of the beautiful intricacies of the law, which gives a semblance of legality to such a theft as this, neglected to ask for a release of the property. After oil was discovered here, Massie saw a chance to steal the property, and he has hired you to do what he doesn't dare to do himself. If I so much as thought I was as contemptible as you show yourselves to be by trying to do this dirty work, I would go and drown myself in the most stagnant pool I could find."

Bob's speech had quite as much effect upon the men as the sight of the clubs had had, and they retreated toward their teams, protesting that they did not know the facts of the case when they started out.

It was in vain that the lawyer who had accompanied them insisted that they were only doing

what his client had a legal right to ask them to do; in vain that he urged them to enter on the property regardless of those who tried to prevent them.

Bob had made them feel ashamed of the part they were playing, and before Ralph, who had [265] outstripped the others in the race, arrived, they were in their wagons, insisting that they would have nothing more to do with the matter.

The lawyer scolded and shouted himself hoarse, trying to oblige them to do as he coaxed and commanded, but all to no purpose. They were determined to return, and they plainly told him that unless he came with them, they should drive away without him.

Under this pressure, which he could not control, the lawyer was obliged to obey those whom he had vainly attempted to command, and the party drove away, leaving Bob the well-earned title of conqueror in this first battle of Mr. Massie's.

But after all danger, so far as this party was concerned, had disappeared, Bob was by no means inclined to relax his vigilance. He stationed his men in the positions he had originally intended they should occupy, supplied each of them with a generous lunch, with the addition of hot coffee, and even gave a portion to the solitary officer at the well, when he had originally intended that he should go hungry.

After that was done, and after he had cautioned them to be watchful, impressing on the minds of Ralph, Jim and Dick the necessity of mistrusting every one whom they might see approaching the farm, Bob went back to the house to consult with Mr. Hillman and George.

There some especially good news awaited him. It seemed as if this direct attack on Massie's [266] part had restored Mr. Simpson to something near his presence of mind, and, aided by his wife, who had always found scolding efficacious when he relapsed into absent-mindedness, had succeeded in recalling the events on the afternoon when he paid the money-lender the five hundred dollars which he had had so much difficulty to raise.

He now distinctly remembered that when he entered Massie's office a man by the name of Jared Thompson, formerly an old neighbor of his, was there, and that his first words were to the effect that he had brought the money to pay off the mortgage.

The old man was equally positive that he had laid the amount on the money-lender's desk in the presence of this same man, and that Massie had then offered to buy the wood-lot. How much more might have been said while Thompson was there he was not certain, but of that much he was positive.

Mr. Hillman was overjoyed at the news that there had been a witness to the repayment of the money, but when he asked where the man could be found, he was disappointed in the reply.

Mr. Thompson had lived on the next farm to Mr. Simpson's, but when he left it, he went to Bradford, and from there it had been said that he had gone to Babcock. Where he was living at that time Mr. Simpson neither knew nor did he know of any one else who might be acquainted with Mr. Thompson's whereabouts.

"If we can find this man, and if he heard what Mr. Simpson thinks he did, then the case will be [267] clear enough, for we shall have a witness to the payment of the money, which, I think, will be sufficient to explode Massie's claim."

"We *must* find him," was Bob's reply.

And just then he felt able to find any man, however hard he might try to hide.

"Yes, but how?" asked Ralph, who had come in at the close of the conversation.

"I don't know exactly," said Bob; "but there must be a way. George can be spared better than any one else. Let him harness his horses and start out. He can stay away until he finds him."

"I think the best way would be to make inquiries at Bradford, and from there you might be able to track him," suggested Mr. Hillman. "Just remember that with this man everything will be plain sailing, and that without him Massie may get the best of us, and I am confident you will bring him back with you."

"And above all things, George, don't give up the chase because you think we may need you here. Just remember that we can get along as well without you and spare neither time nor expense in the search," said Bob.

George was perfectly willing to start in pursuit of the missing witness, and at once made his preparations for the journey.

Fortunately he had with him as much money as he would be likely to want, and to harness his horses and to gather up such things as he might need was but the work of a few moments.

"Don't come back without your man!" shouted Bob, as George drove away. [268]

And the defenders of "The Harnett" and the Simpson farm were left alone to await the coming of Mr. Gurney, and of George with the missing witness.

All of them feared that Massie's next attempt to gain admittance would be made under the cover of darkness, and to prevent this from being successful Bob went to work.

First he sent one of the men on his horse to Sawyer to purchase a number of lanterns, and while the messenger was gone he got from Mrs. Simpson all the blankets and comfortables she had.

It was his purpose that half his men should sleep at their posts during the night, while the others watched, in order that they might be able to continue sentry duty for any length of time, and he also proposed that each one on guard should carry a lantern, that both he and any one who might meditate an attack, would know those in possession of the property were still on the alert.

This done, the inmates and guardians of the farm were ready for the coming of the night.

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CHAPTER XXXV.

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MASSIE'S FAILURE.

ALTHOUGH Bob had taken so many precautions against the coming of the enemy during the night, they were all useless, since neither Mr. Massie nor any one in his employ appeared at the Simpson farm.

"Well," said Bob, next morning, while he was waiting for Mrs. Simpson to prepare the breakfast for the sentinels, "since they didn't come during the night they'll most likely be here to-day, so it won't do for us to grow careless."

As the day wore on, and nothing was seen of the force which it was believed would appear, Ralph said to Bob:

"If father started as soon as he got my telegram, he ought to be here on the train to-night, and some of us must drive into town for him."

