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Stirring Adventures in the Oil Fields, by Edward Stratemeyer**

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THE ROVER BOYS IN THE LAND OF LUCK

OR

STIRRING ADVENTURES IN THE OIL FIELDS

BY ARTHUR M. WINFIELD

(Edward Stratemeyer)

**AUTHOR OF "THE ROVER BOYS AT SCHOOL," "THE ROVER BOYS ON THE OCEAN,"
"THE ROVER BOYS ON A HUNT." "THE PUTNAM HALL SERIES," ETC.**

ILLUSTRATED



"THEY'VE STRUCK OIL!" YELLED ANDY EXCITEDLY.

INTRODUCTION

My Dear Boys: This book is a complete story in itself, but forms the fifth volume in a line issued under the general title, "The Second Rover Boys Series for Young Americans."

As mentioned in some volumes of the first series, this line was started years ago with the publication of "The Rover Boys at School," "On the Ocean," and "In the Jungle," in which I introduced my readers to Dick, Tom, and Sam Rover and their relatives. The volumes of the first series related the doings of these three Rover boys while at Putnam Hall Military Academy, Brill College, and while on numerous outings.

Having acquired a good education, the three young men established themselves in business in New York and became married. Dick Rover was blessed with a son and a daughter, as was likewise his brother Sam, while Tom Rover became the proud father of twin boys. As the four lads were all of a decidedly lively disposition, it was thought best to send them to a boarding school, and in the first volume of the second series, entitled "The Rover Boys at Colby Hall," I related what happened to them while attending this institution.

From Colby Hall the scene was shifted to "Snowshoe Island," where the lads went for a mid-Winter outing. Then they came back to Colby Hall, and what happened to them at the annual encampment of the young cadets is related in the third volume, entitled "The Rover Boys Under Canvas."

When Winter was once more at hand the younger Rovers thought they would like to go on another outing with their chums, and in a volume entitled "The Rover Boys on a Hunt" I related how they came upon a mysterious house in the forest and uncovered a most unusual mystery.

In the present volume the scene is shifted from stirring doings at Colby Hall to still more stirring doings in the famous oil fields in the southern part of our country.

Once more I feel called upon to thank my numerous readers for the many nice things they have said about these "Rover Boys" books. I earnestly hope that the reading of the volumes will do them all good.

Affectionately and sincerely yours,

EDWARD STRATEMEYER.

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THE ROVER BOYS IN THE LAND OF LUCK

CHAPTER I

OUT IN THE STORM

"Jack, it looks as if we were in for another storm."

"Yes, and it's starting right now," declared Captain Jack Rover, as he glanced through the trees to the overcast sky. "Don't you hear it on the leaves?"

"It does beat everything!" declared Andy Rover, his usually bright face clouding a bit. "It has rained enough in the past two weeks to last a year."

"Do you know, I like these constant rains less than I liked being snowbound up at Cedar Lodge," put in Lieutenant Fred Rover.

"Oh, there was some fun in being snowbound," declared Randy Rover. "A fellow could go out in it and have the best time ever. But what can a chap do when the rain is coming down to beat the band?"

"Well, you can go out and get a shower-bath free of charge," commented his twin gaily.

"I'll take my showers in the gym," was the quick reply. "Gee! listen to that, will you?"

There was no need for any of the four Rover boys to listen, or to look, either. A blinding flash of lightning had swept the sky, followed almost immediately by a crash of thunder in the woods behind them. Then followed another crash, as of falling timber.

"It struck a tree, I'll bet a new cap!" exclaimed Jack.

"Yes, and it was a little bit too close for comfort, too," answered his cousin Fred.

The thunder and lightning were followed by a sudden rush of wind which caused the trees of the forest to sway violently. Then the downfall of rain increased until it was little short of a deluge.

"We've got to get to some sort of shelter!" cried Jack. "And the sooner we get there the better. If we stay under the trees we'll be soaked to the skin."

"It's all right enough to talk about shelter," returned Randy quickly; "but where are you going to find it? I don't know of even a log shack in this vicinity."

"We might leg it down to the river," suggested his brother. "We can't be very far from Rocky Bend."

"That's the talk!" burst out Fred Rover. "There is a cliff at the Bend, and I remember there is a hollow under it which the river washed out years ago."

"The trouble is you may find that hollow filled with water now, Fred," answered Jack. "Remember the heavy rains of the last few weeks have caused something of a freshet. Even down at our boathouse the water is unusually high."

Another streak of lightning followed by more thunder interrupted the conversation. Then the wind seemed to veer around, and the rain came swishing in under the tree where the four lads had been resting.

The Rover boys had left Colby Hall immediately after the day's lessons for a tramp through the woods that bordered the Rick Rack River. They had been kept indoors more or less for over two weeks, it raining nearly every day. But that morning the sun had come through the clouds, and they had thought to enjoy a much-desired outing.

All were clad in their cadet uniforms, and in addition wore their shoulder capes and also their rubbers. They had found the roads and paths running through the woods very wet, but did not mind this, being glad to breathe some "real air," as Randy had expressed it.

"I just hate to be boxed in all the time," had been his words. "Give me an outdoor life every time." And then in the exuberance of his spirits he had turned what is commonly termed among athletes a cart-wheel. But when his feet came down again he found the ground so slippery he promptly landed flat on his back, much to the amusement of the others.

The four Rovers had asked some of their chums to accompany them, but two of the other cadets had errands to do in town and the others wished to write letters to their folks at home, so the four had gone off by themselves. All were good walkers, and they had covered a distance of several miles before the sky became again overcast.

"If we weren't so far from the school we might make a dash for it," suggested Jack.

"We can't run that far!" returned Fred, who was the smallest of the boys. "We'd be all out of wind and simply get wet through and through. Let's try for the river. We're sure to find some sort of shelter under the rocks and bushes at the Bend."

"All right; here we go!" was Jack's quick reply. As the oldest of the boys and as a captain of the Colby Hall cadets, he was naturally looked upon as the leader.

He and Fred started side by side and Andy and Randy followed closely. Their course was along a winding path leading over some rough rocks and through some small overhanging bushes.

"Wow! What are you trying to do? Give me a shower-bath?" grumbled Randy presently. Jack had pushed some long and well-saturated brushwood to one side in passing. Now the bushes swung back into place, catching poor Randy over the face and breast and showering him with water.

"Excuse me, but I couldn't hold the bushes back," said Jack. "You had better not stick so close."

"Oh, well, a little more water doesn't count, Jack. We are getting pretty well soaked anyway."

The wind was blowing so furiously the cadets had all they could do to hold their capes tight around their shoulders as they progressed. More lightning lit up the sky, and then they heard the fall of another tree some distance away.

"It's going to be a humdinger of a storm," remarked Andy.

"Yes, and I'd give as much as two nickels to be safe back at the Hall," came from Fred. The constant thunder and lightning was beginning to get on the smallest youth's nerves.

Presently the four Rovers caught sight of the river through the trees. The stream, which at this point was nothing more than a mountain torrent, boiled and foamed as it dashed over the rocks.

"It certainly is getting high," said Jack, as all paused for a moment to catch their breath. "I can't remember having seen it like this before."

"Just look at the stuff coming down, will you?" remarked Fred. "There is a whole lot of good firewood going to waste."

"I guess some one will pick it up by the time it reaches the lake, Fred," said Randy. "There are a lot of poor people down at Haven Point who get all their Winter firewood from this river."

"Yes, but it's not all driftwood," broke in Jack. "A good deal of the timber is cut up in the woods and then floated down. That is quite an industry among some of the old settlers up there."

The four cadets did not pause very long to survey the scene. Their one idea was to find some sort of shelter from the storm; and with this in view they hurried on parallel to the watercourse until they came to the point of rocks commonly known as the Bend. Here the side of the river on which they were located arose to a height of from twenty to thirty feet. In one place there was a sheer rocky wall, but at other places the rocks were much broken up, and consequently, irregular.

"There is the shelter I had in mind," said Fred, pointing with his hand. "Come on; I think it will be just the place to get out of this storm."

"Any kind of a shelter will be better than standing out here," answered Randy, and he and Fred set off on a wild scramble over the slippery rocks with the others following.

"Be careful that you don't sprain an ankle or break a leg," warned Jack.

"Gee! a fellow would have to be a regular grasshopper to jump over these rocks," grumbled Randy, and he had scarcely uttered the words when he slipped down, landing with a thump on his chest.

"Hurt?" queried Jack quickly.

"N-no," spluttered his cousin. "B-but I kn-kn-knocked the wind out of m-me."

In a minute more the boys had reached the shelter of the rocks where they overhung the Rick Rack River. Here they found a shelter several feet above the madly rushing torrent. The place was twelve or fifteen feet in length, and several feet in depth. Above them was a shelving rock which, while it did not shelter them completely, did much to ward off the heavy downpour of rain.

"Not as comfortable as a Morris chair in the library at school," remarked Andy, as he swished the water from his cap, "but it's a good deal better than being in the open."

"Provided we do not have to stay here too long," returned his twin. "What time is it, Jack? I didn't bring my watch with me."

"Quarter to five," announced the young captain, after consulting his wrist-watch.

"We ought to be on our way to the Hall," said Fred. "I don't know what Captain Dale will say if we are late."

"Oh, he'll excuse us when he learns the truth," answered Jack. "Just the same, I'd give a good deal if we were back safe and sound at the school. We certainly can't stay here all night, and it looks as if this storm was going to be a lasting one."

"Maybe we are in for another couple of weeks of rain," growled Andy. "Gee! I wish the Weather Bureau would go out of existence. They have been predicting clearing weather for over a week, and it never came at all."

Crouching down in the shelter of the overhanging rocks, the four cadets made themselves as comfortable as possible. Over them and out on the river swished the wind and the rain. Just below them the mountain torrent boiled and foamed with increasing violence, showing that the heavy downpour was making matters steadily worse.

"I shouldn't want to have a cabin on the edge of this stream," remarked Fred presently.

"Not much!" exclaimed Andy. "You'd be in danger every minute of having it floated away."

"Look there, will you?" cried Randy a moment later, as he pointed out in the stream. "If that isn't a chicken-coop then I miss my guess!"

"You're right! And it's got one or two chickens in it!" burst out Jack.

"That shows that some of the farm lands up the river must be under water," remarked Andy.

"Maybe we'll see a house or a barn coming down next," cried Fred. "Gee, this certainly is some storm!" he added, as another flash of lightning lit up the sky. Then came the thunder, rolling and rumbling along the river and the mountains beyond.

A quarter of an hour passed, and while the wind blew as violently as ever, it seemed to the impatient cadets that the rain was slackening a little.

"Maybe it will let up in the next half-hour or so," remarked Jack hopefully. "Then, if we strike out for the turnpike, we'll be able to get down to the Hall in no time."

"Oh, sure! Only three miles through the mud; and of course that's nothing," remarked Andy airily.

All of the boys were sitting in silence, wondering what their next move would be, when Jack suddenly raised his hand as if to listen.

"What was it?" queried Randy quickly.

"I thought I heard a yell for help," was the reply. "Listen!"

All did so, and presently above the rushing of the wind heard a man's voice. Then came a shrill scream as if from a younger person.

"Somebody is in trouble!" cried Fred. "Listen! He is calling again!"

All strained their ears, and once more heard the yells of the man borne along by the rushing wind. Then came that other shrill cry, as if for assistance.

"They are in trouble, all right!"

"Where are they?"

"That cry came from up the river. Whoever they are, they must be right around the Bend."

"Come on! Let's see what it means."

With these and other exclamations the four Rover boys left the shelter of the overhanging rocks and crawled along a stony pathway leading up the watercourse. Soon they passed around the Bend, and then came within sight of a scene which almost appalled them. A mass of wreckage consisting of a small tree and a quantity of newly cut timber had come down the stream and become caught among the jagged rocks above the Bend, and in the midst of this wreckage, with the water rushing and foaming all around them, were a man and a boy, struggling wildly to save themselves from drowning!

CHAPTER II

WHO THE ROVER BOYS WERE

"Look there, will you!"

"That man and boy will surely be drowned!"

"Why don't they swim ashore?"

"Most likely the stream is running too swiftly for them."

"Help! Help!" came hoarsely from the man. Evidently his exertions were beginning to exhaust him.

"Save me! Save me!" screamed the boy, who seemed to be about Jack's age. "Save me! Don't let me drown!"

The two unfortunate victims had caught sight of the cadets, who had by this time come as close to them as the rocks on the bank permitted. The man waved his arm frantically toward them.

"Can't you swim?" yelled Jack, to make himself heard above the wind and the rushing of the water.

"I'm caught fast!" the man gasped out. "And my son is caught fast too."

"Both of my feet are fast!" screamed the boy. "Oh, please help us! Don't leave us here to be drowned!"

"It's a couple of logs of wood that are holding us," went on the man in a hoarser tone than ever. "They are jammed in between us and some rocks and a floating tree. If you can only start the tree, maybe we can get out of here."

Both the man and the boy were in the rushing water up to their armpits, and occasionally the dashing element would fly over them in a spray that hid them completely from view.

"Oh, boys, this is awful!" groaned Fred. "Can't we do something for them?"

"We've got to do something," answered Jack. "We can't leave them there to drown."

"But what are we going to do?" demanded Andy soberly.

"He said something about loosening the tree that has drifted up alongside them," came from Randy. "Do you think we can do it, Jack?"

"I don't know. But we can have a try at it, anyway. And if we can't push the tree, maybe we can get at the logs that are holding them down."

Jack was looking up the river as he spoke, and at a distance saw a series of rocks jutting out for a considerable distance into the stream.

"I am going out on those rocks and then trust to luck to get over to the other side," he said. "We can't get at that fallen tree from this side."

"All right, I'm with you, Jack," said Randy. And together they made their way out on the rocks mentioned and the others slowly and cautiously followed.

I know it will not be necessary to introduce the Rover boys to my old readers. But for the benefit of those who are now meeting them for the first time a few words of introduction will not come amiss.

In my first volume, entitled "The Rover Boys at School," I related how three brothers, Dick, Tom and Sam Rover, were sent to Putnam Hall Military Academy, where they made a great number of friends, including a cadet named Lawrence Colby.

After passing through Putnam Hall, the boys attended Brill College, and then joined their father in business in New York City, with offices on Wall Street. They organized The Rover Company, of which Dick was now president, Tom secretary and general manager, and Sam treasurer. The three youths were married and lived in three connecting houses on Riverside Drive, overlooking the Hudson River.

About a year after their marriage Dick and his wife became the parents of a son, who was named John, after Mrs. Rover's uncle, Mr. John Laning. This son was followed by a daughter, named Martha, after her great-aunt Martha of Valley Brook Farm. The boy Jack, as he was commonly called, was a sturdy youth with many of the qualities which had made his father so successful.

It was around this time that Tom Rover and his wife Nellie came to the front with a great surprise. This was in the nature of a pair of lively twins, one of whom was named Anderson, after his grandfather, and the other Randolph, after his great-uncle Randolph of Valley Brook Farm. Andy and Randy, as they were always called, were exceedingly active lads, in that particular being a second edition of their father, Tom.

About the time Tom's twins were born Sam Rover and his wife Grace became the parents of a little girl, whom they called Mary, after Mrs. Laning. Then, a year later, the girl was followed by a boy, who was christened Fred after Sam Rover's old school chum, Fred Garrison.

Residing so close together, the younger generation of Rover boys, as well as the sisters, were brought up very much as one family. When they were old enough all were at first sent to private schools in the Metropolis. But soon the boys, led by Andy and Randy, showed such a propensity for "cutting loose" that their parents were compelled to hold a consultation.

"We'll have to send them to some strict boarding school—some military academy," said Dick Rover.

At that time Lawrence Colby, the Putnam Hall chum of the older Rovers, was at the head of a military academy called Colby Hall. To this institution Jack, Fred and the twins were sent, as related in detail in the first volume of my second series, entitled "The Rover Boys at Colby Hall." This military school was located about half a mile from the town of Haven Point, on Clearwater Lake. At the head of the lake was the Rick Rack River, running down from the mountains and woods beyond.

The school consisted of a large stone building facing the river at a point not far from where the stream emptied into the lake. Close by was a smaller building occupied by Colonel Colby and his family and some of the professors, and at a short distance were a gymnasium and a boathouse, and likewise bathing pavilions.

On arriving at Colby Hall the younger Rovers found several of their friends awaiting them, including Dick Powell and Gifford Garrison. They also ran into Nappy Martell, who had been far from friendly with them while in New York, and likewise had trouble with an overgrown bully named Slugger Brown, who was Nappy's crony.

As mentioned, Colby Hall was located about half a mile beyond Haven Point. On the opposite side of the town was Clearwater Hall, a boarding school for girls. During a panic at a fire in a motion picture house the Rover boys became acquainted with several girls from Clearwater Hall, including Ruth Stevenson, May Powell, Alice Strobell and Annie Larkins. They discovered that May was Dick Powell's cousin, and the whole crowd of young people soon became friends. Later on Mary and Martha Rover became pupils at the girls' school.

Ruth Stevenson had an old Uncle Barney. The Rover boys, while out hunting one day, did the old man a great service, and for this he was so grateful that he invited them to spend their Winter holidays with him; which they did, as related in "The Rover Boys on Snowshoe Island."

On this island the lads met their former enemies, Nappy Martell and Slugger Brown, as well as Asa Lemm, a discharged teacher of Colby Hall. The boys exposed a plot against old Uncle Barney, and in the end caused the old hunter's enemies to leave Snowshoe Island in disgust.

"I guess we haven't seen the last of Nappy and Slugger," said Jack; and he was right. Those two unworthies turned up once again, as related in the volume entitled "The Rover Boys Under Canvas." In that book I told how the cadets went into their annual encampment and how after a Spring election for officers Jack was made captain of Company C and Fred made first lieutenant of the same command.

Among the cadets who wished to become a captain was one named Gabe Werner, a great chum at that time of a lad named Bill Glutts. Having failed of election, Werner did all he could to make things uncomfortable for the Rovers, and in his actions he was aided by Glutts. But these two young rascals were discovered in some of their nefarious doings, and, becoming alarmed, Gabe Werner left the school camp and did not return. Glutts was brought before Captain Dale, the teacher in charge of the camp, and received a stern lecture and was deprived of many liberties.

While the Rover boys were at Colby Hall the great war in Europe opened and our country was overrun with German spies and sympathizers. During their time under canvas the boys made several surprising discoveries, and in the end helped the secret service men to capture a hidden German submarine. They likewise helped to round up the fathers of Nappy Martell and Slugger Brown. Mr. Martell and Mr. Brown were sent to prison on the charge of aiding the enemy, while Nappy and Slugger were marched off to a detention camp in the South. When being taken away Nappy and Slugger were very bitter against the Rovers, and vowed they would square accounts the first chance they got.

"And they will do it, too. You'll see," was Fred's comment. "They are as mad as hornets, and they will do everything they can think of to make trouble for us."

When the call for army volunteers came Dick Rover and his brother Sam had lost no time in enlisting. At first Tom Rover had been unable to get away. But soon the business in New York City had been left in reliable hands, and the three fathers of the boys had gone to the trenches in Europe to do their bit for Uncle Sam. They had been in several engagements, and Tom and Sam had received shell wounds, while Dick Rover had suffered somewhat from a gas attack.

"Well, we can be thankful that it is no worse," had been Jack's comment on receiving this news from abroad. "Just the same, I wish this awful war was at an end."

During the Winter Gif Garrison had received a letter from his uncle stating that he and his chums might use a bungalow up in the woods known as Cedar Lodge. Gif at once invited Dick Powell, often called "Spouter" because of his fondness for long speeches, and the Rover boys to become his guests on an outing to the lodge. And how all of the lads went to that place has been related in detail in the volume previous to this, entitled "The Rover Boys on a Hunt." In that book they came upon a house in the forest, and there uncovered a most unusual mystery. They found that some Germans were getting ready to establish a wireless telegraph station, and aided in the round-up of these men by the United States authorities.