"That's true, and you must be the one to go," replied Bob, decidedly. "You can take my team, and if any one comes while you are gone, we shall get rid of them, I guess."

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Since Mr. Hillman wished to go to his office for some law-books and papers before Mr. Gurney arrived, Ralph started off with him about noon, leaving the farm with the often-expressed wish that nothing would happen during the absence of three of the defenders.

"If you mean by that that you're afraid some of Massie's men may get in here, you're mistaken," said Bob, stoutly. "Unless we have a mind to let them, which isn't at all likely, there won't one of them get a chance to so much as show his nose inside."

Now that Mr. Simpson had succeeded in gathering his scattered faculties once more, and understood that everything might yet be well with them, he seemed suddenly to have grown young again, for he was as eager in watching for approaching danger as Bob was.

"Don't fear for us!" he shouted, as Mr. Hillman and Ralph drove down the lane. "We can keep a regiment of them at their distance," and he acted much as if he believed all he said.

It was about two hours after Ralph and the lawyer drove away, when Bob was honored with another visit from Mr. Massie's messengers, but this time they did not come in sufficient force to cause any alarm.

The lawyer and two men drove up to the lane, where Bob, having seen them while they were yet some distance away, had a force of five men, and the following conversation took place:

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"I am instructed by Mr. Marcus Massie, the rightful owner of this place, to take possession of it at once, and to order you off the grounds as trespassers," said the lawyer. "Do you intend to prevent us from an exercise of our legal rights?"

"I intend to prevent you from coming in here," replied Bob, "and I warn you now that I will seriously injure the first one who attempts to come on to this land, which belongs to Mr. Simpson."

"I have made the demand upon you," continued the lawyer, in an unruffled tone, "and I tell you now that my client will proceed against you if you thus attempt by force to prevent him from the exercise of his just and lawful rights."

"Your client may proceed to do whatever he can, and just as soon as he can, and if my answer has not been sufficiently plain, I tell you again that none of you can come in here."

And Bob made a demonstration with his club which appeared to convince the lawyer that he would have no hesitation about using it on his precious body.

"I have warned you," said the legal gentleman, viciously, "and now you can take the consequences."

"And I have warned you!" cried Bob, "and I'm certain that you will take the consequences if you attempt to come here, where neither you nor your client have any rights."

With this pleasant conversation, the lawyer and his companions drove away, and once more was Bob master of the situation.

The next arrivals to the disputed property were Mr. Gurney, Mr. Hillman and Ralph. The former had started as soon as he had received his son's telegram, and from the look on Ralph's face, it was easy to see that the two lawyers, after a consultation together, did not consider the [272] situation a desperate one.

"Father says that even if George doesn't succeed in finding Thompson, he believes it will be possible to show to the satisfaction of a jury that Mr. Simpson paid off the mortgage," said Ralph, as the two lawyers entered the house, leaving the boys alone in the stable-yard. "Of course if this witness could be found, everything could be settled at once."

Ralph's father was also able to do something for the immediate relief of the owners of "The Harnett."

On the morning after his arrival, and the guardians of the property had been undisturbed during the night, Mr. Gurney and Mr. Hillman went into town, where they succeeded in getting bondsmen for the boys, thus releasing the property from attachment. They also began a suit against Mr. Massie, to restrain him from taking any further steps in the matter until the question of ownership could be decided at law.

While they were absent, George returned, and with him was the missing witness, Mr. Jared Thompson. He had been found at Babcock, and since he had no business on hand he was perfectly willing to accompany George, and all the more so because he had been promised he should be well paid for his time, which, just then, was of no value to him.

He remembered distinctly seeing Mr. Simpson at Massie's office, and of seeing him pay over a large roll of money, which he stated was the amount of the mortgage. He also heard Massie say, [273] after he had counted the money, that it was "all right," and saw him hand Mr. Simpson the mortgage, which he took from his safe.

After that Mr. Thompson heard some conversation between the two men relative to the purchase of the wood-lot; but, since he was not interested in the matter, he left the office shortly after it had begun.

On the arrival of Mr. Gurney from town—for he returned alone, since there was no necessity for Mr. Hillman to accompany him after the bonds had been given for the release of the property—he questioned the witness George had brought, and then stated that there was no further cause for anxiety about the matter, since this testimony would answer also the purpose of a written release of the mortgage.

He also gave Bob an order to the keeper of the property at the well, recalling him from his disagreeable duties, and the ex-moonlighter had the pleasure of escorting the officer to the main road, happy that they were once more in possession of their own.

Then, of course, Mr. Gurney was shown the wonderful well, and listened, long and attentively to Bob's arguments as to why another well should be sunk near the house. To the surprise of all the partners except, perhaps, Bob, Mr. Gurney advised that that scheme be carried out, saying that Bob's argument seemed to be supported by such facts in the case as were apparent even to [274] those unfamiliar with the business.

Bob was highly delighted at having convinced Ralph's father of the feasibility of this scheme, and Mr. Simpson was so impressed by the celebrated lawyer's advice that he insisted on deeding, that very night, the strip of land, on which it was proposed to sink the well, to the firm of Harnett, Gurney, Hubbard & Simpson.

Mr. Gurney insisted that the other three partners should pay to Mr. Simpson their proportion of the valuation of the land, which would have been several thousand dollars; but the old man would listen to no such proposition. He had been presented with a quarter of the wood-lot when he had no claim upon it, and he urged his right to make the firm a present of as much land as he owned.

There was no necessity of watching the farm that night, although Bob thought it was careless to leave it unguarded; but no harm came to it, nor did they even hear from the worthy Mr. Massie.

Bob lost no time in setting about the work of opening the new well, and his first duty next morning was to set a portion of the men at work making ready for the erection of the derrick.

Fortunately for the boys, the court was already in session, and Massie's claim came up for an early hearing.

It seemed as if the old money-lender must have entirely forgotten that there had been a witness to the payment of the money, for he came into court apparently confident that he should be able to call "The Harnett" his own; but as soon as he saw Thompson, all his confidence vanished, and [275]

he sneaked out of court even before the case was fairly opened.

Of course, there could be but one decision, under the circumstances, and in less than an hour from the time the case was called, a verdict had been given in favor of Mr. Simpson, who was advised by the judge to demand of Massie a written release, and there was no longer any question as to the ownership of "The Harnett."

So far as Ralph was concerned, the case had been decided none too soon. It was time for him to return to college, and on the next day, in company with his father, he bade his partners adieu for a year, as he returned to his studies. Ralph Gurney's vacation was at an end, as this story should be, since it promised simply to tell of that time.

With the story brought to a close, the work of the author should be ended, unless, as in this case, he makes brief mention of what has happened, concerning the principal characters, from that time until the present.

Ramsdell and Dean were convicted of the assault on George, and sentence of two years in the State prison pronounced against them, the charge of stealing the team still hanging over their heads, in case George wants to press it when their term of imprisonment has ended, which is not probable.

While Ralph was finishing his collegiate course, Bob worked at the new well, and when it was opened, he telegraphed to Ralph: [276]

> "New well just shot. Another victory for the moonlighter, for it is not more than two hundred barrels less than the other."

And Ralph replied:

> "I claim the right to name it. It shall be called 'The Moonlighter.'"

When Ralph graduated, he owned a quarter of three good, paying wells, and Bob has now an idea that it will pay to open another some distance away, where he has been prospecting for the past month.

Mr. and Mrs. Simpson still live on the old farm, and George, Ralph and Bob live with them; but a new house has been built by the side of the old one, for the old couple would not consent that their first home should be torn down, and at any time that the readers visit that section of the country, they should not fail to look at "The Harnett," which still flows as it did during Ralph Gurney's vacation.

THE END.

A bright, enterprising lad was Tom the Bootblack. He was not at all ashamed of his humble calling, though always on the lookout to better himself. The lad started for Cincinnati to look up his heritage. Mr. Grey, the uncle, did not hesitate to employ a ruffian to kill the lad. The plan failed, and Gilbert Grey, once Tom the bootblack, came into a comfortable fortune. This is one of Mr. Alger's best stories.

Dan the Newsboy. By Horatio Alger, Jr. 12mo, cloth, illustrated, price $1.00.

Dan Mordaunt and his mother live in a poor tenement, and the lad is pluckily trying to make ends meet by selling papers in the streets of New York. A little heiress of six years is confided to the care of the Mordaunts. The child is kidnapped and Dan tracks the child to the house where she is hidden, and rescues her. The wealthy aunt of the little heiress is so delighted with Dan's courage and many good qualities that she adopts him as her heir.

Tony the Hero: A Brave Boy's Adventure with a Tramp. By Horatio Alger, Jr. 12mo, cloth, illustrated, price $1.00.

Tony, a sturdy bright-eyed boy of fourteen, is under the control of Rudolph Rugg, a thorough rascal. After much abuse Tony runs away and gets a job as stable boy in a country hotel. Tony is heir to a large estate. Rudolph for a consideration hunts up Tony and throws him down a deep well. Of course Tony escapes from the fate provided for him, and by a brave act, a rich friend secures his rights and Tony is prosperous. A very entertaining book.

The Errand Boy; or, How Phil Brent Won Success. By Horatio Alger, Jr. 12mo, cloth illustrated, price $1.00.

The career of "The Errand Boy" embraces the city adventures of a smart country lad. Philip was brought up by a kind-hearted innkeeper named Brent. The death of Mrs. Brent paved the way for the hero's subsequent troubles. A retired merchant in New York secures him the situation of errand boy, and thereafter stands as his friend.

Tom Temple's Career. By Horatio Alger, Jr. 12mo, cloth, illustrated, price $1.00.

Tom Temple is a bright, self-reliant lad. He leaves Plympton village to seek work in New York, whence he undertakes an important mission to California. Some of his adventures in the far west are so startling that the reader will scarcely close the book until the last page shall have been reached. The tale is written in Mr. Alger's most fascinating style.

Frank Fowler, the Cash Boy. By Horatio Alger, Jr. 12mo, cloth, illustrated, price $1.00. [2]

Frank Fowler, a poor boy, bravely determines to make a living for himself and his foster-sister Grace. Going to New York he obtains a situation as cash boy in a dry goods store. He renders a service to a wealthy old gentleman who takes a fancy to the lad, and thereafter helps the lad to gain success and fortune.

Tom Thatcher's Fortune. By Horatio Alger, Jr. 12mo, cloth, illustrated, price $1.00.

Tom Thatcher is a brave, ambitious, unselfish boy. He supports his mother and sister on meagre wages earned as a shoe-pegger in John Simpson's factory. Tom is discharged from the factory and starts overland for California. He meets with many adventures. The story is told in a way which has made Mr. Alger's name a household word in so many homes.

The Train Boy. By Horatio Alger, Jr. 12mo, cloth, illustrated, price $1.00.