Mixed up with the German sympathizers were Gabe Werner and Bill Glutts, and these badly scared youths had all they could do to convince the authorities that they were really patriotic. Glutts and Werner considered that they had been brought into ill repute by the connivance of the Rovers and their chums, and they were exceedingly bitter against the cadets.

"We are certainly making some real enemies," was the way Jack expressed himself. "First Nappy and Slugger, and now Glutts and Werner. Every one of those fellows will do all he can to injure us."

"Well, all we can do is to keep our eyes open for them," was Randy's reply. "Personally, I'm not afraid of any of them."

"They are all sneaks, and sneaks are always cowards," added Fred.

Having finished their outing at Cedar Lodge, the four Rovers and their two chums had returned to Colby Hall, there to plunge once more into their studies and their other duties as cadets. It was now early Spring, and talk of baseball filled the air, but with so much rain outdoor practice was practically impossible.

Then had come a ray of sunshine, and the four Rovers had ventured forth that afternoon thinking to have a pleasant little outing. But the sunshine had quickly passed, and now they found themselves out in a furious storm and face to face with a situation that was as appalling as it was dangerous.

CHAPTER III

TO THE RESCUE

"Don't leave us! Don't leave us!" shouted the man in the middle of the river, as he saw Jack and the others crawling over the rocky shore up the stream.

"We're not going to leave you," answered the young captain of the Colby Hall cadets. "We are going to try to get to that tree and move it. Keep up your courage."

"Oh, please hurry!" screamed the boy in the stream. "The water is getting higher every minute, and it's flying right into our faces!"

"We'll do what we can," shouted back Randy, and the others added similar words of encouragement.

It was no easy task for the Rovers to make their way over the wet rocks, covered here and there with slippery grass and weeds. More than once one or another went down, and Fred gave his left elbow a bump, while his cousin Andy received a scraping of the shins.

Fortunately, the downpour of rain was abating, so that they had a chance to dash the water from their caps and faces and see better what they were trying to do. They soon reached the last of the rocks jutting out from the shore, and here the four came again to a halt to view the situation.

"There is no help for it—we've got to jump right in and trust to luck to reach the other side," said Jack.

"Let us take hold of hands. Maybe we can brace ourselves better," suggested Randy.

This plan was carried out, and a moment later found the four cadets in water up to their knees. So swift was the current they had all they could do to keep their feet, and Andy would have gone down had not his brother and Fred held him up.

It was lucky for the lads that they had chosen a spot where the stream was rather broad and shallow, widening out on the side opposite to the rocky bluff. Nevertheless, at one point they found themselves in water up to their waists, and here they had to struggle with might and main to keep from being swept down to where the man and the boy were held prisoners.

"Say, this is awful!" gasped Fred, when he at last found himself on a safer footing.

"This river is running like a mill-race," was Randy's comment.

When they had reached a spot where the water was less than a foot deep they stopped once more to regain their breath, and then, led by Jack, moved cautiously down the river to the point where was located the drifting tree the man had mentioned.

"Just see if you can't pull it toward the shore," directed the man. "But be careful that you don't get hit when it swings around."

It was now that the young cadets' lessons in bridge building while in camp came into good play. Jack gave orders as to just how the swinging around of the tree might be managed. Then all took hold and pulled with might and main.

"I don't see that it has budged any," gasped Fred, after half a minute of the hardest kind of effort.

"Try it again, boys!" shouted Jack encouragingly. "Now then—all together! One—two—three!"

Again the four sturdy boys exerted all their strength on the tree, and this time they felt the lower end, which had been wedged in between some logs and rocks, give way. Then, as they hauled the tree still farther from the center of the river, it suddenly swung around and, caught by the current, went dashing along on its course.

"Hurrah! There she goes!" shouted Randy, as the tree disappeared in a veil of foam and spray.

"How about it?" shouted Jack to the man and boy. "Can you get loose now?"

Both of the prisoners were exerting their utmost to release themselves and did not answer. But their efforts were in vain, and soon they ceased to struggle.

"It's no use! One of the logs is holding our feet right against the rocks!" gasped out the man. "We don't seem to be able to budge it."

"I'm afraid it is going to break my leg!" screamed the boy. "I can't stand the pressure much longer."

"I'm going out there and see what I can do," said Jack.

"If you go, so will I," returned Randy promptly.

"You can count me in, too," announced Andy and Fred simultaneously.

"Look out that you don't get drowned," went on Jack quickly.

"We'll be as safe as you'll be," returned Fred.

All went up the river a short distance so that they might not be carried past the spot where the man and the boy were located. Then they struck out bravely for the place where the logs were jammed in a heap. Some of the sticks seemed to have been cut for railroad ties, while others looked like fence rails, and there were not less than two dozen of them in a jumble among the jagged rocks.

In a few seconds the cadets found themselves in this jam with the furious current of the river trying to sweep them to one side or the other. But they held fast, and as rapidly as possible loosened one log or rail after another.

"Look out there!" yelled Andy presently, and all heeded his warning. Then several of the logs bobbed up and went flying down the river.

This released the log holding the man and the boy, and the pair came up spluttering.

"Do you think you can swim ashore?" questioned Jack.

"I guess I can make it," answered the man somewhat weakly. "Look after my kid, will you?"

"We sure will!" answered Jack.

With Fred and Andy beside him, the man struck out for the shore, and all were soon carried down the stream and under the rocky bluff. In the meanwhile, Jack and Randy did what they could to aid the boy, and then followed the others.

The swiftly flowing current of the Rick Rack carried the entire party well past the overhanging rocks and then onward to a point where the river widened considerably. Here they managed to get a footing.

"Thank fortune we are out of that!" exclaimed Fred, as he and the others made their way over the sand and rocks and through the bushes to where there was a grassy slope backed up by a number of trees.

"It was a mighty close shave for me and my kid," returned the man. "I thought sure at one time we would be drowned."

"And we would have been if it hadn't been for these fellows coming to save us," added the boy gratefully, and he shot an admiring glance at the four dripping cadets.

"Are you soldier boys?" questioned the man, as the whole party gathered under the shelter of a tree. By this time the rain was nothing more than a fine drizzle.

"Not exactly," answered Jack. "We are cadets attending Colby Hall Military Academy."

"Oh, yes, I've heard about that school," said the man. "They tell me it's a very fine place. Well, all I've got to say is, if all the boys there are as brave as you lads you certainly must have a bang-up crowd," and he smiled broadly. Then he clapped Jack on his shoulder. "I thank you from the bottom of my heart for what you did for us. It was a nervy thing to do—to risk your lives in that river. I shall never forget it. If I were a rich man I'd want to reward you, but I must admit I'm just about as poor as they make 'em."

"We don't want any reward," answered Jack. "I'm glad to be of service to you."

"I guess we're all glad," added Randy, and the others nodded.

Then the young cadets introduced themselves and the man and the boy did the same. The man said his name was John Franklin.

"This is my son Phil," he added. "We don't belong around here—that is, not exactly. You see, I used to own a farm which was mostly in Texas and partly in Oklahoma, a pretty big farm, though it wasn't very productive. Some oil sharpers came along and made a sort of three-cornered deal, the particulars of which I need not give you, but as a consequence almost before I knew it I was done out of my farm and had next to no money in my pocket. Then I came up here expecting to see some friends who might help me in fighting those rascals, but the friends had moved away, and nobody knew where to, so I was almost stranded. Then Phil and I got work up in the woods, cutting timber and doing other odd jobs, and we had steady employment until this rainy season set in."

"So you came all the way from Texas, did you?" said Randy to Phil Franklin, with a smile. "It's a pretty long distance."

"Oh, we got sick of it down there after dad was done out of his farm by those oil sharpers," answered Phil Franklin.

"Did they find oil on your farm?" questioned Fred.

"No. That is, they hadn't up to the time we left. You know it takes a lot of time and money to sink an oil well. But they did us out of our farm, and that's bad enough."

"Some day, if I ever get on my feet again, I'm going back to Texas and have it out with those rascals," announced John Franklin. "They claimed that their dealings with me were perfectly legal, but I don't look at it that way. However, boys, that affair has nothing to do with you. As I said before, I wish I could reward you, but all I can do is to give you my very best thanks."

"And you can bet I'm thankful, too!" added Phil Franklin earnestly.

"Isn't it rather strange that you should be up here in such a storm as this?" questioned the man from Texas.

"We got tired of staying indoors on account of the rain," answered Jack; "so when it seemed to break away we thought we saw a chance to take a hike just for the fun of it."

"And now we're glad we did take a hike," put in Randy.

"We were trying to cross the stream by the aid of a rope," explained John Franklin. "The rope broke, and Phil was swept down the stream and I went after him to make sure that he didn't get drowned. Then we got mixed up in the logs and the tree, and you know the rest."

"You say you belong up the river?" questioned Andy.

"Yes. We've been stopping at Bossard's camp. I suppose we ought to be getting back there now,

or he'll be wondering what has become of us. Besides that, we'll want some dry clothing. And you fellows will want some dry clothing, too. Otherwise you might catch cold."

"Yes, we'll hike back to the school as fast as possible," answered Jack. He held out his hand. "Good-bye to you, and good luck."

"You won't mind if I come down to see you some time, will you?" questioned the man. "I want your teachers to know how brave you have been."

"Come down, by all means," answered Jack. "But don't pile on the bravery stuff, please. We did only what any healthy young fellows would do."

"I don't know about that. I guess I know real heroes when I see 'em," answered John Franklin, with a grin.

"I'd like to see you fellows drill. It must be great," put in his son Phil.

"Come down any time and ask for us," answered Fred. He was rather taken by Phil Franklin's open manner.

A few words more passed, and then the Franklins hurried up the river in the direction of the lumber camp from which they had come. Then the Rovers turned in the direction of Colby Hall.

"I'm glad we went to the rescue," remarked Andy, when on the way. "They seem a pretty decent sort."

"All the way from Texas," mused his twin. "That's certainly some distance."

As the Rovers hurried to the Hall they talked the matter of the rescue over in all of its details.

"It was certainly a queer meeting," was Fred's comment. But little did he or his cousins dream of the still queerer meeting with the Franklins that was to come in the future.

CHAPTER IV

IN THE GYMNASIUM

"Company attention! Carry arms! Present arms! Shoulder arms! Forward march!"

Captain Jack Rover, assisted by Lieutenant Fred Rover and his other officers, was drilling Company C in a corner of the gymnasium of Colby Hall. It was two days after the adventure on the Rick Rack River, and it was still raining, so that drilling in the open was almost out of the question.

The four cadets who had taken part in the rescue of John Franklin and his son Phil had explained the situation to Captain Dale on their return to the school and had been warmly praised by that old West Point military man for their bravery.

It may be mentioned here that Captain Dale had been in charge of the school since Colonel Colby had volunteered for the war and gone to France to fight.

Many of the cadets hated the rain and hoped it would soon clear. They loved drilling in the open far more than when held indoors, and they also wished to get at baseball and other Spring sports.

"It's a shame it doesn't let up," remarked Gif Garrison, after the drilling had come to an end and the rifles had been put away in their cases along the wall. Gif was a big youth, and the recognized head of many of the athletic sports.

"Well, we have to take such matters as they come," returned Spouter Powell, running his hand through his heavy brush of hair. "Were it not for the gentle rains, and the dews later on, the fields and slopes of the hills would not be clothed in the verdant green which all true lovers of nature so much admire. Instead we might have a bleak barrenness, a dissolution which would appall——"

"Gee, Spouter is at it again!" broke in Will Hendry, usually called Fatty by his chums because of his rotundity. Fatty was extremely good-natured, and as a consequence nearly every one admired him.

"Nothing gentle about this rain!" exclaimed Dan Soppinger, another cadet. "It's coming down in bucketfuls. Say, that puts me in mind—I've got an essay to write on moisture. Can any of you tell me why condensation takes place when——"

"Hurrah! the human question-box is once more with us," broke in Andy Rover. "Dan, I think you'd die if you couldn't ask questions."

"Humph! how is a fellow going to learn anything if he doesn't ask questions?" retorted Dan.

"You might walk around with a set of encyclopedias in your pocket," proposed Randy.

"That's it, Dan. Get a regular thirty-volume set while you are at it. You've got about thirty pockets

in your suit, haven't you? You could put one in each pocket."

"I wish it would clear off to-morrow, at least enough to go to Haven Point," said Fred. "They have a dandy moving picture at Mr. Falstein's place."

"Oh, I know the piece you mean, Fred," cried Andy slyly. "It's entitled 'Meeting the Girls; or, The Great Conspiracy.'"

"Did the girls say they were going to see the pictures, Fred?" questioned Jack quickly.

"Mary telephoned that they might go," answered Fred. "That is, she said she and Martha might, and if they go probably some of the others will go too."

"Then we must get down to see the pictures by all means," answered Jack. "That is, if the storm lets up. If it keeps on raining I don't think any of them will show up."

"Let's go in for a little gymnastic work," cried Randy, and had soon shed his cap and his coat. He leaped up to one of the turning-bars, and was soon busily going through various gymnastic evolutions. His twin joined him, and then they did a little team work, much to the admiration of some of the others present.

"How about a swing from one bar to the next?" called out Ned Lowe. Ned was known as the chief singer of the school and was very handy with a mandolin.

"All right, Ned; I'll swing against you," called Andy quickly.

"Not much!" was Ned's ready reply. "I know you can beat me. See what you can do against Walt Baxter."

Walt Baxter was a clean-cut athletic youth who had made good in various contests in the gymnasium and on the baseball and football field. He was the son of Dan Baxter, who at one time had been a bitter enemy of the older Rovers. But the senior Baxter had reformed, and his son was well liked by the younger Rovers.

"All right, Walt," called out Andy. "Do you want to swing against me or against my brother Randy?"

"I'll swing against both of you," answered Walt pleasantly.

The details of the little contest were quickly arranged, and it was decided that Randy should make the first swing, Walt the second, and Andy should come last. The swing was to consist of a flying leap from one bar to the next, and then to a large pad spread beyond the second bar.

"One try only now, remember!" cried Dan Soppinger. "Do your best, everybody."

It did not take Randy long to get into position, and then he made a swing and a leap which were gracefulness itself. He landed on the pad lightly, but quite close to the second bar.

"I'm sure I can do better than that!" cried Walt Baxter; and in less than a minute he too had made the swing, landing half a foot beyond the mark set by Randy.

Andy eyed the distance carefully, and then prepared to make the swing.

"Here's where I do the flying-fish act!" he cried merrily.

"What's going on here? A contest? Let me see it!" came a voice from behind the crowd that had assembled to see the performance. Then Henry Stowell, a small cadet who was a good deal of a sneak, pushed his way to the front of the gathering.

"Hi, Codfish, what are you trying to do?" exclaimed Ned Lowe, who had been elbowed rather rudely by the small cadet.

"I want to see what's going on," cried Stowell.

"All right, Codfish, take it in for all you're worth," called out Fatty Hendry, and then put out his foot and pushed the sneak of the school forward.

It was a vigorous shove, and in order to keep himself from pitching headlong Henry Stowell took half a dozen quick steps forward. Andy was just in the act of launching himself from one bar to the next when Stowell's forward movement carried him to a point directly between the two bars. As a consequence Andy's feet struck the smaller cadet in the shoulder, and both went down in a heap on the floor.

"Stop! Stop! What are you trying to do—kill me?" yelled Stowell, as Andy came down on top of him in anything but a gentle fashion.

"I'd like to know what you are trying to do, Codfish?" demanded Andy, using a nickname for Stowell which the latter abhorred.

"I didn't do a thing! Fatty Hendry tried to trip me up."

"And you shoved your way in where you had no business to be," retorted Fatty. "Just the same, I'm sorry he got in your way, Andy," he added.

"Are either of you hurt?" questioned Jack quickly.

"He spoiled my jump," answered his cousin.

"And he kicked me in the shoulder and knocked me down," whined Stowell. "I've a good mind to report him."

"What! After all we did for you in the woods last Winter?" demanded Fred. They had found Stowell with Werner and Glutts and had rescued the little cadet from the bullies and seen him safe on his way home.

"I don't care! My shoulder hurts terribly," whined Stowell.

"Never mind, Codfish, we'll give you a mustard plaster to put on it," cried Ned Lowe. And then in some confusion the sneak of Colby Hall withdrew from the crowd.

"I don't suppose you feel like trying the swing now," remarked Walt Baxter to Andy. "If you want to call it off, all right."

"Not much!" was the quick reply. "I got pretty well shaken up by hitting Codfish, but just the same, I'm going to make the swing." And a moment later Andy did so.

"And he wins!" declared Dan Soppinger, after measurements were made. "He's a good six inches ahead of anybody!"

"Well, some time we'll try it again, and then maybe I'll be able to do better," remarked Walt Baxter good-naturedly.

"I'm afraid you've made Codfish sore on us once again," remarked Jack to Andy, after the little contest had come to an end and the cadets were breaking up into various groups.

"If he is going to get sore over that he can do it," retorted Andy.

"I supposed he would be real friendly after all we did for him up in the woods last Winter," remarked Fred.

"Well, that shows what's in a fellow is bound to come out sooner or later," answered Randy. "Codfish always was a poor stick, and I suppose he always will be. Just the same, I did hope he would turn over a new leaf."

When the cadets awoke on Saturday morning a pleasurable surprise awaited them. The storms of the weeks previous had completely passed, and the sun was shining over the hills most gloriously.

"Oh, but isn't this the best ever!" cried Randy, after glancing out of the window.

"It's simply scrumptious," retorted his twin; and then to show how good he felt, Andy turned a flip-flap over his bed. Then he caught up a pillow and threw it through an open doorway at Fred, who had just started to dress.

"Hi, you! what's this—a bombardment by the Huns?" yelled Fred, and promptly returning by sending a sneaker at his cousin. But the footwear struck Randy, who promptly returned the missile and followed it up with a book and a wadded-up towel.

"Hi, you fellows! stop the rough-housing!" shouted Jack. "Do you want to be reported?"

"Who's going to report us—you?" questioned Andy.

"No. But some monitor will, or some teacher. And then a fat chance you'll have of going to Haven Point this afternoon."

"Oh, that's so. We don't want to have our off-time cut off," put in Randy quickly. "The war's over, the armistice is signed, and everybody can go home and get washed up," he added, with a grin.

But while he was speaking Andy had advanced upon Fred, and now the two started to wrestle. Jack tried to stop them and in the confusion the three upset a small stand, sending a dozen or more books to the floor with a thump. Almost immediately came another thump on one of the doors leading to the corridor.

"Now we've done it," whispered Fred, in sudden alarm.

"Pick up those books! Quick!" answered Andy, and got down on his knees to do so while Jack righted the stand which had held the volumes. At the same time Randy leaped to pick up the pillows and otherwise straighten the connecting rooms which the Rovers occupied.

"Ho, you fellows! aren't you up yet?" came from the corridor in the voice of Gif Garrison. "Let me in. I've got some important news to tell you."

"Oh, it's only Gif!" murmured the twins in relief.

"He said he had important news," put in Jack. "I wonder what it can be."

CHAPTER V

THE RIVAL SCHOOL

One of the doors to the rooms occupied by the Rovers was quickly swung open and Gif Garrison strode in, followed by Dick Powell. Gif held a morning newspaper in his hand, one which had been delivered to the school only a short while before.

"You said you had important news, Gif," said Jack. "What is it?"

"There is an item here in the newspaper Gif wants to show you," put in Spouter. "I am sure it will interest every one of us."

"It's not much of an item so far as size goes," said Gif. "But it certainly is important—or at least it may be, especially to you Rovers—seeing that none of us has ever been particularly friendly with Nappy Martell and Slugger Brown."

"What! have you news of those two rascals?" demanded Randy.

"Did they run away from that detention camp in the South?" broke in Fred.

"They'd be fools to do that," returned Andy. "The military authorities would round them up in no time. It's no easy matter to keep out of the clutches of Uncle Sam if he wants you."

"No, they haven't run away. They have simply been given their freedom," answered Gif. "Here—you can read the news for yourselves."

The item he referred to was only twelve lines long and located at the bottom of a column on one of the inside pages of the newspaper. It was dated from a well-known detention camp in the South, and gave a list of six prisoners who had had another hearing and been given their freedom. Two of the names were Napoleon Martell and Slogwell Brown, Jr.

"Well, they're loose, all right enough," was Andy's comment, after they had perused the item. "I wonder what they'll do?"

"One thing is certain, being detained that way by the Government will certainly prove quite a stigma," said Jack. "I shouldn't like to have anything of that sort against me."

"I suppose they'll have it in for us," said Randy. "They always loved us a lot—I don't think!"

"Do you imagine they would dare show themselves around here?" questioned Fred quickly.

"Why not?" queried Spouter.

"I don't think they'll come here," answered Jack. "It's too slow for them around Haven Point. You know how sick they got of it the last time they were here. They'll probably head for some big city, where they can have a good time on whatever money they can get hold of."

Gif and Spouter passed on, to carry the news to other cadets who might be interested in it, and the Rovers hurried to get ready for roll-call and breakfast. While they were finishing their dressing they continued to discuss the news.

"I was hoping that we had seen and heard the last of Nappy and Slugger," said Fred; "just as I was hoping that we had seen the last of Werner and Glutts."

"They are like bad pennies—ready to turn up when you least expect it," said Andy. "Just the same, they had better keep out of my way if they don't want to get into trouble," he continued, his eyes flashing.

During the morning the boys had to attend a drill and then prepare a number of their lessons for the following week. But directly after lunch they had the time to themselves, and the four Rovers hurried off to town, and Gif and Spouter went with them.

As has been mentioned before, Haven Point possessed a first-class motion picture theater, run by a man named Felix Falstein, who on more than one occasion had shown his friendship for the cadets. Jack and Fred had communicated with their sisters, and Martha and Mary had agreed to meet them at a certain hour at the theater entrance.

"Not here yet," said Jack, when the crowd arrived.

"You can't expect girls to be on hand always," said Andy gaily. "You've got to give 'em a chance to get the hair-buns over their ears."

"And fourteen hooks hooked up on the shoulder where you can't reach 'em," added his twin, grinning.

"Here they come now!" interrupted Fred. "Do you want me to tell them about the hooks and the hair-buns?" he added slyly.

"You say a word, Fred, and you'll be killed in cold blood!" retorted Andy, while Randy shook a playful fist at his cousin.

In the crowd of girls coming around the corner of the street were not only the two Rovers and May Powell, the cousin of Spouter, but also Ruth Stevenson, Annie Larkins, and Alice Strobell.

"Have we been keeping you long?" questioned Martha Rover, as she came up to her brother.

"Only a couple of minutes, Martha," answered Jack.

"We haven't even had a chance to read the billboards," put in Andy.

"I was so glad to see it clear off," remarked Ruth Stevenson, as she quite naturally paired off with Jack, while May Powell turned to talk to Fred. And then she added, as she gazed admiringly at the young captain in his neat-fitting uniform: "I understand you and your cousins have been doing the hero act again."

"Who told you that?" questioned Jack quickly.

"Never mind who told me. We've heard all about how you rescued a man and his son from the Rick Rack River. Oh, Jack! it was a grand thing to do."

"But who told you, Ruth?"

"It was Mr. Franklin himself, if you want to know it."

"Where in the world did you meet Mr. Franklin?"

"Why, he works up at Bossard's lumber camp, and Bossard supplies our school with cordwood. Mr. Franklin and his son brought down a load of wood, and he told someone how the Rovers had come to their rescue. Then those folks pointed Martha and Mary out to them, and as we happened to be with your sister and your cousin at the time we heard the whole story. Mr. Franklin said it was a very brave thing to do, and he was awfully sorry that he couldn't offer you some reward—not but what I am sure, Jack, you wouldn't accept it," the girl continued quickly.

By this time all the boys and girls had paired off and soon the cadets had purchased tickets and all entered the showhouse. They found seats together, and sat down to enjoy themselves. A comic picture was being thrown on the screen, and at this the young folks laughed so heartily that it put all of them in the best of humor. Then came a slight intermission, and they had a chance to talk over their personal matters.

"I heard something a few days ago that interested me quite a good deal, Jack," said Ruth. "It was from that new school at Darryville, the Longley Academy."

The girl referred to a school which had been opened the Fall previous. It was supposed to be something of a physical culture academy where as much attention was paid to athletics as to mental studies. The school had been inaugurated too late to do anything in football, but had given out that they would be in the baseball field the following Spring.

"What did you hear about Longley, Ruth?"

"Why, there is a boy there I used to know quite well, Tommy Flanders. He says they have organized a first-class baseball club, and that they are going to put it all over Colby Hall—those are his exact words."

"Humph! that remains to be seen, Ruth."

"Have you received a challenge from them?"

"Not yet. But Gif Garrison is expecting one every day. We heard something of the talk. Do you know if this Tommy Flanders is much of a player?"

"He used to be considered quite a pitcher. In fact, he was so good as a boy pitcher that some of the local fans wanted him to sign up in one of the minor leagues. But of course they wouldn't let him do that because he was too young to leave school."

"That certainly sounds interesting, especially if this Flanders pitches for Longley."

"Tommy told me that they had not less than a dozen first-class baseball players at their academy. He boasted that they would wipe up the diamond with your school—I am now quoting his words."

"Evidently Tommy knows how to blow."

"Oh, but, Jack, he really is a first-class player. And you must remember that they have advertised Longley Academy as given over especially to athletics and gymnastics. Probably they'll pay more attention to baseball and football than they will to their studies."

"Well, if we get beaten we'll get beaten, Ruth, that's all. We'll do our best."

"And I certainly hope you win, Jack," said the girl, giving him a warm glance. "I would like to see you take some of the conceit out of Tommy Flanders."

After the performance was over the young folks adjourned to a nearby ice-cream parlor where they indulged in that dainty to their hearts' content. While eating their cream and munching the cake they had ordered with it, Jack mentioned what Ruth had told him regarding the boys at the new rival school.

"Yes, they said they were going to send a challenge soon," said Gif. "And I've been warned by others that they intend to put a first-class nine on the diamond to beat us."

"Then it will be up to you, Gif, to show them what Colby Hall can do," said Spouter. He himself was not much of a ball player, although he had been on the nine occasionally.

The young people had almost finished their ice cream and cake when they saw two girls and two boys come in. As they entered Ruth clutched Jack by the arm.

"There is Tommy Flanders now!" she whispered, pointing to the larger of the two youths.

Tommy Flanders showed that he was a good deal of a sport. He was dressed in a loud-looking suit, had pointed shoes, and he wore a cap set well back on his head. His face was rather red, and his forehead was overshadowed by a heavy mop of reddish-brown hair.

"Hello, Ruth! How are you?" he called out pleasantly, when still at a distance. "Glad to see you," and he smiled at all of the girls and bowed.

After this there was nothing to do but to introduce the newcomer, and he promptly introduced the two girls, who proved to be residents of Haven Point, and then introduced his friend, Pete Stevens.

"Pete is going to be my backstop on our nine," explained Tommy Flanders. "You know, I suppose, that I am the pitcher," he added in an off-hand manner.

"And he's one wonder pitcher, believe me!" piped in Pete Stevens. He was a stocky youth with small ferret-like eyes.

"I understand you're going to have quite a nine," remarked Jack politely.

"Say, it will be the finest baseball aggregation this part of the country has ever seen—that is, for a school nine," boasted Tommy Flanders. "You know, our school is long on athletics. We intend to put it over everything within traveling distance."

"That is, provided the other schools are not too scared to accept our challenges," added Pete Stevens.

"You won't find Colby Hall afraid to accept any reasonable challenge," retorted Gif, somewhat disgusted with the boasting manner of the newcomers.

"We've waxed a few schools around here, and maybe we can take a round out of Longley Academy," Fred could not help but add.

"You'll never take a round out of Longley, believe me," sneered Pete Stevens. "We'll put it all over you fellows just as sure as you're born."

"Well, we'll see," remarked Jack, and his face showed that he did not admire having this discussion before the girls.

"Say, I'll tell you what I'll do, Rover," said Tommy Flanders, advancing close to the young captain. "I'll bet you ten dollars that we win the first game of ball we play with you."

"You'll have to excuse me, Flanders, but I'm not betting," answered Jack.

"Afraid, are you?"

"I said I was not betting. And now if you'll excuse us, we'll finish our ice cream and cake," added the young captain coldly.

"Oh, well, if you're afraid to bet, we'll let it go at that," responded Tommy Flanders carelessly. Then he and his companion and the girls with them moved off to a table in the rear of the ice-cream parlor.

"Of all the conceited fools——" began Andy, when Jack caught him by the arm.

"Drop it, Andy," and Jack looked at his cousin and then at the girls, all of whom had been much disturbed over the possibility of a quarrel.

"Oh, sure, let's drop it," was Andy's quick answer. And then to change the subject he began a funny story and soon he had the girls shrieking with laughter. Then they finished their ice cream and cake and left the place.

"Oh, Jack, if you do play them I hope you beat them good," said Ruth, when the girls and the cadets were ready to separate.

"We'll do our best," was his reply.

"I hope when that match comes off we'll be able to see it," said Martha.

"Of course you'll all have to be on hand," answered her brother quickly. "We'll want you girls to encourage us."

"I want to see you beat Longley Academy," declared Mary.

"So say we all of us!" came in a chorus from the others.

CHAPTER VI

PLAYING HIXLEY HIGH

"Now for some real baseball practice, boys!"

"Right you are, Jack! I'm mighty glad it has cleared off at last."

"If we are going to have our annual game with Hixley High two weeks from to-day we had better get busy," put in Gif Garrison. "I had no idea they would ask for a match so early in the season."

"It's on account of the game they expect to have this year with Longley Academy," remarked Walt Baxter. "You see, they are to play the new school too."

"Yes, and I heard that those Longley fellows were boasting they were going to do up Hixley, just the same as they were going to do us up."

"Gee, but that Tommy Flanders makes me sick!" broke in Fred. "I really think he's the most conceited fellow I ever met."

"Just the same, I've heard he's a pretty good player," remarked Gif. "He is not only a good pitcher, but quite a good batsman. And they say that his crony is also quite a good all-around player."

The regular nine, minus two players who had left the school the term previous, were out on the diamond practicing. A little later, with two substitutes, they were to play a match of five innings against a scrub team picked from the most available of the ball players left.

Jack Rover was in the box and was putting some swift ones over the plate. As yet he did not have perfect control of the horsehide, and as a consequence it occasionally went over the catcher's head.

Three games of baseball had been arranged for Colby Hall, one with Hixley High, another with Columbus Academy, and a third with Longley. They were to take place in the order named and at intervals of one week.

The practice soon came to an end, and then the five-innings game with the scrubs started. This proved to be quite a contest, and Fred Rover distinguished himself by knocking a three-bagger, while Jack struck out six batsmen, much to his satisfaction. When the contest came to a close the regular nine had won by a score of 11 to 3.

"Well, that shows the old nine is still in the running," remarked Dan Soppinger, when the boys were rushing to the gymnasium to get under the showers.

"Right you are, Dan," answered Jack. "Just the same, that scrub team isn't Hixley High, or Columbus or Longley, either, please don't forget that."

"Oh, I know that just as well as you do, Jack. We've got to play much better than we did to-day if we expect any victories in the regular games."

"Don't forget that we'll be up against Dink Wilsey again," said Gif.

"I don't believe that any of us are likely to forget it," grinned Dan. All remembered Dink Wilsey very well. He was the pitcher for Hixley High and a fellow who was destined to become talked about in baseball circles. He had a puzzling delivery, and sometimes struck out even the best of the batsmen with ease.

From that day forth Jack and the other members of the ball team put in every spare moment at practice. Gradually the young pitcher obtained better control of the sphere, and then he did what he could to increase his speed and make his curves more puzzling.

The contest with Hixley High was to take place on the latter's grounds, and almost all the pupils at Colby Hall made the journey to see the game. Many girls were also present from Clearwater Hall and from the town.

"Oh, Jack, I hope you win!" said Ruth Stevenson, as he strode forward to greet her and the others who had arrived from the girls' school.

"We're going to do our best, Ruth," answered the young pitcher. And then, as he noticed something of a cloud on her face, he added jokingly: "You don't have to look so glum about it."

"I'm not glum over the game, Jack. I was thinking of something else," she answered soberly.

"Why, what's the matter, Ruth—has anything gone wrong?"

"Yes, Jack. But—but maybe I'd better not tell you anything about it," she faltered.

"Has anybody been annoying you?"

"I can't tell you now—I'll tell you after the game if I get a chance," whispered Ruth, as several of the other boys and girls came closer.

At that moment came a blare of tin horns and the noise of many rattles, and then the Hixley High boys let out a wild yelling:

"Hixley High! Hixley High! Hixley High forever!" and this was repeated over and over again.

"Wake up, fellows!" came suddenly in a bellow from Ned Lowe. "Everybody wake up for Colby Hall!" And then there boomed out this refrain:

"Who are we?
Can't you see?
Colby Hall!
Dum! Dum! Dum, dum, dum!
Here we come with fife and drum!
Colby! Colby! Colby Hall!"

"That's the stuff! Give it to 'em again!" yelled Fatty Hendry, wiping the perspiration from his forehead, and once more the school refrain boomed forth.

"Oh, isn't that grand!" remarked Mary Rover.

"The best ever!" answered her cousin Martha.

"It makes me feel just as if I was being raised off my feet," remarked May Powell.

The game began with Hixley High at the bat. There was a wild cheering for Rigby, the center-fielder, when he came up, stick in hand, and also yells of encouragement for Jack.

"Put him out in one-two-three order, Jack!"

"Don't let him get a smell at first!"

"Knock the cover off it, Rigby! Make a homer!"

After two strikes, one of them a foul, Rigby managed to get a safe hit to first. But then Jack tightened up and presently the side was retired without a run.

"That's the stuff! Hold 'em to goose eggs all the way through!"

"Now, then, Colby, go to it and make a couple!"

But alas for this hope! One player got as far as third, but there the inning ended.

Goose eggs also went up for both sides in the second, third and fourth innings. Then two players of Hixley High managed to make singles, and on a fumble by one of the new men playing for Colby one of these hits was turned into a run.

"Hurrah! Hurrah! That's the stuff! Score one for Hixley!"

"Hold 'em down! Hold 'em down! Don't let 'em score again!" came from the Colby Hall supporters. And the players from the military school did "hold 'em down" to the single tally which had been made.

With the score 1 to 0, the game ran along to the eighth inning. Then Dan Soppinger managed to knock out a two-bagger, and he was followed at the plate by Randy. Two men were already out, so it was a crucial moment in more ways than one.

Dink Wilsey was still in good form, although the strain was evidently telling upon him. He sent in two swift balls, which were called strikes, one being a foul. Then came two wide ones, which were put down as balls by the umpire.

"Hit it, Randy!" sang out Gif. "Paste it for all you know how!"

Randy was on the alert, and although the next ball pitched was a bit low, he swung for it, sending it down toward right field.

"Run, Dan! Run!"

"Leg it, Randy!"

And both players did run for all they were worth. Dan had started as Randy swung for the sphere, and consequently touched third a few seconds later. Then, as he saw the ball was still down in right field with the fielder chasing madly after it, he came in to the home plate. Randy had meanwhile reached first and was halfway to second, which he reached safely by sliding.

"Hurrah! One run for Colby Hall!"

"And Randy Rover made it a two-bagger!"

"Some playing, I'll say!"

The excitement was now intense as Colby Hall saw a chance to win. But this chance went glimmering a few seconds later when a pop-fly was gathered in with ease by the Hixley pitcher.

"Never mind, we've tied the score, and that's something," said Gif. "Now all we need do is to hold them down and make one more run."

In the ninth inning Hixley High fought desperately to score, and Colby Hall did the same. But neither side got further than first.

"A tie game! A tie game!" was the cry.

"Now, then, it takes only one run to win!"

The excitement was now at a fever heat, and this continued through the tenth and eleventh innings. By this time it was growing dark, so that the fielders had difficulty in seeing the ball.

"I think we had better call it a tie and let it go at that," said the Hixley captain to Gif. "What do you think about it?"

There was a brief consultation, and several of the regular school coaches were called in. In the meanwhile it grew darker rapidly, and presently the contest was called off.

"It's too bad we couldn't finish it," remarked Jack, as he shook hands with Dink Wilsey.

"We'll have to finish it next year," said the rival pitcher, with a grin.

There was a good deal of talk about the contest, but gradually the crowd dispersed, and many of the Colby boys started for the Hall. The Rovers and some of their chums rejoined the girls, and walked with them to the automobiles which were to take Martha and Mary and the others back to Clearwater Hall.

"I'm so sorry you fellows didn't win that game," pouted May Powell, on the way.

"Well, we did our best," answered Fred. "And believe me, it's something to hold down a school like Hixley with such a pitcher as Dink Wilsey."

"You don't mean to say he can pitch any better than Jack!" put in Ruth quickly.

"Oh, I'm not saying anything against Jack," answered Fred. "Just the same, Dink's a great pitcher, and Jack will say so himself."

"He certainly is," was the reply from the oldest Rover boy. "He'll be on one of the professional teams one of these days. If Longley Academy has any such pitcher in Tommy Flanders, we've got our work cut out for us."

Most of the boys and girls went on to where the automobiles were in waiting, but Jack kept to the rear until the whole crowd were out of hearing.

"Now, then, Ruth, tell me what is troubling you," he said in a low voice.

"Oh, Jack, I don't believe I ought to tell you! I should have torn it up and forgotten all about it," returned the girl.

"Torn it up? What do you mean? Was it a letter?"

"Yes, a letter that came yesterday. It is nothing but a scrawl, and it's unsigned. It was sent from New York."

"What did the letter say? Did somebody threaten you, Ruth?"

"No, Jack. Somebody threatened you. If it hadn't been for that, I wouldn't think of bothering you about it."

"Humph! this is interesting. Have you got the letter with you?"

"Yes. Here it is," and the girl brought forth the letter from her handbag. As she had said, it was postmarked New York City, and was addressed to her at the school. The envelope was a plain one, and inside was a single sheet of plain white paper. On this, evidently in a disguised hand, had been scrawled the following:

RUTH STEVENSON: If you know when you are well off you won't have much to do with Jack Rover or his cousins. They are a bum lot and some day you will be ashamed of every one of them. Jack Rover never treated anybody square, and some day you can take it from me that I intend to pound his handsome face into a jelly. Better listen to my warning, or you will be very sorry you had anything to do with that crowd.

"A FRIEND."

CHAPTER VII

NEWS FROM ABROAD

"That's a fine letter, I must say!" remarked Jack, after perusing the scrawl a second time. "Evidently the writer loves me a whole lot."

"Of course it must have come from one of those fellows who used to go to school with you," said Ruth. "Perhaps that Martell boy or that Brown boy."

"I don't think Nappy Martell would dare send such a letter," answered the young captain of the cadets. "It would be more like Slugger Brown to do it. But you must remember that those fellows

have just been released from that detention camp." Jack mused for a moment. "This looks more like the work of Gabe Werner to me."

"Oh, Jack! suppose he should attack you some time when you weren't aware?"

"That's a risk a fellow has to run. Of course, I expect to keep on my guard, not only against Gabe Werner but also against Martell, Brown and Glutts. The whole four don't like any of our crowd."

"But just read the dreadful thing he says," continued the girl, as she caught Jack tightly by the arm. "He says he'll pound your face into a jelly! Oh, Jack! don't you ever give him a chance to do that," and Ruth's face showed her solicitude.

"There is one thing you have to remember, Ruth, and that is the writer of an anonymous letter is generally a coward," Jack answered as lightly as he could, more to ease her feelings than anything else. "So don't you worry about this letter. Have you mentioned it to any of the others?"

"No; I didn't want to worry them."