Paul Palmer was a wide-awake boy of sixteen who supported his mother and sister by selling books and papers on the Chicago and Milwaukee Railroad. He detects a young man in the act of picking the pocket of a young lady. In a railway accident many passengers are killed, but Paul is fortunate enough to assist a Chicago merchant, who out of gratitude takes him into his employ. Paul succeeds with tact and judgment and is well started on the road to business prominence.

Mark Mason's Victory. The Trials and Triumphs of a Telegraph Boy. By Horatio Alger, Jr. 12mo, cloth, illustrated, price $1.00.

Mark Mason, the telegraph boy, was a sturdy, honest lad, who pluckily won his way to success by his honest manly efforts under many difficulties. This story will please the very large class of boys who regard Mr. Alger as a favorite author.

A Debt of Honor. The Story of Gerald Lane's Success in the Far West. By Horatio Alger, Jr. 12mo, cloth, illustrated, price $1.00.

The story of Gerald Lane and the account of the many trials and disappointments which he passed through before he attained success, will interest all boys who have read the previous stories of this delightful author.

Ben Bruce. Scenes in the Life of a Bowery Newsboy. By Horatio Alger, Jr. 12mo, cloth, illustrated, price $1.00.

Ben Bruce was a brave, manly, generous boy. The story of his efforts, and many seeming failures and disappointments, and his final success, are most interesting to all readers. The tale is written in Mr. Alger's most fascinating style.

The Castaways; or, On the Florida Reefs. By James Otis. 12mo, cloth, illustrated, price $1.00.

This tale smacks of the salt sea. From the moment that the Sea Queen leaves lower New York bay till the breeze leaves her becalmed off the coast of Florida, one can almost hear the whistle of the wind through her rigging, the creak of her straining cordage as she heels to the leeward. The adventures of Ben Clark, the hero of the story and Jake the cook, cannot fail to charm the reader. As a writer for young people Mr. Otis is a prime favorite.

Wrecked on Spider Island; or, How Ned Rogers Found the Treasure. By James Otis. 12mo, cloth, illustrated, price $1.00. [3]

Ned Rogers, a "down-east" plucky lad ships as cabin boy to earn a livelihood. Ned is marooned on Spider Island, and while there discovers a wreck submerged in the sand, and finds a considerable amount of treasure. The capture of the treasure and the incidents of the voyage serve to make as entertaining a story of sea-life as the most captious boy could desire.

The Search for the Silver City: A Tale of Adventure in Yucatan. By James Otis. 12mo, cloth, illustrated, price $1.00.

Two lads, Teddy Wright and Neal Emery, embark on the steam yacht Day Dream for a cruise to the tropics. The yacht is destroyed by fire, and then the boat is cast upon the coast of Yucatan. They hear of the wonderful Silver City, of the Chan Santa Cruz Indians, and with the help of a faithful Indian ally carry off a number of the golden images from the temples. Pursued with relentless vigor at last their escape is effected in an astonishing manner. The story is so full of exciting incidents that the reader is quite carried away with the novelty and realism of the narrative.

A Runaway Brig; or, An Accidental Cruise. By James Otis. 12mo, cloth, illustrated, price $1.00.

This is a sea tale, and the reader can look out upon the wide shimmering sea as it flashes back the sunlight, and imagine himself afloat with Harry Vandyne, Walter Morse, Jim Libby and that old shell-back, Bob Brace, on the brig Bonita. The boys discover a mysterious document which enables them to find a buried treasure. They are stranded on an island and at last are rescued with the treasure. The boys are sure to be fascinated with this entertaining story.

The Treasure Finders: A Boy's Adventures in Nicaragua. By James Otis. 12mo, cloth, illustrated, price $1.00.

Roy and Dean Coloney, with their guide Tongla, leave their father's indigo plantation to visit the wonderful ruins of an ancient city. The boys eagerly explore the temples of an extinct race and discover three golden images cunningly hidden away. They escape with the greatest difficulty. Eventually they reach safety with their golden prizes. We doubt if there ever was written a more entertaining story than "The Treasure Finders."

Jack, the Hunchback. A Story of the Coast of Maine. By James Otis. Price $1.00.

This is the story of a little hunchback who lived on Cape Elizabeth, on the coast of Maine. His trials and successes are most interesting. From first to last nothing stays the interest of the narrative. It bears us along as on a stream whose current varies in direction, but never loses its force.

With Washington at Monmouth: A Story of Three Philadelphia Boys. By James Otis. 12mo, ornamental cloth, olivine edges, illustrated, price $1.50.

Three Philadelphia lads assist the American spies and make regular and frequent visits to Valley Forge in the Winter while the British occupied the city. The story abounds with pictures of Colonial life skillfully drawn, and the glimpses of Washington's soldiers which are given shown that the work has not been hastily done, or without considerable study. The story is wholesome and patriotic in tone, as are all of Mr. Otis' works.

With Lafayette at Yorktown: A Story of How Two Boys Joined the Continental Army. By James Otis. 12mo, ornamental cloth, olivine edges, illustrated, price $1.50. [4]

Two lads from Portsmouth, N. H., attempt to enlist in the Colonial Army, and are given employment as spies. There is no lack of exciting incidents which the youthful reader craves, but it is healthful excitement brimming with facts which every boy should be familiar with, and while the reader is following the adventures of Ben Jaffrays and Ned Allen he is acquiring a fund of historical lore which will remain in his memory long after that which he has memorized from textbooks has been forgotten.