"I'm glad you didn't say anything to Martha and Mary. I know it would upset them a good deal, and maybe they would think they'd have to write to their mothers about it. Just keep it to yourself. And please don't destroy that letter; it might come in useful some time. Maybe we can trace the handwriting."

"But you'll tell your cousins at the Hall, won't you?"

"Yes; I think I had better, so that they can be on their guard, too. We don't want to run any unnecessary chances when it comes to those rascals." And there the talk on this subject came to an end.

It was not until late that evening, when the four Rovers were retiring, that Jack got a chance to mention the anonymous letter to his cousins. All were tremendously interested, and speculated on who the writer could be.

"My opinion is it was either Gabe Werner or Slugger Brown," said Randy. "Neither Nappy Martell nor Bill Glutts would have the nerve to do it."

"I'll side with Jack and say it was Werner," said Fred.

"And I'll side with my brother and say it was either Slugger or Werner," added Andy.

Two days later came word which filled the Rover boys with joy. It was announced that, as the war in Europe was at an end, Colonel Colby might be expected home any day.

"Hurrah! that means that our folks will be coming home too before long!" cried Fred, throwing up his cap. "Isn't this the best ever!"

"Maybe we'll get word from our fathers in a day or two," returned Andy. "Anyway, I hope so."

"My! what a grand old time we ought to have when they do get home," said Randy, his eyes glistening.

"We'll tear the woodpile down!" announced his twin, and then turned a handspring just to ease his feelings.

The talk among the cadets at the Hall was now divided between the return of Colonel Colby and the baseball game with Columbus Academy. In the meantime Hixley High played a game with Longley Academy and lost by a score of 3 to 7.

"Gee! that doesn't look good to me," announced Gif soberly, when the news came in. "All we could do this year was to hold them to that tie."

"That score would seem to prove that the Longley nine is just about twice as good as the Hixley nine," remarked Dan.

"I see by the score that Tommy Flanders struck out nine men. He certainly must have been going some," came from Fred, who was studying the score sheet with interest.

"Yes, and the Longley fellows made two home-runs and three two-baggers," put in Spouter. "I must say they didn't do a thing to Hixley High but punch holes into them."

"We've certainly got our work cut out for us," announced Jack, and then went to practicing harder than ever.

But if the score between Longley and Hixley had been a disappointment to the Colby Hall team, there was quite a little comfort for them in the game with Columbus Academy. The Columbus boys did their level best to win, and yet when the game came to an end Colby Hall was the victor by a score of 8 to 3.

"Well, that shows we are still in the running!" cried Gif that evening. "Those Columbus fellows certainly put up a stiff game."

"They certainly did!" answered Randy. "Their pitcher wasn't such a wonder, but their fielding was certainly great and they have some very good batsmen."

"Yes, and their shortstop is as good as you can find them," added Spouter.

"I've got one complaint to make about that game," said Ralph Mason, who was the major of the school battalion. "I don't know whether I ought to speak to you fellows about it or to Captain Dale."

"What is that, Major?" questioned Gif quickly.

"It has to do with little Henry Stowell," answered the young major seriously.

"Oh, I think I know what you mean!" cried Ned Lowe. "Isn't it the way in which he was talking to some of those Columbus players?"

"It is," was Ralph Mason's reply. "Then you heard it too, did you?"

"I heard a little. I hoped to hear more, but just then somebody came up and took me away."

"If it was about the ball game, Major, I think I ought to know of it," said Gif.

"The trouble is, Gif, I don't really know whether Stowell meant anything by it or not—or rather if he understood what he was doing. He is so very innocent in some things I hate to accuse him of actual wrong-doing. But one thing is certain: Those Columbus Academy fellows pumped him as much as they could about our players, and especially about Jack Rover's style of pitching. And they also asked a great number of questions about the two new players on the nine."

"Codfish is a sneak, and always was!" burst out Dan Soppinger. "Oh, I know you fellows feel inclined to stick up for him," he added, looking at the Rovers; "and once in a while I feel sorry for him myself. But, just the same, he isn't to be trusted."

"If you'll excuse me for saying something, Major, I don't think I'd take the matter to Captain Dale—at least not just yet," put in Jack. This conversation took place during the cadets' off time, and the young captain felt he could talk freely to his superior officer. "If we find that Stowell really tried to injure us, I guess we can take care of him," and he smiled suggestively.

"All right, we'll let it go at that," answered Ralph Mason; and then walked away, satisfied in his own mind that he had said quite enough to the other boys.

By careful inquiry it was ascertained that several other cadets had noticed Stowell talking to some of the Columbus students and had overheard some of the remarks. All were of the opinion that the little cadet had told altogether too much, although it was possible that he was innocent in the matter.

"We certainly ought to teach him some kind of a lesson," remarked Andy.

"I wonder where Codfish is now?" questioned his twin quickly.

"I don't know, but I think we can soon find out. Come on—let us look him up."

"Hi! what are you up to?" demanded Jack, feeling that something was in the air.

"Oh, let them go, Jack!" cried Fred. And then he added to the twins: "If it's anything worth seeing, let us know about it."

"We will!" called back Andy gaily.

The twins hunted around the school, and at last found Henry Stowell in the gymnasium, where he was sitting on a bench watching some other cadets going through their athletic exercises.

"If we can only manage to keep him here a while we might be able to fix up something in his room for him," suggested Randy.

"I guess that would be easy," answered his twin. "There is Walt Baxter. We'll get him to engage Codfish's attention for a while."

Walt was called to one side and the situation explained to him. He readily consented to see to it that Stowell was kept from going up to his room for some time. Then the twins hurried off in the direction of the Hall.

"We must teach him a lesson that he won't forget in a hurry," remarked Randy.

"Right you are!" was his brother's reply.

Half an hour later the other Rovers, along with Gif, Spouter and Dan, were coming up to their rooms when they were met at the head of the stairs by the twins.

"We're all ready for Codfish," announced Randy, somewhat excitedly. "Just wait until I go down to the gym and tip Walt Baxter off."

"Walt and Codfish are in the school library. They just came over," announced Dan. "Ned Lowe is with them. They were asking Codfish a lot of fool questions in history, as to when Hannibal discovered the south pole and things like that."

Randy ran down and in a minute more was in the school library. He caught Walt Baxter's eye and nodded to let the other cadet know that everything was all right. Then Walt did the same to Ned.

"Well, I'm getting sleepy, Stowell," said Walt, stretching himself. "I think I'll go and hit the hay."

"Ditto here," came from Ned.

"I'm real tired myself, and I'd have gone to bed some time ago if you hadn't asked me so many questions," answered Henry Stowell, with a yawn.

"Then you don't really know much about who discovered the south pole?" said Ned seriously. "You see, I want to put it in a composition I'm writing about cats."

"I don't see what cats have to do with the south pole," said Stowell innocently.

"Oh, that's easy, Codfish," said Walt. "Cats like to climb poles, and the south pole is the south pole, isn't it?" And then he and Ned walked off and joined Randy, and all hurried upstairs to the Rovers' rooms.

As luck would have it Henry Stowell this term was occupying a room by himself. It was a fairly large apartment and furnished with a single bed, a chiffonier, a table, and several chairs. In one corner was a closet in which he kept most of his clothing and also a handbag.

"Well, what have you done?" questioned Fred, as the twins appeared.

"We fixed it up so Codfish is going to spend a real pleasant night," answered Andy, with a grin.

"But what did you do?" came from Jack.

"Just you fellows wait and see. Walt, will you go out and let us know when Codfish comes up?"

"I will," answered Walt Baxter, and hurried to a corner of the corridor where he might see without being seen.

In less than five minutes he came back hurriedly with the information that Stowell had just entered his room.

"All right, then, fellows, come with me and maybe you will see or hear something worth while," announced Randy gleefully.

"How are we going to see anything when he shuts his door on us?" questioned Dan.

"His window is right next to the platform of the new fire-escape," answered Andy. "We'll go out on that, and then maybe we'll see everything that goes on. He always keeps a bright light in his room and always pulls down the shade. But we fixed it so the shade will come down only so far, leaving a crack that we can look through with ease."

"I hope you haven't done anything to get us in bad with Captain Dale," remarked Jack.

"Oh, this isn't as bad as all that, Jack," answered Andy. "It's just something to wake Codfish up."

Led by the twins, the other Rovers and their chums hurried down the side corridor to where there was a red light and a sign, "Fire Escape." Then they threw open a window, and in a moment more stood on the escape mentioned. It was of steel, fairly wide, and ran along past several windows, the second of which belonged to the room occupied by Stowell.

As they stepped out on the fire escape they saw a light flash up in the sneak's room and a few seconds later the window shade was pulled down.

"Just as I told you!" Andy exclaimed. "I knew the shade would come down. And see! there is the crack we mentioned. Now, then, line up under the window and we'll see what happens next."

CHAPTER VIII

THE JOKE ON THE SNEAK

The window of Stowell's room had been left open so the boys outside could hear, as well as see, what went on within. They saw the sneak of the school yawn and stretch as if he was tired, and then he lost no time in preparing to retire.

In one of his pockets he carried a piece of cake, and this he ate with satisfaction while undressing. Then, when clad only in his pajamas, he turned off the light and moved in the semi-darkness toward the bed.

"Now watch," murmured Andy, somewhat excitedly.

All outside did so, ranging their heads close together at the open slit of the window. They heard Stowell throw back the covers of the bed and then sit down. An instant later came a cry of surprise.

"What's this? Oh, dear me! something is in the bed!"

The sneak of the school bounced to his feet so hurriedly that he tipped over a chair standing alongside of the bed and pitched forward headlong to the floor.

"Hi! Leave me alone! Get away from me! Scat!" they heard him ejaculate and then give a little

squeal of terror as he scrambled once more to his feet. Then they heard him rush to the side of the room and once more make a light.

As the rays filled the apartment those outside saw something of what had taken place. Not less than half a dozen mice were doing their best to hide themselves here and there under the bed and the chiffonier and in the corners of the room. One or two scampered directly past Stowell, who set up another squeal of alarm and then leaped up on the nearest chair.

"He's enjoying it, all right," murmured Randy.

"Shut up!" came promptly from Fred. "If he sees us we'll have to dust for it."

But the eyes of the sneak were not turned toward the window. He was looking only at the mice, two of which were still scampering across the floor trying to find some hole of escape.

"Somebody's been playing a trick on me," murmured Stowell to himself. "Just wait till I find out who did it, I'll fix him!"

He remained standing on the chair, not caring to venture on the floor in his bare feet and with the mice still at liberty. He had placed his shoes under the head of the bed.

"I've got to clear them out somehow," he muttered to himself. "But I guess I'd better put my shoes on first. Then I'll get that baseball bat in the closet and do it."

With extreme caution Codfish descended from the chair and walked hurriedly across the floor to the head of his bed. He drew forth the shoes and started quickly to put them on.

His toes were just going down into one of the shoes when he let out a yell which would have done credit to a wild Indian. One of the mice had found refuge in the footwear, and now it gave a bound and scrambled up inside the leg of Stowell's pajamas.

"Hi! Get out of there! Help! Murder! Take that beast away! Oh, my! he'll bite me sure! Ouch! he's bit me already!" And then the sneak of the school began to dance around wildly, in the meantime clutching savagely in the region of the knee where the mouse had found lodgement. Caught, the little animal had nipped Codfish in the finger.

"Gee, this is the richest yet!" chuckled Walt Baxter.

"Better than a moving picture," was Gif's comment.

"He'll wake the whole school if he makes much more noise," remarked Jack. "Be prepared to skip out when the time comes."

"I'll have somebody arrested for this," howled Codfish, as he still struggled with the mouse that was up his leg. "This is beastly! Oh, dear! what in the world shall I do?"

He gave a savage tug at his pajamas, and the next instant there was a tearing sound and the cloth parted at the knee. Out leaped the mouse, to disappear quickly under the bed.

Panting from his excitement, and muttering to himself, the sneak of the school, making sure that the shoes were now both empty, slipped his feet into them and then hurried toward the clothing closet located in a corner. He intended to get a baseball bat with which to either kill the mice or chase them out into the hallway.

"Now watch," whispered Randy. "Here is where he gets another surprise."

Stowell flung open the door of the closet in a hurry. As he did this he found himself confronted by the figure of a Colby Hall cadet. The intruder had a handkerchief tied over his face.

"Hi! what are you doing here?" cried Stowell in sudden surprise. "You're the fellow who's playing the trick on me, eh? I'll fix you, you see if I don't!" And then struck by a sudden idea, Stowell slammed shut the door of the closet and locked it. "Now I've got you, and you'll suffer for this nonsense—you see if you don't!" he shouted.

"Gee! this is the best yet!" burst out Andy in a low voice. "I didn't think he'd lock that dummy in."

"We only put it there to scare him," explained Randy. "It's one of his old suits stuffed out. We thought it might fall out on him when he opened the door. But I guess it's better the way it is," he chuckled.

"Where did you get those mice?" Gif questioned.

"Oh, that was easy," answered Andy. "I met Pud Hicks, the janitor's assistant, this noon and he was telling me of a whole lot of mice he had caught down in the barn during the past week. He had the bunch in a box, and he said he was going to take them down to the river and drown them. I knew where the box was, and getting them was easy."

By this time Codfish had slipped into his trousers, and now he put on his coat.

"He's going downstairs to tell Captain Dale or one of the professors!" exclaimed Jack in a low voice. "We had better get out of here."

The young captain's advice was followed, and all lost no time in leaving the fire escape and entering the school building. They were just in time to see the door to Stowell's room flung open

and the sneak hurry downstairs.

"I must see what he does!" cried Randy, who could never let any portion of a joke get away from him, and he hurried down the stairs after Stowell.

Captain Mapes Dale was in the office of the school writing a letter when Stowell burst in upon him with scant ceremony.

"Oh, Captain Dale, won't you please come quick?" cried the little sneak, all out of breath with excitement. "Somebody put about a million mice in my room, and I've got the fellow locked up in my clothes-closet."

"A million mice in your room, Stowell!" exclaimed the captain, leaping to his feet. "Surely you must be mistaken. You don't mean quite that many," and a faint smile crossed his features.

"Well, there are a whole lot of them, anyway," returned Codfish. "When I opened my bed they leaped right out at me and they ran all over the floor, and then one of them went up the leg of my pajamas and bit me. See how I had to tear my pajamas to get him out?" and he showed the spot.

"And you say you have the culprit locked up in your closet?" demanded Captain Dale.

"Yes, sir. Won't you please come up and see who it is before he has a chance to break out? Of course he'll try to get away if he can. He won't want to be caught."

"Yes, I'll go up immediately. Are the mice up there still?"

"Yes, sir. I shut the door on them so they couldn't get away."

"Then I had better call the janitor and his assistant first, so that we can round up the million mice, more or less."

Fortunately Pud Hicks was not around the building, so could not be summoned. But Job Plunger, the school janitor, was at hand, and so was Bob Nixon, the school chauffeur.

"I guess I know where those mice came from," said Nixon, with a grin. "Hicks caught a lot of them down at the barn. He was going to drown 'em down at the river to-morrow. Somebody must have got hold of 'em and put 'em in Stowell's room."

Nixon and Plunger followed Captain Dale and Stowell to the cadet's room. In the meanwhile Randy had rejoined the other Rovers and their chums, and likewise rapped on half a dozen doors as he passed, and as a consequence fully a score of cadets were made aware that something unusual was happening.

"What's the row?"

"Is it a fire?"

"Are they going to celebrate the victory over Columbus Academy?"

"If anything good to eat is being passed around count me in."

"Codfish is holding a celebration!" cried Andy from around a corner and in a disguised voice. "Everybody watch for something good from Codfish's room."

The appearance of Captain Dale with Stowell only whetted the curiosity of the assembled students, and from half-closed doors they watched the head of the school and the little sneak approach the room. The door was left open, and a moment later out popped one mouse, quickly followed by another.

"Hello, there's a mouse!"

"Hi, catch those fellows!" yelled Bob Nixon, who was on hand with a trap, followed by Job Plunger with a box.

The school janitor was quite deaf, and so could hear nothing of what was going on.

The escape of the two mice was a signal for the assembling students to begin a chase after the rodents. Then another mouse came out into the hallway, and various things were thrown at the scurrying animal.

"Here, here! Stop that noise out there!" commanded Captain Dale. "There is no sense in making such a racket over a few little mice."

As he spoke the head of the school strode to the closet door and unlocked it.

"Now come out here and give an account of yourself," he said, as he threw the door open.

"Now you are going to catch it for playing such a trick on me," exulted Codfish.

The figure in the closet, of course, did not move, and Captain Dale reached forth to pull the offending cadet into the room. But then he stopped short, and something of a smile crossed his face.

"What is the matter with you, Stowell—are you blind?" he demanded.

"Blind?" queried the sneak of the school, bewildered. "What do you mean?"

"Can't you see that this is only a stuffed figure? And it hasn't any head on, either; only a handkerchief tied around some underwear with a cap stuck on top."

"Oh, Captain Dale, you don't mean it!" cried Codfish, and fell back against the wall, too upset to say more.

"But I do mean it," went on the military man, and reached for the dummy, which immediately toppled over on the floor, the head and cap rolling in one direction and the legs and shoes in another. "It's nothing but an old uniform stuffed out."

"Where's them mice?" cried Job Plunger in a shrill voice. "Where's them mice, I say?"

"You'll have to find them, Plunger," answered Captain Dale.

"Behind 'em?" remarked the deaf janitor. "Behind where?"

"I did not say behind anything," shouted the captain. "I said you'd have to find them."

"Oh. Well, I'll find 'em if they're in the room," said Plunger.

By this time the noise and excitement had increased so that nearly half of the school was out in the corridor in front of Stowell's room. They saw the remains of the stuffed figure on the floor, and many quickly surmised that a joke had been played.

"What is Codfish doing with that dummy?"

"Has he been using it for an imitation Hun to shoot at?"

"Maybe he's going to join the football team next Fall and wants to practice up."

"Has he been taming mice on the sly?"

"Gee! I don't want to stay in a place where a fellow keeps mice in his room."

In the midst of this talk the janitor and the chauffeur did what they could to round up the escaped mice. They managed to capture two of the rodents and kill two others, and that was all that could be found.

"If there were any more, the rest must have gotten away," remarked Bob Nixon.

"This is simply a practical joke," announced Captain Dale, after a few more words with Stowell. "Have you any idea who played it?"

"I don't know exactly, sir, but I think maybe I can find out," answered the sneak. He felt much subdued, especially as he saw the eyes of many of the other cadets on him.

"Well, you go to bed now, and I'll take this matter up to-morrow morning," said Captain Dale. "Boys, I want you all to retire, and at once," he went on with a wave of his hand to those outside. And then the cadets dispersed to their rooms.

CHAPTER IX

THE GAME WITH LONGLEY

"I guess that will hold Codfish for a while," remarked Randy, when the Rovers were once more by themselves in their rooms and the excitement had died away.

"I'll have to make it a point to see Pud Hicks the first thing in the morning," returned his twin. "Pud might tell somebody that he showed those mice to me."

"Yes, you'd better do that, by all means," put in Jack.

"And another thing you ought to do, is to let Codfish know why this trick was played on him," came from Fred. "Otherwise it will be a good effort thrown away," and he grinned.

"I'll leave a note under his door," said Randy, and a little later scribbled out the following on a card:

"This is what you get, Codfish, for giving information to our baseball rivals. Be careful in the future to keep your mouth shut.

"THE AVENGERS."

"I reckon that will hold him for a while," said Randy, and before going to bed he slipped out into the corridor and placed the card under Stowell's door.

Early in the morning Andy saw the assistant janitor and easily arranged for Pud Hicks to say nothing about the mice.

"Why, over a dozen of the cadets saw those mice," said Hicks; "so they can't blame any of this on you." And it may be mentioned here that the investigation which followed came to nought.

Two days later Andy burst in on the others like a whirlwind, his face glowing with excitement.

"Come on downstairs, everybody!" he called out. "Colonel Colby has just arrived! Come on, and ask him what he can tell us about our fathers."

At this announcement there was a general stampede. All of the others dropped the textbooks they had been studying and made a simultaneous rush for the corridor and the stairs. Down, pell-mell, went the whole crowd, to join a group of cadets in the lower hall, everyone of whom was doing his best to shake Colonel Colby's hand first.

The owner of the school was dressed in his uniform as a United States officer, and looked taller and more bronzed than ever. His face wore a broad smile and he gave each of his pupils a hearty handshake.

"Oh, Colonel, we are so glad to see you back!" cried Jack, with genuine pleasure as he wrung the officer's hand. "And I hope you have good news of my father and my uncles?"

"I am as glad to see you as you are to see me, Captain Rover," returned Colonel Colby. "And it is a genuine pleasure to get back to this school after having endured such arduous days in France."

"And what about our folks?" added Fred, as he too came in for a handshake.

"When our troopship left France your folks were expecting to follow in about ten days or two weeks. Most likely they are already on the way."

"And they were well?" asked Randy anxiously.

"Quite well. Of course, you know that your father and your Uncle Sam were wounded by some flying shells, and that your Uncle Dick suffered from a gas attack. But they are all recovering rapidly, and I don't doubt but what they will soon be as well as ever."

"Somebody said that dad had won a medal of honor," said Jack, his eyes lighting up with expectancy.

"It is true. He did win such a medal. And he deserved it. Probably he will give you all the particulars when he arrives."

That was all Colonel Colby could say at the time, because many others wanted to shake his hand, from Captain Dale down through all the teachers and the cadets to the school janitor, and even the women working in the kitchen and the men in the stables. He had been on good terms with all his hired help, and now they showed a real affection for him which touched his heart deeply.

"Just think of it! Our fathers may be back in ten days!" exclaimed Andy. "Isn't it the best ever!" And he commenced to dance a jig just to let off steam.

The boys lost no time in telephoning to the girls, and it may be imagined that Martha and Mary were indeed glad to hear the news.

The next day, just as the session was closing, the Rovers were informed that a man and a boy were out on the campus waiting to see them. They hurried out and found themselves confronted by John Franklin and his son Phil.

"I've been promising myself right along that I'd come and see you fellows," said John Franklin. "But somehow I couldn't get around to it. But now that my son and I are going back to Texas I felt I'd have at least to say good-bye and thank you once again for what you fellows did for us."

"And as my father wasn't able to reward you, I thought maybe you wouldn't mind if I made each of you something out of wood with my jackknife," put in Phil Franklin, somewhat awkwardly. "You know, handling a jackknife is one of my specialties," he added, with a grin. "So please accept these with our compliments. You can divide them up to suit yourselves."

He handed over a package done up in a newspaper, and, unfolding this, the Rovers found four articles carved out of hard wood. One was an inkstand, another a miniature canoe, a third an elaborate napkin ring, and the fourth a tray for holding pins and collar buttons.

"Why, those are real fine, Phil," said Jack, as he looked the articles over.

"You don't mean to say you did all of this work with a knife?" questioned Andy admiringly.

"Every bit of it," was the reply.

"They are beautiful," was Randy's comment, after an inspection.

"Better than you could buy in the stores," added Fred.

"I'm pleased to know that you like my son's handiwork," said John Franklin.

"They are real good," said Jack. "But we don't feel like taking these things without giving you something in return," he added hastily.

"Oh, that's all right!" cried Phil Franklin. "You've done enough for us already. You keep the things and don't say anything more about it."

"And so you're really going back to Texas?" questioned Fred, after the presents had been inspected again.

"Yes, we're going to start to-morrow noon," answered John Franklin. "I've got a little money together now, and I'm going back to see if I can't put a crimp in those oil-well sharpers who did me out of my farm."

"Well, I certainly hope you get the best of those fellows if they swindled you," said Randy heartily.

The conversation lasted half an hour longer, and during that time Randy and Jack excused themselves and slipped off to their rooms. When they came back they had a small package containing two of their best story books.

"Here are a couple of books which perhaps you'll like to read on the trains," said Jack. "We want you to accept them with the compliments of all of us."

"Oh, story books!" And Phil Franklin's eyes lit up with pleasure. "I love to read. Are you sure you can spare them?" And when they said they could he continued: "That suits me immensely."

A little later father and son took their departure.

"Pretty nice people," was Jack's comment. "I certainly hope they get their rights."

This meeting took place on the day when Longley Academy played Columbus Academy. The cadets, remembering the score between Hixley High and Longley, were very anxious to know how the Columbus team would fare against the new school.

"Well, Longley wins again!" exclaimed Ned Lowe, who came in with the news.

"What was the score?" questioned Gif with much interest.

"Eleven to two."

"You don't mean it!" cried Spouter. "Why, that's worse than the game they took from Hixley High!"

"One thing is certain: The Longley team knows how to play," said Jack decidedly. "We may not like Tommy Flanders and his bunch, but, just the same, you've got to hand it to 'em for knowing how to put it across."

"It looks to me as if we might be in for a defeat," remarked another cadet.

"Defeat! Don't talk that way, Leeds," stormed Gif. "Colby Hall is going to win!"

"Well, I hope so, but I'm afraid you'll be disappointed," answered Leeds. He was a new pupil, and was of a decidedly pessimistic turn of mind.

The victories of Longley over Hixley and Columbus served one good purpose. It caused Gif to call his team together and read them a stern lecture.

"We are evidently up against a bunch of real ball players," said the captain. "We've got to buckle down in this contest and do our very best, and then some. I want every man to practice all he can from now on. And when the time comes I want every man to play the game with all the brains and all the nerve that are in him."

Longley Academy being devoted, as mentioned before, very largely to physical culture and athletics, had an extra fine baseball grounds with a beautiful new grandstand and bleachers. The new school was anxious to show off these grounds, and so had insisted that the game be played there, and this had been agreed to after it was announced that one half of the stands should be set aside for the cadets of Colby Hall and their friends.

It had been noised about that this game was to be "for blood," so that when the time came for the contest the grounds were overflowing with people. Everybody from Colby Hall and Longley was there, and in addition quite a respectable crowd from Hixley, Columbus, and from Clearwater Hall. There was also a scattering of people from the town and the surrounding districts.

"Oh, Jack, aren't you nervous?" questioned Martha, when he met the girls from Clearwater.

"If I am I'm not going to show it," he replied to his sister.

"Jack, I'm going to root harder than I ever did in my life," said Ruth, as she held up a banner marked Colby Hall and another marked Clearwater Hall.

"We're all going to root," declared May Powell.

The stands were speedily filled to overflowing, and there was a large crowd assembled behind the foul line on either side of the diamond. There was a loud cheering when the Colby Hall nine appeared, and a like cheer when the Longley players put in an appearance.

"Hurrah for Colby Hall!"

"Three cheers for Longley Academy!"

"Here is where the cadets walk off with another one!"

"Not much! Here is where Longley snows you under!"

And so the gibes and comments ran on, while every once in a while wild cheering rang out,

mingled with the noise of horns and rattles.

The toss-up sent Longley to the bat first, and with a cheer from his friends Jack took the ball and walked down to the box.

"Now then, fellows, swat it good and plenty!" cried Tommy Flanders. "We want about half a dozen runs the first inning."

"He doesn't want much," murmured Fred.

The first man up was a heavy hitter named Durrick. He had one strike and two balls called, and then sent a low one to left field which gave him first base with ease.

"Hurrah, boys! Keep it a-going!" cried Tommy Flanders, dancing around joyously.

The second man up knocked two fouls and then a short fly to third. But then came another safe hit to right field which took the batter to first while the other runner gained third.

"Take it easy, old man," cautioned Gif, as he came up to speak to Jack. "Don't let them rattle you."

"They are not going to rattle me," answered Jack sturdily.

He gritted his teeth, and then sent in three swift balls so quickly that the next batsman was taken completely by surprise and was declared out almost before he knew it.

"That's the stuff, Colby! Two out! Hold 'em down!"

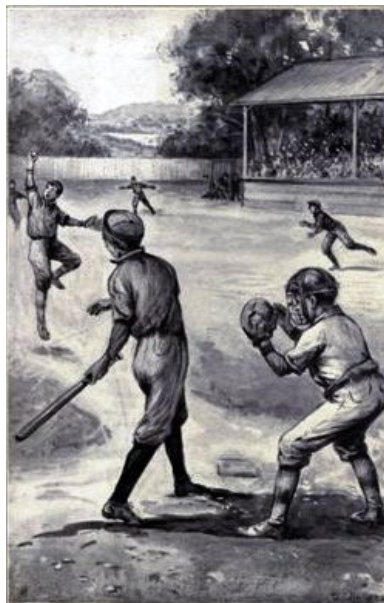
"Knock it out! Bring Durrick in!"

The next player up was a tall, lanky chap named Wilks. He swung savagely at the sphere as if intending to knock it over the back fence.

"If he ever connects with it it will be a homer with three runs in," thought Gif.

Two strikes were called, and then three balls. Then Jack took a sudden brace and sent in a swift high one. Wilks leaped for it, and the crack of the bat could be heard all over the grounds.

It looked like a safe hit to center field, but as the crack of the bat sounded on the air Jack Rover was seen to leap high up with hand out-stretched. The next instant he came down with the sphere safe within his grasp.



JACK ROVER LEAPED HIGH UP AND CAUGHT THE BALL.

"Fly ball! Batter out!"

Longley Academy had played its first inning without scoring.

CHAPTER X

A GLORIOUS VICTORY

"Good for Jack Rover!"

"That was some stop, all right!"

"Maybe it didn't sting his hand!"

So the cries ran on, and when the Colby Hall nine came in from the field the young pitcher was wildly applauded.

In the meantime, however, Gif ran to him anxiously.

"It was the best ever, Jack, but did it hurt your hand—I mean enough to stop your pitching?"

"It's not going to stop my pitching, Gif," answered the young pitcher. His hand stung as if burnt by fire, but he was not going to admit it.

"Oh, wasn't that a glorious play!" burst out Ruth Stevenson, and her glowing face showed her pleasure.

"I hope Jack wasn't hurt," answered the young captain's sister solicitously.

There was another cheering when Dan Soppinger stepped to the plate with his bat in hand. Dan had two strikes called on him, and then sent a fly to left field which was gathered in with ease.

"One out! Keep it up, Longley!"

"Don't let 'em see first!"

Gif was the next player up, and by hard work he managed to rap out a single between short and second, which carried him to first in safety. But the next two players failed to connect with the sphere, and the goose egg went up on the board for the cadets.

After that there was a good deal of seesawing for four innings, and without any results so far as scoring was concerned. Longley made four hits, and so did the Colby boys. But no runner got further than second base.

Of course the catching of the red-hot liner had done Jack's pitching hand no good. It was a little swollen in the palm, and this prevented the fingers from working quite as freely as would otherwise have been the case.

"Now listen, Jack," said Gif, taking him to one side after Jack had pitched through the fifth inning. "If your hand hurts you, say so, and I'll put another fellow in the box."

"Never mind my hand, Gif, as long as I can treat them to goose eggs," answered the young pitcher.

"But I don't want you to ruin your hand."

"That's all right. When I feel I can't do any more pitching I'll let you know."

In the sixth inning there came a break. But this could not be called Jack's fault. The first Longley player up, a chap named Mason, managed to dribble the ball toward third, and before either the baseman or the shortstop could send it over he had reached first. Then, on a wild throw to second, the runner not only covered that bag, but went on and slid in to third.

"Now we've got 'em a-going, fellows!" was the Longley yell.

"Right you are!"

"Nobody out, and a man on third! This is the time we wipe up the diamond with them! Everybody on the job!"

The next player went out on a pop fly. Then came Tommy Flanders, who did his best to line out a single. This was stopped by the second baseman, who, however, threw the ball to the home plate, thus cutting off the possibility of a run.

"Hurrah! Two men on base, and only one out!"

"Here is where Longley does some big scoring!"

"Jack, are you sure you can hold 'em?" Gif questioned anxiously, as he came up to the pitcher.

"I'll do it or die in the attempt," was the answer, and Jack gritted his teeth.

It was certainly a trying situation, but the young pitcher refused to allow his nerves to get the better of him. He gave a signal to the backstop, and then sent in an outcurve, which the batter swung at in vain. Then he sent in a straight ball, following this by another outcurve, and almost before he knew it the batter was struck out.

"Hurrah!" came from Spouter Powell. "That's the way to do it! Two men out! Now for the third man!"

The Longley player to come up was one of their best batsmen, and Jack realized that to give him anything like a good ball to hit would be fatal, so he fed the man nothing but those which were high and wide. As a consequence the fellow had two strikes called on him and four balls, and took his base, moving Flanders to second.

"Hurrah! Three men on base!" was the Longley yell. "Now, then, Simmons, bring 'em all in!"

Simmons came forward with a do-or-die expression on his face. He had one strike called on him, and then knocked a low one toward centerfield. At once he started for first, while the fellow on third dashed forward for the home plate. The ball was gathered in as quickly as possible, and the runner from first to second was put out. But the runner from third had come in just before.

"Hurrah! That's one run, anyhow!" shouted the Longley supporters.

"I told you we could do it," said Tommy Flanders. He was glad of the run, yet tremendously chagrined to think that he had not been permitted to score.

"Now we've got to tie that score or better," said Gif, when the Colby Hall boys came to the bat.

All of those who came up, including Fred and Jack, did their best, but were unable to get further than first or second.

"Hurrah! That's the stuff!" cried Pete Stevens. "Let us hold 'em down to a whitewash!"

"Sure I'll hold 'em down!" boasted Tommy Flanders. "Not a one of 'em are going to see the home plate off of me to-day."

"He'll certainly win the game if conceit can do it," murmured Ned Lowe in disgust.

It must be admitted that so far Tommy Flanders had done wonderfully well. But there were signs that he was overdoing it by pitching too hard.

"I think he'll break before the game is over," said Dan.

"Just my opinion," returned Walt Baxter. "No young pitcher can stand up under such a strain as that."

The break they had looked for came in the eighth inning. By a supreme effort Longley managed, on a fumble by one of the new players for Colby Hall, to bring in another run, at which the cheering on their side was tremendous.

"That's the stuff! Two to nothing! Wallop 'em good and plenty, Longley!"

"We'll wallop 'em all right enough," exulted Tommy Flanders. "They are going to get the worst whitewashing they ever had—you mark my words."

Alas for the conceited young pitcher! His overconfidence made him a trifle wild, and almost before he realized it the first Colby Hall batter had got a safe hit to first and the second man up went to first on balls, advancing the other to second.

"Tighten up there, Tommy! Tighten up!" called out one of the Longley sympathizers.

"I'll tighten up, all right enough," answered Flanders, with a scowl.

The next player up got another single, the ball being fumbled by the fielder, and as a consequence the bases were filled.

"Be careful, Tommy!" cautioned the Longley captain, as he came up to the pitcher. "Be careful! We don't want to spoil the score."

"They won't get in. You just watch me and see," answered Flanders, and scowled more than ever.

He did tighten up a little, and as a consequence the next batter up went out on strikes and the following player on a foul fly.

"Hurrah! Two out! Hold 'em down! Don't let 'em score!"

The next batter up was Fred. So far the youngest Rover had been unable to get further than first.

"Oh, Fred, line it out! Please line it out!" cried May Powell, and then she blushed furiously as a number sitting near her began to laugh.

"Don't you care, May," consoled Mary, and then she called out loudly: "Do your best, Fred! Do your best!"

"Go in and win!" cried Martha.

There had been a tremendous racket, but now, as Fred gripped his ashen stick and Tommy Flanders prepared to deliver the ball, a deathlike silence came over the field. Every one of the men on the bases was prepared to leg it at the slightest chance of being able to score.

The first ball to come in was too high, and the second too low, so Fred let them go by. Then, however, came a straight ball just where he wanted it, and Fred swung at it with every ounce of muscle in his body.

Crack! The report could be heard all over the grounds, and then the sphere could be seen sailing far off into left field.

"Run, boys, run! Everybody run!"

"Leg it for all you are worth!"

"It's a three-bagger, sure!"

"No, it isn't! It's a homer! Run, boys! Run! Run! Run!"

The crowd was now on its feet yelling and cheering at the top of its lungs and throwing caps and banners into the air, and while the left fielder was chasing madly after the bounding ball, the three men on bases came in one after another, followed swiftly by the panting and blowing Rover boy.

"Hi! Hi! Hi! What do you know about that! Four runs!"

"That's the way to do it, Colby! Keep it up!"

"You've got the Longley pitcher going!" cried Spouter at the top of his lungs. "Give us a few more home runs! They'll be easy!"

"Take Flanders out!" said one of the Academy boys in disgust. "He's beginning to weaken."

While the din and excitement continued the Academy captain went up to talk to the pitcher.

"Don't you think we had better make a change, Tommy?" he questioned anxiously.

"No, I don't!" roared Flanders angrily. "That home run was a fluke, that's all. I'll hold 'em down, you wait and see."

There were wild cries to change the pitcher on the part of the Longley students, while the military academy cadets yelled themselves hoarse telling their nine to "bat Flanders out of the box."

Walt Baxter was now up, and managed to get to second. Then came Jack with a single that took him safely to first and advanced Walt to third.

"Say, Tommy, you'd better give it up," whispered the Longley captain, as he came to the box.

"I'll hold 'em! Just give me one chance more," answered Flanders desperately.

And then came the real break. The next player up got what would have been a two-base hit, but the ball was fumbled, and as a consequence the man got home, chasing the other two runners in ahead of him.

"Hurrah! What do you know about that! Seven runs!"

"That's the way to do it! Hurrah for Colby Hall!"

"You've got 'em a-going, boys, give it to 'em good and plenty!"

The excitement was now greater than ever, and all, including the girls from Clearwater Hall, were shouting themselves hoarse, tooting tin horns, shaking rattles, and throwing caps and other things into the air.

"Take him out! Take Flanders out!"

"Out with Flanders! Out with him!"

"He should have been taken out before!"

"All right—finish the game without me!" roared Tommy Flanders in disgust, and, throwing down the ball, he strode from the field and into one of the dressing-rooms.

"Gee, but he's sore!" was Randy's comment.

"That ought to take some of the conceit out of him," added Andy.

The new pitcher was a left-hander who had rather a puzzling delivery, and he managed to retire the side without any more runs, so that at the end of the eighth inning the score stood 7 to 2 in favor of Colby Hall.

"Now then, pull yourselves together," ordered the Longley captain, when his side came up to the bat for the last time.

All of those who came to the plate did their best, but Jack was on his mettle, and though his swollen hand hurt him not a little, he played with all the coolness, strength and ingenuity which he possessed. As a consequence, although he allowed two single hits, none of the Longley boys got further than third.

"Hurrah! Colby Hall wins!"

And then what a celebration ensued among the cadets who had won the game and their many supporters!

CHAPTER XI

BONFIRE NIGHT

Such a glorious baseball victory as this could not be passed off lightly by the cadets of Colby Hall. They arranged for a grand celebration that night, with bonfires along the river front and a generous collation served in the gymnasium. They were allowed to invite a few of their boy friends, and all made the most of it.

"It's a pity we can't have you girls," said Jack, when they were parting with Ruth and the others.

"Never mind, Jack; I'm happy to think that you won the game," answered the girl.

"Yes, and we're extra happy to think that you got the best of that awfully conceited Tommy Flanders," added May.

Late in the evening the boys cut loose to their hearts' content, neither Colonel Colby nor Captain Dale having a mind to stop them.

There were only two boys in the school who did not appreciate the celebration. One was Stowell, who was caught by some of his tormentors and dusted from head to foot with flour, and Leeds, who had been so pessimistic regarding the school winning. Leeds had said altogether too much, and as a consequence a big fool's cap was placed on his head and he was marched around the campus riding on a rail and then dumped unceremoniously into the river.