At the Siege of Havana. Being the Experiences of Three Boys Serving under Israel Putnam in 1762. By James Otis. 12mo, ornamental cloth, olivine edges, illustrated, price $1.50.

"At the Siege of Havana" deals with that portion of the Island's history when the English king captured the capital, thanks to the assistance given by the troops from New England, led in part by Col. Israel Putnam.

The principal characters are Darius Lunt, the lad who, represented as telling the story, and his

comrades, Robert Clement and Nicholas Vallet. Colonel Putnam also figures to considerable extent, necessarily, in the tale, and the whole forms one of the most readable stories founded on historical facts.

The Defense of Fort Henry. A Story of Wheeling Creek in 1777. By James Otis, 12mo, ornamental cloth, olivine edges, illustrated, price $1.50.

Nowhere in the history of our country can be found more heroic or thrilling incidents than in the story of those brave men and women who founded the settlement of Wheeling in the Colony of Virginia. The recital of what Elizabeth Zane did is in itself as heroic a story as can be imagined. The wondrous bravery displayed by Major McCulloch and his gallant comrades, the sufferings of the colonists and their sacrifice of blood and life, stir the blood of old as well as young readers.

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"During the British occupancy of New York, at the outbreak of the Revolution, a Yankee lad hears of the plot to take General Washington's person, and calls in two companions to assist the patriot cause. They do some astonishing things, and, incidentally, lay the way for an American navy later, by the exploit which gives its name to the work. Mr. Otis' books are too well known to require any particular commendation to the young."—Evening Post.

With Warren at Bunker Hill. A Story of the Siege of Boston. By James Otis. 12mo, ornamental cloth, olivine edges, illustrated, price $1.50.

"This is a tale of the siege of Boston, which opens on the day after the doings at Lexington and Concord, with a description of home life in Boston, introduces the reader to the British camp at Charlestown, shows Gen. Warren at home, describes what a boy thought of the battle of Bunker Hill, and closes with the raising of the siege. The three heroes, George Wentworth, Ben Scarlett and an old ropemaker, incur the enmity of a young Tory, who causes them many adventures the boys will like to read."—Detroit Free Press.

With the Swamp Fox. The Story of General Marion's Spies. By James Otis. 12mo, cloth, illustrated, price $1.00. [5]

This story deals with General Francis Marion's heroic struggle in the Carolinas. General Marion's arrival to take command of these brave men and rough riders is pictured as a boy might have seen it, and although the story is devoted to what the lads did, the Swamp Fox is ever present in the mind of the reader.

On the Kentucky Frontier. A Story of the Fighting Pioneers of the West. By James Otis. 12mo, cloth, illustrated, price $1.

In the history of our country there is no more thrilling story than that of the work done on the Mississippi river by a handful of frontiersmen. Mr. Otis takes the reader on that famous expedition from the arrival of Major Clarke's force at Corn Island, until Kaskaskia was captured. He relates that part of Simon Kenton's life history which is not usually touched upon either by the historian or the story teller. This is one of the most entertaining books for young people which has been published.

Sarah Dillard's Ride. A Story of South Carolina in 1780. By James Otis. 12mo, cloth, illustrated, price $1.00.

"This book deals with the Carolinas in 1780, giving a wealth of detail of the Mountain Men who struggled so valiantly against the king's troops. Major Ferguson is the prominent British officer of the story, which is told as though coming from a youth who experienced these adventures. In this way the famous ride of Sarah Dillard is brought out as an incident of the plot."—**Boston Journal.**

A Tory Plot. A Story of the Attempt to Kill General Washington. By James Otis. 12mo, cloth, illustrated, price $1.00.

"'A Tory Plot' is the story of two lads who overhear something of the plot originated during the Revolution by Gov. Tryon to capture or murder Washington. They communicate their knowledge to Gen. Putnam and are commissioned by him to play the role of detectives in the matter. They do so, and meet with many adventures and hair-breadth escapes. The boys are, of course, mythical, but they serve to enable the author to put into very attractive shape much valuable knowledge concerning one phase of the Revolution."—**Pittsburgh Times.**

A Traitor's Escape. A Story of the Attempt to Seize Benedict Arnold. By James Otis. 12mo, cloth, illustrated, price $1.00.

"This is a tale with stirring scenes depicted in each chapter, bringing clearly before the mind the glorious deeds of the early settlers in this country. In an historical work dealing with this country's past, no plot can hold the attention closer than this one, which describes the attempt and partial success of Benedict Arnold's escape to New York, where he remained as the guest of Sir Henry Clinton. All those who actually figured in the arrest of the traitor, as well as Gen. Washington, are included as characters."—**Albany Union.**

A Cruise with Paul Jones. A Story of Naval Warfare in 1776. By James Otis. 12mo, cloth, illustrated, price $1.00.

"This story takes up that portion of Paul Jones' adventurous life when he was hovering off the British coast, watching for an opportunity to strike the enemy a blow. It deals more particularly with his descent upon Whitehaven, the seizure of Lady Selkirk's plate, and the famous battle with the Drake. The boy who figures in the tale is one who was taken from a derelict by Paul Jones shortly after this particular cruise was begun."—**Chicago Inter-Ocean.**

Corporal Lige's Recruit. A Story of Crown Point and Ticonderoga. By James Otis. 12mo, cloth, illustrated, price $1.00. [6]

"In 'Corporal Lige's Recruit,' Mr. Otis tells the amusing story of an old soldier, proud of his record, who had served the king in '58, and who takes the lad, Isaac Rice, as his 'personal recruit.' The lad acquits himself superbly. Col. Ethan Allen 'in the name of God and the continental congress,' infuses much martial spirit into the narrative, which will arouse the keenest interest as it proceeds. Crown Point, Ticonderoga, Benedict Arnold and numerous other famous historical names appear in this dramatic tale."—**Boston Globe.**

Morgan, the Jersey Spy. A Story of the Siege of Yorktown in 1781. By James Otis. 12mo, cloth, illustrated, price $1.00.