"And don't you dare swim out until you promise after this to believe in Colby Hall and root for her first, last, and all the time!" shouted one of the cadets on the shore.

"All right, I'll promise! I'll promise anything!" spluttered Leeds. "Only let me get out of this." And then he climbed up the river bank and, dripping with water, made a wild rush for the back entrance to the school.

Of course there was a good deal more of horseplay, and it can be surmised that Andy and Randy went in for their full share of it. Even Job Plunger was caught by the crowd and hoisted on the top of a barrel which was waiting to be placed on one of the bonfires.

"Speech, Shout! Speech!" cried Andy gaily.

"Tell us what you know about ball playing in the olden times," suggested Ned Lowe.

"You let me down off of this barrel!" cried Plunger, in alarm. "You let me down before this barrel caves in!" and poor Shout, as he was so often called, looked anything but comfortable as he balanced himself on the top of the barrel.

"We've got to have a speech, Shout. Come on, you know you are a first-class talker when you get at it."

"What is it you boys want?" demanded the janitor, with his hand over his ear.

"Give us a speech, a *speech!*"

"Teach! I never did teach! What are you talking about?"

"We didn't say *teach!*" screamed Andy. "We said speech—talk—words—sentences—*speech!*"

"Oh, you want me to make a speech," and Plunger looked rather vacantly at the crowd. "I can't do it. I ain't got nothing to say. I want you to let me go. I've got a lot of work to do, with cleaning up that mess in the gym, not to say anything about the mess you fellers made down to the barn getting that stuff out for them fires."

"If he won't give us a speech, let us give him a ride," cried Dan Soppinger.

"What shall we ride him in?" questioned Walt Baxter.

"I've got it!" burst out Andy quickly. "Just keep him here a few minutes longer, fellows. Come on, Randy, quick!"

Sure that something was in the wind, Randy followed his brother out of the crowd and both made their way toward the back end of the gymnasium. Here there was a room in which Si Crews, the gymnastic instructor, kept a number of his personal belongings. Si had been the instructor since Colby Hall had been opened, and his wife was the matron for the smaller boys.

"Mrs. Crews has a baby carriage belonging to her sister stored away in that room," explained Andy, as he and his brother hurried on. "I saw them put it there only a few days ago. It's a rather old affair, but I think it is strong enough to give Shout a ride in."

The lads found the door to the storeroom unlocked, and by lighting a match saw the baby carriage standing there just as left by Mrs. Crews. It contained a pillow, and also a baby shawl and a cap.

"Hurrah! now we'll be able to dress Shout up for the ride," said Randy gaily.

It took but a few minutes to haul the baby carriage out and start it on its way down to where the crowd surrounded the school janitor. A shout of satisfaction went up when the other cadets saw the little vehicle, and another shout arose when Andy picked up the shawl and Randy followed with the baby cap.

"Here you are, Shout!" came from Walt Baxter. "Now we'll be able to dress you up fine for your ride," and before the astonished and bewildered janitor could resist, he was hoisted from the barrel and placed in the baby carriage, where the lads proceeded not only to strap him in but also to tie him down with a bit of clothesline which was handy. Then they tied the baby cap on his head and pinned the shawl around his shoulders.

"Music! Music for the procession!" called out Fatty Hendry. "Somebody got a drum and fife!" and immediately several of the cadets ran off to do as bidden.

In a few minutes more the procession started, headed by two boys carrying torches and followed by a youth with a bass drum and another with a fife. Back of them came the baby carriage drawn by a full dozen of cadets and steered in the rear by Andy and Randy. On each side of the carriage marched a cadet with a torch, so that the curious turnout might be properly illuminated. In the rear was a motley collection, laughing and joking and cutting up generally.

"Hi, you! You let me go! I don't want no ride!" cried Plunger wildly. "This ain't no way to treat me at all!"

"Oh, you need the air, Shout," answered Randy. "Besides, see the shoeleather you are going to save by getting a ride instead of walking."

The poor janitor struggled to free himself, but all in vain, and to the noise of the drum and the fife and with many shouts of laughter the whole outfit moved around the school twice and then around the gymnasium.

"And now for a final celebration!" exclaimed Randy, when the crowd came to a halt near the river front. "Everybody attention! One—two—three! Listen to the stillness!"

Wondering what was going to happen next, all came to a standstill and listened.

Bang!

A large firecracker set off directly under the baby carriage flew in all directions. As it went off poor Plunger gave a shriek of terror and then tried so hard to free himself that the carriage was overturned and he found himself snarled up in a bunch on the grass. Then the boys, not wishing to see the man hurt, rushed forward and released him, and he lost no time in disappearing inside the gymnasium.

"Hurrah! that was a grand finale," cried Fred. "Where did you get the firecracker, Andy?"

"It was out of a bunch I bought for the Fourth of July," was the reply.

After this celebration matters moved along swiftly toward the close of the term. During that time the Rover boys heard from their mothers in New York that their fathers were expected home in about ten days. They immediately called up the girls at Clearwater Hall, and learned that Mary and Martha had received the same news.

"And won't I be glad to go home and see dad!" said Martha to her brother.

"No more glad than I'll be," he returned quickly.

It was now early Summer, and many of the cadets were in the habit of spending a part of their off time either bathing or rowing. Before going to war Colonel Colby had promised to get two motor-boats for the use of the cadets, but as yet these had not been purchased. But rowboats were numerous.

"I'll have the motor-boats here by Fall, however," said Colonel Colby, in speaking of this. "And then you can have a lot of fun with them."

There was one more Saturday to be spent at school before breaking up for the term, and the Rovers and their chums had decided to spend that afternoon with the girls in an outing on the lake.

"Mary and some of the others want to go over to Bluebell Island," said Fred. "They say there are some very fine ferns to be had there, and they thought maybe they would have a chance to take some of the ferns home."

"All right, we'll take them wherever they want to go," answered Jack; and so it was arranged.

Bluebell Island was located a distance down the lake, not far from Foxtail Island, where the young folks had previously had an outing, as related in the volume entitled, "The Rover Boys at Colby Hall."

At that time a squall on the lake and an encounter with a log raft had placed all of the young people in great peril, from which Slugger Brown and Nappy Martell had refused to rescue them.

It had been decided that the boys should row from Colby Hall down the lake to the dock at Clearwater Hall and there take the girls on board. They had three boats, one containing Jack and Fred, another the twins, and a third Gif and Spouter.

"It's certainly one grand day for this outing," remarked Fred, as they set off. All were good oarsmen, so the rowboats made rapid progress in the direction of the girls' school.

"I had the day made to order," sang out Andy. And then he added, with a grin: "It never rains when I go out unless the water happens to be coming down."

The cadets had informed Martha and the others when they would arrive, and when they reached the dock they found six girls waiting for them, each with a carefully-tied-up shoebox under her arm.

"Yum, yum! I smell something good to eat!" exclaimed Andy, on catching sight of the boxes.

"Got any mustard pie?" added Randy. "Excuse me, I mean custard pie."

"No, we've got straw pie for you, Mr. Smarty," called out Alice Strobell.

Jack noticed that Martha and Mary looked rather thoughtful when they got into the rowboat manned by Spouter and Gif.

"Anything wrong?" he asked anxiously.

"Not much, Jack," answered his sister. "I'll tell you just as soon as we get to the island and we have a chance."

"Didn't you boys bring anything?" questioned Mary of the other Rovers.

"Sure we did! But that's a surprise," answered Fred. They had brought fruit and candy.

"We brought two yeast cakes and a fried-onion sandwich," broke in Andy gaily, and at this all the girls giggled.

Ruth and May were made comfortable in the boat rowed by Jack and Fred, and they at once set off in the direction of Bluebell Island. The others shortly followed, and all made good time across the placid bosom of Clearwater Lake.

"I hope we don't encounter such a squall as we did before," remarked Ruth presently.

"Oh, I'm sure it will stay clear," Jack hastened to reassure her.

In less than half an hour the young folks found themselves safe on the island, which was about thirty acres in extent, with a grassy slope on one side and rocks, trees and brushwood on the other. They tied their boats securely, and then proceeded to walk across the island to where they might take it easy under the trees or hunt for the ferns the girls desired to get.

"Now then, what is it that is troubling you?" asked Jack of his sister as soon as he could speak to Martha without the others noticing.

"Oh, Jack, I don't know whether it ought to trouble me or not," answered Martha. "It was such a surprise. I didn't dream that those two fellows would show themselves around Clearwater Hall."

"Who are you talking about, Martha?"

"Bill Glutts and Gabe Werner."

"When did you see them?"

"I saw them yesterday, and Mary saw them early this morning."

CHAPTER XII

ON BLUEBELL ISLAND

Jack Rover was much surprised over the statement made by his sister Martha. Bill Glutts had not returned to Colby Hall after his unfortunate experiences in the woods the Winter previous, nor had Gabe Werner shown himself in the vicinity of the military academy.

"Have you any idea what they were doing around Clearwater Hall?" he questioned.

"I have not, Jack. But I feel sure they were not up to anything good."

"Did they say anything to either of you?"

"Oh, no. As soon as I saw them they sprang out of sight behind some trees, and this morning, when they caught sight of Mary, they hurried off in the direction of Haven Point."

"I think I had better tell the others about this, then we can all be on our guard. Those fellows do not belong anywhere near Haven Point, and in my opinion they cannot be here for any good purpose." Jack was thinking of the anonymous letter which had been received and which he now felt certain had been penned by Werner.

"If you tell the others now it will spoil the whole outing," pouted Martha. "Why don't you wait until to-night?"

"All right, I'll do that. And when you girls are by yourselves you and Mary must tell the others."

And so it was agreed.

Those ahead had already reached the vicinity of the rocks and trees, and now began a diligent hunt by all for the rare ferns said to be growing there.

"Our idea was to empty the lunch from the shoeboxes and then fill the boxes with ferns," said Ruth.

The girls had brought a tablecloth with them to spread on the ground, and the entire lunch was placed in this and then wrapped in a newspaper and placed on a flat rock.

"I wonder if the squirrels will bother the lunch?" questioned Fred. They had noted several of the frisky little animals flitting from tree to tree as they walked along.

"The squirrels want nuts. I don't think they care for mustard sandwiches and onion cake," cried Andy. "Gee! but it feels good to be out here," he went on, and, leaping up, he grasped the limb of a low-growing tree and went through the performance generally known as "skinning the cat."

"Oh, Andy, do be careful!" called out his cousin Mary. "First thing you know you'll twist your arms off."

"Oh, I do this every morning before I wake up," answered the fun-loving Rover cheerfully.

"I'll get him down!" cried Randy, and, taking up a handful of dead leaves, he threw them at his twin. Andy promptly gave a swing, let go of the tree, and landed on his brother's shoulders, and both went down to the ground, there to roll over and over, kicking the dead leaves in all directions.

"Hi, you!" cried Jack sternly. "What sort of a ladies' exhibition is this! Get up there before I yank you up!"

"You'll have those beautiful suits ruined," came from Annie Larkins.

The search for the rare ferns then began in earnest, and this led them through the woods and around a great number of sharp rocks and a considerable distance away from where the things to eat had been left.

"Here is one," called Ruth presently, and pointed it out.

The girls had brought trowels with them, and now Jack lost no time in digging up the fern and placing it in the corner of one of the boxes. Several other plants were located nearby, and all the boys and girls were soon busy. Some of the ferns were quite small, but others were of good size, and all showed up well when grouped together.

"We have a little fernery at home," explained Ruth. "Last winter the plants did not do so well, and these will therefore come in very nicely. I'm sure my folks will be pleased to see them."

"I suppose Uncle Barney is now living with you, Ruth," said Jack.

"Oh, yes. And he is very thankful for all you Rovers did for him that Winter," answered the girl, referring to the happenings which have been related in detail in "The Rover Boys on Snowshoe Island."

"Here is a different kind of fern," announced Martha, a minute later.

"Let me get it for you!" cried Gif, pressing forward to assist her.

"It's right down there between those big rocks, Gif. Be careful that you don't push one of the stones over on your fingers."

"Don't ruin the whole island getting up one fern, Gif!" exclaimed Andy, as the athletic student pushed away a couple of rocks which prevented his getting at the fern.

There was another rock in the way—one that rested partly over the roots of the fern, which looked like an unusually healthy plant. Gif tugged at this rock and Fred bent forward to assist him. Then, all of a sudden, the rock came out from the split in which it lay, and both cadets slipped and fell on their backs.

"Oh, do be careful! You'll have one of those rocks on your toes, sure!" cried Ruth.

She had scarcely spoken when there came a scream from May Powell and Alice Strobell.

"A snake! A snake!"

"He's coming for us!"

"Run! Run, everybody, before the snake bites you!"

Such were some of the cries that rent the air as all of the young people fell back.

A black snake at least three feet long had suddenly appeared from a hollow under the last rock to be dislodged, and this was quickly followed by a second snake equally large.

"Hit 'em, boys! Hit 'em!" exclaimed Jack, as soon as he had recovered from his surprise, and as he spoke he caught up a stone and flung it at the nearest snake.

The action of the oldest Rover boy was quickly seconded by the other cadets, and a dozen or more stones were hurled at the two snakes. One of the reptiles was quickly killed, but the second received only a bruise on its tail, and it switched around angrily and then made a dash toward the fleeing and screaming girls.

"Gee! if we only had a pistol or a gun!" exclaimed Randy.

The snake still left alive was but a few feet from Martha and Ruth when Jack and Spouter hurled two more stones. Each of these reached its mark, and with its back crushed the reptile whipped around on the rocks for a moment more and then lay still.

"Oh, dear! is it dead?" questioned Martha, and her voice trembled a little as she spoke.

"Dead as a doormat," announced her brother, after a hasty examination. Then he took a stick and, placing it under the reptile, threw the remains from the rocks into the lake. Fred and Andy speedily disposed of the other reptile in the same way.

"Maybe there are more snakes around here!" cried Alice Strobell nervously.

"If there are, I'm sure I don't want to stay here any longer," added Annie Larkins.

"Who would dream of digging up snakes on this island?" murmured Martha. "Oh, it takes away all the fun of gathering ferns."

"Nevertheless, I am going to get that fern for you," announced Gif.

"But, Gif, there may be more snakes around that hole."

"Well, I'll take a chance. I don't think they are very dangerous, anyhow," answered the athletic cadet.

"Be on your guard, Gif," warned Jack, and then armed himself with several stones, and the other cadets did the same.

Gif approached the spot with caution and began to dig up the fern Martha had wanted. The other boys came quite close, but the girls kept their distance. No other snakes appeared, and soon Gif had the fern, which he took pleasure in presenting to Jack's sister.

"Thank you, Gif," she said politely. "It certainly is a beautiful fern, and I'll do my best to preserve it. But I think every time I look at it I'll remember those snakes."

"Oh, you mustn't mind anything like that, Martha. Why, we've met dozens of little snakes on our tours. I don't believe they'd hurt you."

"Maybe not, Gif; but they're such awful crawly things!"

"I'm afraid I'd die if a snake touched me," added Alice Strobell, with a shudder.

For a while the snake episode put a damper on the outing. But the boys did their best to make the girls forget it, and after a while all were hunting as diligently as before for ferns. They found a varied collection, and took delight in filling the shoeboxes with the plants, filling in the tops of the boxes with moss.

"Oh, my! Half-past three already!" declared Ruth presently, as she consulted her pretty little wrist-watch.

"As late as that?" returned Martha.

"Perhaps we had better go back and have our lunch," suggested Mary.

All were willing, for climbing around the rocks had made the young folks hungry. Mary and Spouter led the way back, with the others straggling behind.

"What are you going to do this summer, Jack?" questioned Ruth on the way.

"We haven't made any plans yet, Ruth. I want to see my father first of all."

"I don't blame you for that. You must be glad to think he is coming back safe and sound. And just to think that he won a medal! Isn't it perfectly wonderful!" and her eyes beamed with pleasure.

"It sure is! Oh, my dad's a wonderful man—the best in the world!" answered the young captain enthusiastically. And then he added: "Have your folks decided to go down on the Jersey shore?"

"It's about settled. I'll know for sure when I get home next week."

"You mustn't forget to write, Ruth."

"And how about yourself?"

"Oh, you'll hear from me, don't worry about that," answered Jack quickly.

"If you go up to Valley Brook Farm this summer——" began Ruth, when a sudden cry ahead made her pause. "What was that, Jack?" she asked quickly.

"I don't know, but I guess something has gone wrong."

"Maybe the squirrels or a fox or some other wild animal got at the lunch."

"Phew! that would be too bad! Come on and see what is wrong."

The pair had fallen behind the others, and now they ran forward through the woods and around the rocks as rapidly as they could. As they did this there came a call from Andy:

"Hi, there, Jack! Where are you? Look out for Gabe Werner and Bill Glutts! Don't let them get away!"

"Werner and Glutts!" repeated the young captain. "What brought them to this island?"

"Catch them! Catch them!" came in a scream from Martha. "They are making off with all our lunch!"

"Drop that stuff, Werner!" Jack heard Randy call out.

"Come on after them, everybody!" yelled Gif. "They sha'n't get away with those good things—not if I know it!"

There was a rush through the trees, and the calls and cries increased. The girls did not take part in the chase, feeling that the two former bullies of Colby Hall might do them harm.

"Oh, dear, Jack! do you really think that they made off with all that lunch?" sighed Ruth.

"Sounds like it," he answered. "I wonder where they are?" He ran around some high rocks which cut off a view of what was beyond, and then leaped over some low bushes. Not to be left alone in the woods, Ruth followed close at his heels.

The next instant Jack saw Bill Glutts running in one direction and Gabe Werner legging it in another. Bill Glutts carried the tablecloth with a good portion of the things to eat still in it, while Gabe Werner held the newspaper with the remaining things.

"Stop!" ordered Jack, and then, as he saw Gif and Randy chase Glutts, he made a wild dash after Gabe Werner.

CHAPTER XIII

WERNER'S ATTACK

"Hold on, Bill Glutts!" cried Randy, as he ran after the youth whom he had not seen since the Winter before.

"You leave me alone!" returned Glutts, and then, in order to run faster, he dropped the bundle he was carrying.

"Don't let him get away!" burst out Fred, and made a wild dash over some low bushes in Glutts's direction. In a moment more he had caught Glutts by the arm.

"Let go of me!" screamed the former cadet, and in alarm he tried to push Fred away. But the youngest Rover boy clung fast, and then Glutts aimed a blow with his fist at Fred's face.

Had the blow landed as intended, it would have hurt severely; but the youngest Rover ducked, and then hit Glutts a stinging blow on the chin.

By this time Randy and Gif were coming up, and almost before he knew it Bill Glutts was surrounded. Gif caught the former bully of the Hall by the shoulder.

"This is a nice way to act, Glutts," he said sternly. "What business had you to touch our lunch?"

"How did I know it belonged to you?" whined Glutts, much crestfallen over the sudden turn affairs had taken. "We found the stuff on the rocks."

"You can't play the innocent that way," broke in Randy. "You and Gabe Werner must have followed us to this island. Gee!" he added quickly, "where is Werner?"

"Jack went after him," answered Fred; "and so did Andy and Spouter."

"We didn't follow you at all," answered Bill Glutts. "We have as much right on this island as anybody. We ran across that lunch by accident. We didn't know that anybody was coming back to get it," he added lamely.

In the meanwhile Jack was hurrying after Gabe Werner, and, strange as it may seem, Ruth followed close behind him, at the same time calling to the others for help. She remembered the anonymous note which had been delivered, and she was afraid that Gabe Werner might try to do the young captain serious injury.

Gabe Werner was legging it among the trees. He was trying to reach the shore of Bluebell Island, but became confused among the rocks and bushes and presently had to swing around in something of a semicircle, and this soon brought him face to face with Ruth.

"Oh!" cried the girl, in increased alarm. "Don't you dare touch me, Gabe Werner! Don't you dare!"

"Get out of my way!" roared the bully, and then, as he heard Jack crashing through the brushwood directly behind him, he brushed Ruth rudely to one side.