"The two lads who are utilized by the author to emphasize the details of the work done during that memorable time were real boys who lived on the banks of the York river, and who aided the Jersey spy in his dangerous occupation. In the guise of fishermen the lads visit Yorktown, are suspected of being spies, and put under arrest. Morgan risks his life to save them. The final escape, the thrilling encounter with a squad of red coats, when they are exposed equally to the bullets of friends and foes, told in a masterly fashion, makes of this volume one of the most entertaining books of the year."—**Inter-Ocean.**

The Young Scout: The Story of a West Point Lieutenant. By Edward S. Ellis. 12mo, cloth, illustrated, price $1.00.

The crafty Apache chief Geronimo but a few years ago was the most terrible scourge of the southwest border. The author has woven, in a tale of thrilling interest, all the incidents of Geronimo's last raid. The hero is Lieutenant James Decker, a recent graduate of West Point. Ambitious to distinguish himself the young man takes many a desperate chance against the enemy and on more than one occasion narrowly escapes with his life. In our opinion Mr. Ellis is the best writer of Indian stories now before the public.

Adrift in the Wilds: The Adventures of Two Shipwrecked Boys. By Edward S. Ellis. 12mo, cloth, illustrated, price $1.00.

Elwood Brandon and Howard Lawrence are en route for San Francisco. Off the coast of California the steamer takes fire. The two boys reach the shore with several of the passengers. Young Brandon becomes separated from his party and is captured by hostile Indians, but is afterwards rescued. This is a very entertaining narrative of Southern California.

A Young Hero; or, Fighting to Win. By Edward S. Ellis. 12mo, cloth, illustrated, price $1.00.

This story tells how a valuable solid silver service was stolen from the Misses Perkinpine, two very old and simple minded ladies. Fred Sheldon, the hero of this story, undertakes to discover the thieves and have them arrested. After much time spent in detective work, he succeeds in discovering the silver plate and winning the reward. The story is told in Mr. Ellis' most fascinating style. Every boy will be glad to read this delightful book.

Lost in the Rockies. A Story of Adventure in the Rocky Mountains. By Edward S. Ellis. 12mo, cloth, illustrated, price $1.

Incident succeeds incident, and adventure is piled upon adventure, and at the end the reader, be he boy or man, will have experienced breathless enjoyment in this romantic story describing many adventures in the Rockies and among the Indians.

A Jaunt Through Java: The Story of a Journey to the Sacred Mountain. By Edward S. Ellis. 12mo, cloth, illustrated, price $1.00. [7]

The interest of this story is found in the thrilling adventures of two cousins, Hermon and Eustace Hadley, on their trip across the island of Java, from Samarang to the Sacred Mountain. In a land where the Royal Bengal tiger, the rhinoceros, and other fierce beasts are to be met with, it is but natural that the heroes of this book should have a lively experience. There is not a dull page in the book.

The Boy Patriot. A Story of Jack, the Young Friend of Washington. By Edward S. Ellis. 12mo, cloth, olivine edges, illustrated, price $1.50.

"There are adventures of all kinds for the hero and his friends, whose pluck and ingenuity in extricating themselves from awkward fixes are always equal to the occasion. It is an excellent story full of honest, manly, patriotic efforts on the part of the hero. A very vivid description of the battle of Trenton is also found in this story."—**Journal of Education.**

A Yankee Lad's Pluck. How Bert Larkin Saved his Father's Ranch in Porto Rico. By Wm. P. Chipman. 12mo, cloth, illustrated, price $1.00.

"Bert Larkin, the hero of the story, early excites our admiration, and is altogether a fine character such as boys will delight in, whilst the story of his numerous adventures is very graphically told. This will, we think, prove one of the most popular boys' books this season."—**Gazette.**

A Brave Defense. A Story of the Massacre at Fort Griswold in 1781. By William P. Chipman. 12mo, cloth, illustrated, price $1.00.

Perhaps no more gallant fight against fearful odds took place during the Revolutionary War than that at Fort Griswold, Groton Heights, Conn., in 1781. The boys are real boys who were actually on the muster rolls, either at Fort Trumbull on the New London side, or of Fort Griswold on the Groton side of the Thames. The youthful reader who follows Halsey Sanford and Levi Dart and Tom Malleson, and their equally brave comrades, through their thrilling adventures will be learning something more than historical facts; they will be imbibing lessons of fidelity, of bravery, of heroism, and of manliness, which must prove serviceable in the arena of life.

The Young Minuteman. A Story of the Capture of General Prescott in 1777. By William P. Chipman. 12mo, cloth, illustrated, price $1.00.

This story is based upon actual events which occurred during the British occupation of the waters of Narragansett Bay. Darius Wale and William Northrop belong to "the coast patrol." The story is a strong one, dealing only with actual events. There is, however, no lack of thrilling adventure, and every lad who is fortunate enough to obtain the book will find not only that his historical knowledge is increased, but that his own patriotism and love of country are deepened.