"Jack! Jack! Here he is!" the girl screamed.

The young captain did not need to be told this, for he saw Gabe Werner just ahead of him. He made a flying leap forward, and was barely able to catch Werner by the tail of his coat.

"You can't get away! You might as well give it up," he said, and as the bully kicked out savagely, he caught Werner by the foot and sent him headlong.

"Oh, Jack! Jack! Do be careful!" cried Ruth in increasing alarm, and then she set up a call for assistance.

"I'm not afraid of Gabe Werner, and he knows it," answered the young captain.

"I'll fix you for this!" roared Werner. "I owe you a lot for the way you've been treating me." And with these words he scrambled to his feet and aimed a blow at Jack's face.

The young captain moved to one side so that the blow struck him on the shoulder. He came back quickly with one on Werner's right ear, and followed this up with another on the bully's nose, which made that organ bleed profusely.

By this time there was more noise in the under-brush, and Andy and Spouter could be heard calling.

"This way! This way!" answered Ruth.

While she was calling, and while Andy and Spouter were doing their best to brush aside some thorny bushes which held them back, the struggle between Jack and Werner continued. The bully landed on Jack's shoulder again and then on his chest, and in return received a crack on the chin which all but keeled him over.

"I said I'd get you, Jack Rover, and I will!" spluttered Werner, after this last attack. And then, as Jack made a move as if to strike him again, the bully stepped around to one side, bringing himself once more close to Ruth. His right hand had gone down into his coat pocket, and now he brought out something in a small paper bag.

"I said I'd fix you, and this is how I'm going to do it! Look there, if you dare!" called out Werner, and pointed to a tree limb just over their heads.

Fearing some trick, Jack gave only the faintest of glances upward, but Ruth, more innocent, gazed wide-eyed at the limb pointed out. As he spoke, Werner broke open the paper bag and hurled its contents forward.

"There! Take that, Jack Rover!" he shouted triumphantly. "Take that, and see how you like it!"

It was a package of pepper which Gabe Werner had carried. As it was thrown forward a small portion of it went in Jack's face, but the most of it was sent in a spray over the young captain's shoulder and hit poor Ruth.

"Oh! Oh!" screamed the girl. "Oh, I am blinded! He threw pepper in my eyes!"

"You hound, you!" exclaimed Jack, and even though his eyes smarted not a little from the few grains of pepper that had entered, he managed to leap upon the bully and give him a swinging crack in the jaw. But then Werner threw the young captain backward over a rock, and just as Andy and Spouter put in an appearance he dodged in among some heavy brushwood and quickly disappeared.

"What did he do?" demanded Spouter.

"He threw something in our eyes. Ruth got the worst of it," answered Jack. "Go on after him; we'll have to attend to our eyes."

Jack's eyes were bad enough, but Ruth's were much worse. The girl could hardly keep from screaming with pain, and Jack was just then in no condition to assist her. Seeing this, Andy and Spouter set up a yell for some of the others to go after Werner, and then did what they could to relieve the sufferers.

"Come on down to the lake," advised Spouter. "I guess water will be about the best thing you can use. Anyhow, you can wash out the pepper if there is any left."

Both cadets assisted Ruth to the water's edge, and Jack stumbled after them. Here the eyes, which had already begun to inflame, were washed out carefully, and then, as Ruth continued to complain of the pain, they bound up her eyes with their handkerchiefs.

"I think mine will be all right after a while," said Jack. "They smart a little, but that's all."

"Don't you think Ruth had better see a doctor?" suggested Spouter.

"By all means. We'll get back to town just as soon as we possibly can. He can probably give her some sort of ointment that will relieve the pain and take away the inflammation."

By this time the others were coming up. The news that Ruth had received a dose of pepper in her eyes excited everybody.

"Gabe Werner ought to be put in jail for this," said Martha.

"Isn't it the most dreadful thing you ever heard of!" came from May.

The excitement was so intense that for the time being the boys forgot all about Bill Glutts. As a consequence when they turned to where they had left that unworthy, Glutts had disappeared.

"Well, he got a good beating, anyhow," said Randy. "I think that will teach him to leave our stuff alone after this."

At first some of the boys were inclined to make another hunt for Werner and Glutts. They knew the bullies must have come to the island in some kind of a boat.

"If we can find their boat we can take it with us," said Spouter. "Then they can either stay on the island or try to swim ashore."

"We can't waste any more time," declared Jack. "We must get Ruth to a doctor. And I'd like to see a doctor myself. My eyes feel terribly scratchy."

"Yes, yes! I want to see a doctor at once," said Ruth. "My eyes hurt dreadfully."

Some of the boys gathered up what was left of the lunch, and all made their way to the water's edge, where the rowboats had been left. As they did this they heard the sudden put-put of a motor-boat, and a few seconds later they saw the craft shoot out of a tiny cove at the upper end of the island and head for the eastern shore of Clearwater Lake.

"There they go! There are Glutts and Werner!" exclaimed Gif.

"And in a motor-boat, too!" added Randy. "Too bad! If they were in a rowboat we might be able to catch them."

"Oh, let them go," said Mary hastily. "I am more worried about Ruth's eyes than anything else."

"We're all worried about that," answered her brother. "Come on, we'll get over to Haven Point just as fast as we can. I only hope we find one of the doctors at home."

They tumbled into the boats, the girls leading Ruth, who still had her eyes bandaged.

"Do you think you can row, Jack?" questioned Fred.

"Of course I can," replied the young captain. He was not going to admit that the injury to his eyes was making him feel sick all over.

May sat beside Ruth and did what she could for the sufferer. All of the boys bent to their oars and a straight course was taken for the town.

"Wouldn't it be dreadful if Ruth was blinded for life?" remarked Alice Strobell on the way.

"Oh, Alice! don't suggest such a thing as that," came from Annie Larkins in horror.

"Well, people have been blinded in that way more than once," remarked Randy. "It all depends on how bad a dose she got."

"Jack said the pepper must have been intended for him," came from Andy. "I can't imagine that Werner would be wicked enough to try to injure Ruth that way."

"Maybe he didn't intend to do it when he started," returned his brother. "But when Werner gets mad he's liable to do almost anything. You know that as well as I do."

"That's true. When he gets into a rage he goes almost insane."

"What an ending to our outing!" sighed Alice.

"And we didn't eat a mouthful of the lunch!" added Annie. She had spent over an hour in fixing some fancy sandwiches.

"Was that pepper from some you brought along?" questioned Randy quickly.

"As far as I know we didn't bring any pepper along. We had a saltcellar, and that's all," answered Alice.

"Then it must have been a deliberate attempt on Werner's part to blind Jack!" cried Andy. "Oh, what a pity we didn't catch him! Then we could have handed him over to the authorities."

When the boys and girls reached one of the docks at Haven Point Andy and Randy ran on ahead and speedily procured a taxicab. Into this Ruth and Jack were hustled, and then Randy, sitting beside the driver, directed him to take the sufferers to the nearest doctor.

At the first physician's house they learned that the doctor was away for the afternoon. Then they hurried to another part of the town, and there found Doctor Borden, an older man who had occasionally come to both the girls' school and the military academy.

"Pepper in your eyes! Is it possible!" said the old physician. "Come into my office at once."

Sometimes that sort of thing is very serious."

"You wait on the lady first, Doctor," said Jack. "She is by far the worse off."

"Very well," said the doctor. "Come this way," and he led Ruth into his private office.

CHAPTER XIV

BOUND FOR HOME

While the doctor was attending Ruth the others of the party arrived at the physician's residence. They found Jack walking up and down in the anteroom while Randy sat in a chair doing what he could to comfort his cousin.

"What does the doctor say about Ruth?" questioned May quickly.

"He hasn't come out yet. They are in there," and Randy pointed with his hand to the inner office.

"Oh, Jack, how do your eyes feel?" questioned Martha, coming up and gazing earnestly at her brother.

"To tell the truth, they don't feel very good, Martha," he answered. "But I won't mind that so much if only Ruth gets out of it."

The boys and girls sat down, some in the outer office and some on the piazza of the doctor's residence. They had to wait nearly a quarter of an hour before the door of the inner office opened.

"I think the young lady will feel much better by to-morrow," said Doctor Borden, as he led Ruth forth. He had placed a new and heavier bandage over her eyes. "I'll call at the school to see her the first thing to-morrow morning. You need do nothing to the eyes until that time." He looked at the other girls. "I presume you young ladies are with Miss Stevenson?"

"We are," several of them answered.

"Then there ought not to be any trouble about getting her back to the school in safety," and the physician smiled faintly.

"I'll get a taxicab," said Randy, and lost no time in doing so.

"I don't want to go back to the school until Jack has been taken care of," declared Ruth. "I want to know just how bad off he is. The doctor tells me he doesn't think my eyes will be permanently injured." She was trying to bear up bravely, even though her eyes hurt her a good deal. But what the doctor had put on them was gradually allaying the pain.

Jack entered the inner office, and the doctor made a thorough examination of each eye.

"You were lucky to get off so well, Rover," he announced at the conclusion of the examination. "I'll give you a lotion to put on to-night before retiring, and I'll give you a treatment of it now. Then bathe the eyes again in the morning, and I think in a day or two you will be as well as ever."

"And what about Miss Stevenson's eyes?" questioned the young captain anxiously.

"I can't say very much about them as yet. Of course, I didn't want to worry her, so I did not tell her how bad it might be. Still, I'll know more about it to-morrow morning."

This was as much as Doctor Borden would say. Jack received the treatment and was given a small bottle filled with the lotion, and then, after settling with the physician, he was ready to leave.

"Do you want any of us to go to the school with you?" he asked of Ruth and the other girls.

"No, Jack; it won't do any good," answered the blindfolded girl. And as he took her hand and pressed it warmly, she added: "Please don't worry about me."

"But I'm going to, Ruth," he answered in a low tone. "Somehow, I feel that your injury is my fault."

"Nonsense! It was Gabe Werner's fault entirely! That boy ought really to be in jail! But, Jack, you are quite sure that your eyes are all right?" she went on anxiously.

"Yes, Ruth. The doctor says that I'll be as well as ever in a day or two. You are the only one to be worried over. I'll tell Martha to telephone to me to-morrow just as soon as the doctor has seen you." And so it was arranged.

Randy had obtained a large taxicab and into this all the girls crowded, taking care, however, to make Ruth as comfortable as possible on the rear seat. Then the girls of Clearwater Hall started for the school.

"I'll bet Miss Garwood will be surprised when she sees Ruth," was Andy's comment, as he watched the girls riding away. Miss Garwood was the head of the girls' school.

"Poor Ruth," murmured Fred. "What a miserable outing this has been!"

Fortunately for the cadets, they found the Colby Hall stage in town, and all piled in and were speedily taken to the school. Here Jack and Randy went up to their rooms, while the others reported to Colonel Colby.

"Threw pepper into Jack's eyes, did he!" said the colonel wrathfully. "What a dastardly thing to do! I am glad that Werner is no longer a pupil at the school. If he were I should feel it my duty to hand him over to the authorities. You say he did not come back to Haven Point?"

"No, sir," answered Gif. "They motored over to the other side—over to where the Hasley ammunition factory used to be located."

"I see. Then probably both he and Glutts will take good care not to show themselves in the vicinity of Haven Point," said Colonel Colby.

And in this surmise the head of the school was correct. Long afterwards it was learned that Werner had put the motor-boat into the hands of a man to bring it back to the party of whom it had been hired, and then he and Glutts had tramped three miles across the country to a railroad station where they took a train for parts unknown.

The colonel came up to see Jack and have a look at his injured eyes, and then sent Mrs. Crews up to the young captain to bathe his eyes with the lotion the doctor had given him and bind them up.

"It's too bad! too bad entirely!" said Mrs. Crews, who was quite a motherly woman. "I hope your eyes are as well as ever in a day or two." And then she added with a twinkle in her own optics: "I suppose that is what you get for running off with that baby carriage."

"If it is, it's a terrible price to pay, Mrs. Crews," answered Jack, and then told her about Ruth.

"Now that's too bad entirely," said the matron of the school. "Oh, who would want to harm a dear young lady like Miss Stevenson? It's awful how wicked some young men are," and she shook her head dolefully.

Jack took it easy for the rest of the day, and one after another his chums came in to sympathize with him.

"I can't understand a fellow like Werner," remarked Ned Lowe. "If he isn't careful he'll land in prison."

"What gets me is that a fellow like Glutts keeps on tagging after him," put in Dan Soppinger. "Sooner or later Werner is bound to lead Glutts into something pretty bad."

Jack passed a restless night, not only because his eyes hurt him, but because he could not get Ruth out of his mind. What if the girl's eyes should be permanently injured? The mere thought of such a catastrophe horrified him.

In the morning he bathed his eyes again, as Doctor Borden had directed. He had been excused from his classroom, and so sat around where he could readily be called to the telephone if any message came in for him. It was not until about eleven o'clock that his sister rang him up.

"The doctor left a few minutes ago," said Martha over the wire. "He was with Ruth about half an hour, and gave her quite a treatment. He was very much encouraged, and said he thought she would come around again all right in a few days, but that she must be careful for several weeks about how she strained her eyes or went out in the wind."

"But he really thinks she will come around all right?" questioned Jack anxiously.

"Yes, Jack, he was almost sure of it. And, oh! I am so glad, and so are all the other girls."

"Well, it's a great relief to me, Martha," he returned, and his voice showed what a weight had been lifted from his mind.

After that the days to the end of the term passed quickly. There were the usual examinations, and all of the Rovers were glad to learn that they had passed successfully. In the meanwhile Jack's eyes continued to mend, so that on the final day at the Hall they felt practically as good as ever.

The young captain and Fred had gone over to Clearwater Hall, ostensibly to call on their sisters, but in reality to find out about Ruth. She came down to greet them, and they were surprised and delighted to find that she no longer wore the bandage over her eyes.

"I can't go out in the strong sunlight yet, nor in the wind," said the girl. "Nor can I do much reading or studying. But the eyes no longer pain me, and for that I am very thankful."

"Doctor Borden says it will take a week or two before her eyes are normal again," explained Martha. "But that isn't so bad when you consider what might have occurred," and she gave a little shiver.

Colby Hall was to close several days before the girls' school, but the two Rover girls had received permission to go home with their brothers. This was the last chance Jack had of seeing Ruth, and the last chance that Fred would have to see May, and both made the most of it.

"I'll write to you, sure, Ruth," said the young captain. "And I hope your eyes will allow you to

reply."

"Oh, I'll send you something, Jack, even if it's only a postal," was the quick answer. "Please don't worry about me. I am sure my eyes will come around all right sooner or later."

"If they don't I'll never forgive myself for taking you on that outing," said the young captain feelingly.

With the examinations at an end, the Colby Hall cadets were allowed to do very much as they pleased, and on the last night at school there was the usual horseplay and cutting up generally. Some boys tried to catch Stowell, but the sneak of the school outwitted them by receiving permission to leave the Hall twelve hours early.

"Well, good riddance to bad rubbish!" announced Fatty Hendry, when he heard of this. "I think Colby Hall could get along very well if Stowell stayed away for good."

"I'm sure I wouldn't worry if he did stay away," returned Walt Baxter.

"And now hurrah for little old New York!" cried Andy, on the following morning.

"Little old New York and our dads!" added his twin.

"I wonder if they have arrived yet?" put in Fred quickly. "I don't think so, or they would have sent us a telegram."

"Either that, or they want to surprise us when we get there," said Jack.

Their trunks had been sent on ahead, and directly after breakfast they set to work to finish packing their suitcases. Then they went around saying good-bye to the professors and Colonel Colby, and did not forget "Shout" Plunger and Bob Nixon, giving the latter some tips to remember them by.

"Off at last!" cried Fred, as the auto-stage rumbled up to take the first crowd of boys to the railroad station. In they piled, and were soon whirled away in the direction of Haven Point.

At the railroad station they were met by Martha and Mary. The other girls could not come, as all had examinations that morning. Soon the train rolled in, and the Rovers and a number of the other cadets piled in, Jack and Fred being accompanied by their sisters.

"I'll be glad to get home again and see mother and Aunt Grace and Aunt Nellie," remarked Martha, as she settled herself in a seat beside her brother.

"And how about dad, Martha?" questioned Jack.

"You don't have to ask that question," she returned quickly. "You know I am just as crazy to see him as you are. And I'm crazy to see Uncle Tom and Uncle Sam, too."

"I'll bet they'll have some stories to tell about their doings in France."

"Yes, indeed, Jack. Oh, how they all must have suffered! And how thankful I am that they are coming back to us whole and hearty. Just think if they had come back minus an arm or a leg, or frightfully injured in some other way!"

"I have thought of that, Martha, more than once. I can tell you, when I think of the thousands of good, strong, healthy young fellows who went over there and gave up their lives or came back crippled, I feel that our folks have much to be thankful for."

CHAPTER XV

BACK FROM FRANCE

The journey to New York City was uneventful. They had to change cars at the Junction, and here a number of the other cadets left the Rovers. These included Gif and Spouter.

"Sorry you're not going down to the city with us," said Jack; "but I suppose you are as anxious to see your folks as we are to see ours."

"Right you are," answered Spouter. And Gif nodded his head to show that he agreed with his chum.

When the train rolled into the Grand Central Terminal at Forty-second Street the Rovers found two automobiles awaiting them, and in the turn-outs were the three mothers of the boys and girls.

"What's the news about dad, Ma?" burst out Jack, as he kissed his parent.

"Have the soldiers come back yet?" was Fred's question.

"They haven't got in yet, but we are expecting them almost any time now," answered Mrs. Dick Rover.

"We are just as anxious as you are to see them," came from Mrs. Tom Rover, as both of her sons gave her a warm hug. "There, there! don't smother me!" she added affectionately.

"Oh, it's so good to be home again!" exclaimed Mary. "Boarding school is all well enough, but I'd rather be with you folks any time." Mary had always been a good deal of a home girl.

The young folks piled into the cars, which were run by the Rovers' chauffeurs, and in a moment more they were picking their way through the crowded traffic in the direction of Fifth Avenue. They speeded up this noted thoroughfare and then across town to Riverside Drive.

"What is the matter with your eyes, Jack?" questioned his mother presently. "They look rather inflamed."

"Oh, I had a little run-in with one of our old enemies," returned the young captain. "I'll tell you about it later."

"It's poor Ruth Stevenson that got the worst of it," broke in Martha. "We may as well tell mother," she added. "She ought to know it."

"I wish you boys would stop making enemies," sighed Mrs. Rover. "Sooner or later they may cause you a lot of trouble."

"Well, I don't consider that it is our fault," returned Jack. "It is no more our fault than it was dad's fault to make an enemy of Dan Baxter and his father, Arnold Baxter."

"Well, if only your enemies reform, as Dan Baxter reformed, that will be something worth while," said his mother.

All of the mothers had made great preparations for the return of the young people. Their rooms had been placed in order, and there were a number of pretty and useful gifts for all of them. Then came a grand reunion in the Tom Rover home, where an elaborate dinner was served that evening.

"Gee! if only our dads were here to enjoy this with us," murmured Andy, as he gazed upon the many good things spread before him.

"I'll bet they won't find any fault with home cooking after they get back from the trenches in France," commented Randy, with a grin. "I'll bet they've had to put up with all kinds of cooking."

"Yes, and sometimes they had to put up with cooking that wasn't," added Andy.

"Cooking that wasn't?" repeated Mary, puzzled. "Oh! I know what you mean—when they couldn't get anything."

A number of their friends came in during the evening to see them, and the young folks had an enjoyable time dancing and in singing in a group around the piano, which the girls took turns in playing.

"We'll have to have another and a larger gathering when our fathers get home," declared Mary.

"Oh, won't we have the bully good time then!" cried her brother.

"Maybe they won't have some stories to tell!" piped in Andy.

"I want to hear all about how Uncle Dick won that medal," came from Randy.

It was not until after eleven o'clock that the little gathering broke up, and then Mrs. Dick Rover called her children to her.