For the Temple: A Tale of the Fall of Jerusalem. By G. A. Henty. With illustrations by S. J. Solomon. 12mo, cloth, olivine edges, price $1.00.

"Mr. Henty's graphic prose picture of the hopeless Jewish resistance to Roman sway adds another leaf to his record of the famous wars of the world. The book is one of Mr. Henty's cleverest efforts."—**Graphic.**

Roy Gilbert's Search: A Tale of the Great Lakes. By Wm. P. Chipman. 12mo, cloth, illustrated, price $1.00. [8]

A deep mystery hangs over the parentage of Roy Gilbert. He arranges with two schoolmates to make a tour of the Great Lakes on a steam launch. The three boys visit many points of interest on the lakes. Afterwards the lads rescue an elderly gentleman and a lady from a sinking yacht. Later on the boys narrowly escape with their lives. The hero is a manly, self-reliant boy, whose adventures will be followed with interest.

The Slate Picker: The Story of a Boy's Life in the Coal Mines. By Harry Prentice. 12mo, cloth, illustrated, price $1.00.

This is a story of a boy's life in the coal mines of Pennsylvania. Ben Burton, the hero, had a hard road to travel, but by grit and energy he advanced step by step until he found himself called upon to fill the position of chief engineer of the Kohinoor Coal Company. This is a book of extreme interest to every boy reader.

The Boy Cruisers; or, Paddling in Florida. By St. George Rathborne. 12mo, cloth, illustrated, price $1.00.

Andrew George and Rowland Carter start on a canoe trip along the Gulf coast, from Key West to Tampa, Florida. Their first adventure is with a pair of rascals who steal their boats. Next they run into a gale in the Gulf. After that they have a lively time with alligators and Andrew gets into trouble with a band of Seminole Indians. Mr. Rathborne knows just how to interest the boys, and lads who are in search of a rare treat will do well to read this entertaining story.

Captured by Zulus: A Story of Trapping in Africa. By Harry Prentice. 12mo, cloth, illustrated, price $1.00.

This story details the adventures of two lads, Dick Elsworth and Bob Harvey, in the wilds of South Africa. By stratagem the Zulus capture Dick and Bob and take them to their principal kraal or village. The lads escape death by digging their way out of the prison hut by night. They are pursued, but the Zulus finally give up pursuit. Mr. Prentice tells exactly how wild-beast collectors secure specimens on their native stamping grounds, and these descriptions make very entertaining reading.

Tom the Ready; or, Up from the Lowest. By Randolph Hill. 12mo, cloth, illustrated, price $1.00.

This is a dramatic narrative of the unaided rise of a fearless, ambitious boy from the lowest round of fortune's ladder to wealth and the governorship of his native State. Tom Seacomb begins life with a purpose, and eventually overcomes those who oppose him. How he manages to win the battle is told by Mr. Hill in a masterful way that thrills the reader and holds his attention and sympathy to the end.

Captain Kidd's Gold: The True Story of an Adventurous Sailor Boy. By James Franklin Fitts. 12mo, cloth, illustrated, price $1.00.

There is something fascinating to the average youth in the very idea of buried treasure. A vision arises before his eyes of swarthy Portuguese and Spanish rascals, with black beards and gleaming eyes. There were many famous sea rovers, but none more celebrated than Capt. Kidd. Paul Jones Garry inherits a document which locates a considerable treasure buried by two of Kidd's crew. The hero of this book is an ambitious, persevering lad, of salt-water New England ancestry, and his efforts to reach the island and secure the money form one of the most absorbing tales for our youth that has come from the press.

The Boy Explorers: The Adventures of Two Boys in Alaska. By Harry Prentice. 12mo, cloth, illustrated, price $1.00. [9]

Two boys, Raymond and Spencer Manning, travel to Alaska to join their father in search of their uncle. On their arrival at Sitka the boys with an Indian guide set off across the mountains. The trip is fraught with perils that test the lads' courage to the utmost. All through their exciting adventures the lads demonstrate what can be accomplished by pluck and resolution, and their experience makes one of the most interesting tales ever written.

The Island Treasure; or, Harry Darrel's Fortune. By Frank H. Converse. 12mo, cloth, illustrated, price $1.00.

Harry Darrel, having received a nautical training on a school-ship, is bent on going to sea. A runaway horse changes his prospects. Harry saves Dr. Gregg from drowning and afterward becomes sailing-master of a sloop yacht. Mr. Converse's stories possess a charm of their own which is appreciated by lads who delight in good healthy tales that smack of salt water.

Guy Harris: The Runaway. By Harry Castlemon. 12mo, cloth, illustrated, price $1.00.

Guy Harris lived in a small city on the shore of one of the Great Lakes. He is persuaded to go to sea, and gets a glimpse of the rough side of life in a sailor's boarding house. He ships on a vessel and for five months leads a hard life. The book will interest boys generally on account of its graphic style. This is one of Castlemon's most attractive stories.

Julian Mortimer: A Brave Boy's Struggle for Home and Fortune. By Harry Castlemon. 12mo, cloth, illustrated, price $1.

The scene of the story lies west of the Mississippi River, in the days when emigrants made their perilous way across the great plains to the land of gold. There is an attack upon the wagon train by a large party of Indians. Our hero is a lad of uncommon nerve and pluck. Befriended by a stalwart trapper, a real rough diamond, our hero achieves the most happy results.

By Pike and Dyke: A Tale of the Rise of the Dutch Republic. By G. A. Henty. With illustrations by Maynard Brown. 12mo, cloth, olivine edges, price $1.00.

"Boys with a turn for historical research will be enchanted with the book, while the rest who only care for adventure will be students in spite of themselves."—**St. James's Gazette.**

St. George for England: A Tale of Cressy and Poitiers. By G. A. Henty. With illustrations by Gordon Browne. 12mo, cloth, olivine edges, price $1.00.

"A story of very great interest for boys. In his own forcible style the author has endeavored to show that determination and enthusiasm can accomplish marvellous results; and that courage is generally accompanied by magnanimity and gentleness."—**Pall Mall Gazette.**

Captain Bayley's Heir: A Tale of the Gold Fields of California. By G. A. Henty. With illustrations by H. M. Paget. 12mo, cloth, olivine edges, price $1.00.

"Mr. Henty is careful to mingle instruction with entertainment; and the humorous touches, especially in the sketch of John Holl, the Westminster dustman, Dickens himself could hardly have excelled."—**Christian Leader.**

Budd Boyd's Triumph; or, The Boy Firm of Fox Island. By William P. Chipman. 12mo, cloth, illustrated, price $1.00. [10]

The scene of this story is laid on the upper part of Narragansett Bay, and the leading incidents have a strong salt-water flavor. The two boys, Budd Boyd and Judd Floyd, being ambitious and clear sighted, form a partnership to catch and sell fish. Budd's pluck and good sense carry him through many troubles. In following the career of the boy firm of Boyd & Floyd, the youthful reader will find a useful lesson—that industry and perseverance are bound to lead to ultimate success.

Lost in the Canyon: Sam Willett's Adventures on the Great Colorado. By Alfred R. Calhoun. 12mo, cloth, illustrated, price $1.

This story hinges on a fortune left to Sam Willett, the hero, and the fact that it will pass to a disreputable relative if the lad dies before he shall have reached his majority. The story of his father's peril and of Sam's desperate trip down the great canyon on a raft, and how the party

finally escape from their perils is described in a graphic style that stamps Mr. Calhoun as a master of his art.

Captured by Apes: The Wonderful Adventures of a Young Animal Trainer. By HARRY PRENTICE. 12mo, cloth, illustrated, price $1.00.

Philip Garland, a young animal collector and trainer, sets sail for Eastern seas in quest of a new stock of living curiosities. The vessel is wrecked off the coast of Borneo, and young Garland is cast ashore on a small island, and captured by the apes that overran the place. Very novel indeed is the way by which the young man escapes death. Mr. Prentice is a writer of undoubted skill.

Under Drake's Flag: A Tale of the Spanish Main. By G. A. HENTY. With illustrations by GORDON BROWNE. 12mo, cloth, olivine edges, price $1.00.

"There is not a dull chapter, nor, indeed, a dull page in the book; but the author has so carefully worked up his subject that the exciting deeds of his heroes are never incongruous nor absurd."—**Observer.**

By Sheer Pluck: A Tale of the Ashanti War. By G. A. HENTY. With illustrations by GORDON BROWNE. 12mo, cloth, olivine edges, price $1.00.

The author has woven, in a tale of thrilling interest, all the details of the Ashanti campaign, of which he was himself a witness.

"Mr. Henty keeps up his reputation as a writer of boys' stories. 'By Sheer Pluck' will be eagerly read."—**Athenæum.**

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By England's Aid; or, The Freeing of the Netherlands (1585-1604). By G. A. HENTY. With illustrations by ALFRED PEARSE. 12mo, cloth, olivine edges, price $1.00.

"It is an admirable book for youngsters. It overflows with stirring incident and exciting adventure, and the color of the era and of the scene are finely reproduced. The illustrations add to its attractiveness."—**Boston Gazette.**

For sale by all booksellers, or sent postpaid on receipt of price by the publisher, A. L. BURT, 52-58 Duane Street, New York.

Transcriber's Note:

Variations in the use of hyphens and alternative spelling have been retained as they appear in the original except as in the following changes:

Page	5	friendship for you. *changed to* friendship for you,
Page	12	and he was he was on his way *changed to* and he was on his way
Page	14	I should have have been somewhere *changed to* I should have been somewhere
Page	55	might he obliged to *changed to* might be obliged to
Page	88	thay may make it disagreeable *changed to* they may make it disagreeable
Page	146	in a box-buggy *changed to* in a box buggy
Page	151	his own propperty *changed to* his own property
Page	153	Hello! Helo-o-o! *changed to* Hello! Hello-o-o!
Page	156	A SOUVENIR OF THE THIEVES *changed to* A SOUVENIR OF THE THIEVES.
Page	180	call the case on of *changed to* call the case one of
Page	225	said Bob, and before *changed to*

said Bob, "and before

Page	234	an hour bfore it *changed to* an hour before it
Page	238	this was followd by *changed to* this was followed by
Page	242	it was, prefering to *changed to* it was, preferring to
Page	258	they might lose. "The Harnett" *changed to* they might lose "The Harnett"

And in the advertisements:

Page	5	South Carolina in in 1780 *changed to* South Carolina in 1780
Page	6	price $1,00 in Corporal Lige's Recruit *changed to* price $1.00
Page	8	illustrated, price $1.00 in The Boy Cruisers *changed to* illustrated, price $1.00.
Page	10	price $1, in Lost in the Canyon *changed to* price $1.
Page	10	cloth, illustrated. in Captured by Apes *changed to* cloth, illustrated,

The table of contents was not in the original publication.

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