"Now you must tell me about your eyes, Jack, and you, Martha, must tell me about Ruth Stevenson's," she said.

Thereupon the young captain and his sister related the particulars of what had occurred during the outing on Bluebell Island and what had been done by Doctor Borden to relieve the sufferers.

"It was a vile thing to do!" exclaimed Mrs. Rover, her eyes showing her displeasure. "Why, that Gabe Werner is nothing but a criminal! You can be thankful, Jack, that you escaped as you did. But are you sure poor Ruth's eyes are not permanently injured?"

"Her eyes looked a great deal better when we came away than they had," answered Martha. "Just the same, I'm greatly worried, and I know Jack is too."

"Ruth is to write to us and let us know how she is getting along," went on the oldest Rover boy.

"Ruth is such a splendid girl, and so fine looking, it would be a shame if her eyes were hurt," continued Mrs. Rover. And this remark about Ruth caused Jack to think more of his mother than ever.

Two days passed quickly, the boys and girls spending their time in getting settled and renewing old acquaintances. The girls went shopping with their mothers, while the lads visited the offices of The Rover Company in Wall Street to see with their own eyes how matters were going.

"Everything seems to be moving along swimmingly," remarked Jack, when he and his cousins came away.

"I'll bet it will seem strange to our dads to settle down to the grind once more after seeing so much fighting," remarked Fred.

"It will be hard for all of the soldiers and sailors to settle down, I'm thinking," added Randy. "A fellow can't knock around here, there, and everywhere for months and then come down to a regular routine all in a minute."

That night the young folks retired rather early. Andy and Randy were indulging in some horseplay in their bedroom when they heard the door-bell ring.

"I'll bet it's a telegram from dad!" burst out Andy.

"Maybe it's dad himself!" answered his twin. "Come on down and see."

As they hurried down the stairs they heard their mother's room door open and heard one of the servants going to the front door. The next instant there was a cry from below.

"Mr. Rover! Is it really you!"

"It's dad! It's dad!" yelled the twins simultaneously, and fairly leaped to the bottom of the stairs and ran to greet their father.

"Hello, boys! So you got home ahead of me, did you?" came from Tom Rover, as he hugged and kissed each in turn. "My, how big you are getting!"

"Tom! Tom!" cried his wife Nellie. And then she rushed down the stairs as he rushed up to meet her. He caught her up in his strong arms as he had been wont to do so many times in the past and fairly swung her above him. Then he kissed her on each cheek and on the mouth and set her down with his hands on her shoulders.

"This is what I've been waiting for, Nellie," he declared. "Just waiting to see you again!"

"And I've been waiting too, Tom—waiting every day," she murmured, with tears in her beautiful eyes.

In the meantime similar scenes were taking place in the adjoining houses. Dick Rover, having a key, had let himself in unobserved, and gave his wife quite a shock when he met her at the door to her room. But she was overjoyed to see him, as were also Jack and Martha, and all clustered around to listen to what he might have to say.

"Why, Dad, you are as brown as a berry!" declared the young captain.

"And look how tall and strong he seems to be!" put in Martha.

It was Mrs. Sam Rover herself who answered her husband's ring, and her shout of joy quickly brought Fred downstairs. Mary had already retired, but, leaping up, she threw a kimona around her and came flying down in bare feet.

And then what a reunion there was among the members of all three families! The doors which connected the three residences were thrown wide open, and all gathered in the middle house. All seemed to be talking at once, and boys, fathers and uncles shook hands over and over again, while the girls and their mothers came in for innumerable hugs and kisses.

"We are not yet mustered out," said Dick Rover. "But we expect to be before a great while."

"You ought to be very proud of having done your bit for Uncle Sam," said Mary to her father and her uncles.

"Well, I think our boys did their bit, too, if I am any judge," was Sam Rover's fond comment. "First they helped to catch those chaps who blew up the Hasley ammunition factory, then they aided in rounding up the crowd who had the hidden German submarine, and lastly they prevented those Huns from establishing that wireless station in the woods. I certainly think they did remarkably well."

"But they've made some terrible enemies," broke in Mrs. Dick Rover. "Just look at Jack's eyes. One fellow tried to throw pepper into them."

"Oh, let's not talk about that now, Ma!" cried the young captain. "I want to hear all about what dad and Uncle Tom and Uncle Sam have been doing in France."

"If we started to give you all the details we wouldn't get to bed to-night," said his Uncle Tom, with a grin. They had already been talking for quite a while, and the clock hands pointed to nearly one in the morning.

"Oh, well, this is a red-letter night, Dad," broke out Randy.

"Such a coming together may not happen again in a lifetime," added his twin.

Then the older Rovers told of many of their adventures, both while in camp in France and during the time they had been on the firing line.

"We were in some pretty hot fights," admitted Tom Rover. "One in particular—when we forced the Huns out of a stretch of woods they were holding—none of us is liable to forget. That's the fight in which Sam and I were wounded."

"Yes, and the day after they were wounded I was caught in a gas attack," said Dick Rover. "My! but that was something pretty nasty! I felt as if somebody had me by the throat and at the same time was trying to twist my stomach inside out. I never felt such a sensation in my life," and he shook his head and sighed deeply over the recollection of what he had passed through.

"Was that where you won your medal, Dad?" questioned Jack eagerly.

"No, my boy. The medal was won some time later, while your two uncles were in the hospital trying to recover from their wounds. We made two advances, and then were told to hold our new line. There was a fierce bombardment early in the morning, and then, because of a mix-up of orders, part of our command fell back while another tried to go forward. One of our men, a fellow named Lorimer Spell, a queer sort of chap who hailed from Texas, was hit by a piece of shell and knocked partly unconscious. He was unable to save himself, and as I didn't want to see him killed I ran out from behind our shelter and brought him in."

CHAPTER XVI

DICK ROVER'S HEROISM

It can readily be believed that the Rovers did not sleep much that night. The boys and girls were downstairs by seven o'clock and waited anxiously for the appearance of their parents in the dining-room of Dick Rover's residence, where the fathers were to have breakfast before returning to the troopship which was docked across the river, at Hoboken.

"We've got to get back by noon," announced Tom Rover, "and Sam and I want to pay a visit to Wall Street before we go, so we won't be able to spend much more time here."

"You were going to tell us how you won that medal, Dad," said Jack, after breakfast was over and his two uncles had said good-bye to everybody and left. "What about it?"

"Well, if you must have the story, sit down and I'll give it to you," answered Dick Rover, with a smile. "As it happens, the death of Lorimer Spell may make quite a difference in my plans for this Summer."

"Oh, then the poor man died in spite of your efforts to rescue him!" said Martha in crestfallen tones.

"He didn't die from that shell wound," answered her father. "But I had better tell the story from the beginning, since you seem to be so anxious to hear it."

"You must remember, Dick, that Jack is something of a soldier himself. He is a captain of the cadets, you know," remarked the mother of the lad.

"Oh, but that isn't like being a real soldier and fighting for Uncle Sam!" protested the youth.

"This Lorimer Spell, the fellow I saved, was a tall, lanky Texan who joined our command after we arrived in France. Just how he got in I can't say. He was rather a quiet sort of man, and some of the soldiers thought he was decidedly queer. He took a great interest in botany and geology, and I take it he was something of a student in those lines, although he was by no means well educated.

"The day that he was knocked out by a fragment of a shell was a misty one—the kind of a mist that makes it very uncertain to see any great distance. We did not know how close some of the Huns might be, and as a matter of fact they were closer than we expected, and some time later two of our men were shot down while moving from one trench to another close by.

"When Spell went down I was over a hundred feet away from him. Before he became unconscious he tried to crawl back to the trench from which he had come. But evidently he was confused and went down in plain sight of the Huns.

"I didn't care very much for the man, as I told you before, but I could not see him remain there exposed to the fire of the enemy, and so without thinking twice I jumped up out of the trench and ran across the ground to where he was lying. The shells had torn the soil dreadfully, so that I had considerable difficulty in reaching him.

"I placed him on my shoulder, and just then several Huns began firing at us. One bullet grazed my side, giving me a deep scratch, and another went through the cloth of Spell's coat. I stumbled down into a shell crater with the man and had all I could do to drag him and myself out. Then I plunged forward again, and just as the Huns let out several more shots, both of us stumbled down into the trench, and the rescue, if you might call it such, was over."

"Well, I think that was a grand thing to do, Dad!" burst out Jack, his face beaming. "Simply grand!"

"You couldn't beat it for pluck!" said Fred.

"And that's how you won the medal?" broke in Andy. "Fine!"

"You certainly deserved it," added his twin. "Gee! but suppose those Huns had plugged you when you were carrying the fellow!"

"And that's how I got him back to the trenches," went on Dick Rover. "He was taken to the field hospital, and there his injuries were found to be slight, and in a few days he was back on the firing line again."

"He ought to have been mighty thankful," declared Martha, who sat close by, holding her father's hand.

"He was thankful; and for that reason he did something which may have an important bearing on my future business dealings," answered Dick Rover. "He said he had no relatives of any kind, and he then and there made a will whereby if anything happened to him all that he possessed in this world should go to me."

"And then he was killed?" questioned Mrs. Rover.

"Yes. Just two days after his return to duty we were making another advance. Spell was in one part of the field while I was in another. Suddenly I saw him running off to a place just in front of where our squad was located. Then he made a turn as if to come toward us, and just at that instant he threw up his hands and fell forward on his face."

Here Dick Rover paused and dropped his eyes. No one cared to speak, and for an instant there was utter silence.

"When the skirmish was over we had gained our position, and a few hours later the body of Lorimer Spell was picked up and carried to the rear," went on Jack's father. "A bullet had struck him in the back of the head, and death must have been instantaneous."

"I confess that I felt pretty bad. A number of the company knew of the will Spell had made, and two of them were witnesses to the crude document he had drawn up. As a consequence, Spell's personal effects were turned over to me. They included a small amount of money, a ring, a wrist watch, and a number of papers, including an order for a box in a safe deposit vault in a bank in Wichita Falls, Texas."

"Poor fellow, it's too bad he couldn't have lived to enjoy himself now the war is at an end," remarked Mrs. Sam Rover.

"Were any of his papers of value?" questioned Jack curiously.

"That remains to be found out, Jack. His papers spoke of a valuable tract of oil land in Texas close to the boundary line between that State and Oklahoma."

"Oil lands!" exclaimed Randy. "Why, they may be worth a fortune, Uncle Dick! They are making immense strikes in oil down in that territory."

"I know that, Randy. Some of the wells are worth a fortune. But, on the other hand, you must remember that many of the tracts that are supposed to have oil on them have so far proved to be utterly dry. Men spend ten to forty thousand dollars in sinking a well only to find in the end that they have had their labor for their pains."

"Did Lorimer Spell say that his land had oil on it?" questioned Fred.

"From the way his papers and letters read one would think so, Fred. But, as I said before, Spell was a very queer kind of man. In fact, some of the fellows in our company thought he was a little bit out of his mind at times. It is just possible that he only imagined that he possessed valuable oil land."

"But you are going to investigate, aren't you, and make sure?" questioned Jack.

"Certainly, Son. I intend to go to Texas and make an investigation just as soon as I am mustered out of the service."

"Oh, Dad! do you mean that you might go to Texas this Summer?"

"I will if they muster me out."

"If you go, won't you take me along?"

"I'll think about it," and Dick Rover smiled at his son, whose face showed his eagerness.

"Gee! I'd like to go to Texas myself," burst out Fred.

"Such a trip would suit me down to the ground," announced Andy.

"I've always wanted to see a big oil well in operation," added his twin.

"I'd like to see them shoot an oil well," went on Jack. "They say it is a wonderful sight, especially if the well happens to be a real gusher."

"The queerest part of it is this," went on Dick Rover. "Before the war came on I was more or less interested in the oil fields in Texas and Oklahoma, as well as in Kansas. A good oil well, or series of wells, is a splendid paying proposition in these days, and I'd like first rate to get possession of such a holding and then start a first-class oil company."

"Oh, there are millions in oil! I know that!" burst out Martha. "Why, I was reading in a magazine only the other day of some folks in Texas who were quite poor. They had a farm of less than a hundred acres, and could make barely a living on it. Then the oil prospectors came along and located a well or two, and now those poor farm people have so much money they don't know what to do with it."

"Wouldn't it be great if we could go down there and locate a few of those first-class wells?" said Fred, with a sigh. "I'd just like to know how it feels to be a real millionaire."

"Can I go, Dad, if you go?" questioned Jack again.

"I'll see about that later. I don't wish to make any promises now."

"If Jack goes I want to go with him," put in Fred sturdily.

"Of course we'll want to go with him!" added Andy and Randy in a breath.

"What's the matter with us girls going along?" demanded Martha.

"What would girls be doing in the oil fields?" asked Fred. "A well might go off and shoot all your beautiful dresses full of oil."

"Huh! what about it if some oil got on that flaming red necktie you are wearing, Fred?" questioned his sister quickly. In his haste to get dressed that morning her brother had donned a necktie which she detested.

"Never mind my necktie, Mary. If Jack goes to Texas I'm going to see if I can't go along."

The matter was talked over a few minutes longer, and then Dick Rover went off with his wife to arrange some private affairs before he should take his departure for Hoboken. Then he said good-bye all around and was off.

"The next time you see us I think we'll be in a big parade," said Jack's father on leaving.

"A parade?" queried several of the others.

"Yes. They are talking of having a big parade of the soldiers on Fifth Avenue. If they do, of course we'll be in it."

"Hurrah! that's the stuff," cried Andy. "I've been aching to see one of those big parades ever since war was declared."

"If you do parade, Dad, we'll all be there to see you," declared Martha.

"We'll want front seats in the grandstand," added Mary.

"I don't think you'll get any front seats, Mary," answered her mother. "More than likely those seats will be reserved for the gold-star mothers—those who have lost their sons in battle."

"Well, those mothers deserve the front seats every time," said Jack.

"Indeed they do!" came from the girls.

"How soon will this parade come off?" questioned Randy.

"I don't know that the date has been settled exactly," answered Dick Rover. "But it will undoubtedly be in the near future. You will probably see all the details in the newspapers. I presume the whole of New York will have a holiday."

"Yes, and Fifth Avenue will be decorated in great shape from end to end," declared Mary. "Just see how they have been working on that Arch of Victory, and the Tower of Jewels, and all the other things."

"It will certainly be a parade well worth seeing," said Dick's wife.

"Yes, and I'll wager folks will come miles and miles to see it," added Fred. And then he continued quickly: "What's the matter with having Grandfather Rover down here from Valley Brook Farm?"

"Yes, and Great-aunt Martha and Uncle Randolph, too!" broke in Mary.

"Oh, we must have all of them, by all means!" cried Jack.

CHAPTER XVII

THE GREAT VICTORY PARADE

"My, what a jam of people!"

"Did you ever see such a crowd before in all your life!"

"And look at the flags and other decorations! Aren't they beautiful?"

"This time New York has outdone herself."

It was the day for the great parade of the returned soldiers, and New York City, especially in the vicinity of Fifth Avenue, was packed with dense crowds that filled miles of grandstands, windows, and other points of vantage, and also jammed the sidewalks and the side streets. It was a holiday for all, and everybody was going to make the most of it.

The Rovers had left their homes early to make their way to the seats they had obtained on one of the stands. With those who resided in the city were Grandfather Rover and also Aunt Martha and Uncle Randolph, who had come down the day previous from Valley Brook Farm.

"This is the greatest day of my life," said Grandfather Rover, his eyes glistening with pleasure. "To think that my boys have all fought for our country and come back from the war safely."

"Yes, and to think one of them has won a medal—not but what the others have been equally brave," responded old Uncle Randolph.

"I hope they never have to go to another war—they or their sons either," murmured old Aunt Martha.

The girls had invited May and Ruth to come to New York to witness the parade. May had accepted the invitation, but Ruth had sent word the doctor did not think a trip advisable at this time, her eyes being still in bad condition.

"It's too bad Ruth couldn't come," sighed Jack.

"Well, she had better take care of her eyes," answered his sister. "Oh, dear, why did that horrid Werner have to do such a mean thing!"

The Rovers had all they could do to get to the seats reserved for them. Each carried a small flag, to be waved as the soldiers passed. There was quite a wait, and the crowd seemed to grow denser every minute. Then from a distance came the fanfare of trumpets and the booming of many drums.

"Here they come! Here they come!" was the glad shout, and soon a platoon of police on horseback swept by. Then followed a brass band of a hundred pieces or more, and the great parade was fairly started.

To go into the particulars of this tremendous spectacle would be impossible in the limits of these pages. Regiment after regiment swept by, representing every State in the Union. There were brass bands galore, with Old Glory everywhere in evidence. The crowd clapped and cheered, and sometimes shouted itself hoarse as some favorite command swept by with soldierly precision. Here and there a hero was recognized, and then the din would increase.

"Some parade, I say!" exclaimed Fred enthusiastically.

"Isn't it wonderful how many soldiers there are?" marveled May, who sat next to him.

"When are our boys coming?" questioned Grandfather Rover anxiously.

"They'll be coming along pretty soon now," answered Jack, who had been studying the program closely. "They are in the second regiment after the one now passing."

The New York State troops were now approaching, and the din became terrific, the more so as one company after another was recognized.

"Here they come! Here they come!" exclaimed Martha, who was gazing down the line.

"I see them! They are just at the corner!" added Mary.

"There's dad! I see dad!" screamed Andy, to make himself heard above the noise. "There he is, in the front row on this side!"

"Yes, and there is my father!" yelled Fred. "See him? Two men away from Uncle Tom!"

"I see dad," announced Jack. "He's in the middle. See him with that medal on his breast?"

"Hurrah, boys! Hurrah for you!" yelled Grandfather Rover, and arose excitedly, shaking his cane in one hand and a small flag in the other.



"HURRAH FOR YOU, BOYS!" YELLED GRANDFATHER ROVER.

By this time all were on their feet, cheering and waving their flags wildly. Dick, Tom and Sam Rover saw them, and although they did not dare to turn their heads, they smiled broadly in recognition. For them the moment was just as thrilling as it was for those on the stand.

"Hurrah! Hurrah! Hurrah!" shouted the boys and girls, and their parents and other relatives joined in as strenuously as any one.

Old Aunt Martha was crying openly, and the other women had also to wipe the tears from their eyes.

"Somehow it chokes me all up," declared old Uncle Randolph, and blew his nose vigorously.

The company containing the Rovers passed on and the great parade continued hour after hour until it seemed as if there would be no end to that grand procession.

"Gracious! I didn't know there were so many soldiers in the whole world," declared Aunt Martha at length.

"If you are getting tired, Aunt Martha, I'll have somebody take you back to the house," remarked Mrs. Dick Rover, after they had been watching the parade for four hours.

"No, no. I am going to see it to the end," declared the old lady. "It will be something to talk about as long as I live."

"Just think of a lot of soldiers like these fighting all over our farm at Valley Brook," was Uncle Randolph's comment. "That's what they did over in France. It must have been terrible, the way things were cut up."

"My dad says you wouldn't believe it if you didn't see it," answered Randy. "He said some of the shell craters were big enough to dump a small barn in. Think of holes like that in your pasture lot."

But even the greatest of parades must come to an end, and at last the final body of soldiers marched by, and then came more police, followed by a great crowd of people that surged into Fifth Avenue like great flocks of sheep, hurrying, bustling, and jostling in an effort to get every way at once.

"Wasn't it perfectly grand?" cried Mary.

"It couldn't have been more wonderful," answered May.

"Now we'll get you back to the house and give you something to eat," said Mrs. Dick Rover to the old folks. "You certainly must be hungry as well as tired."

"Well, a little bit of something to eat wouldn't go bad, Dora," answered Grandfather Rover, placing an affectionate hand on her shoulder. And then he added softly: "We're mighty proud of our Dick, aren't we?"

"Proud! I should say we are!" answered Mrs. Rover, her whole face glowing with keen satisfaction.

It was decided that all of the older folks, as well as the three girls, should return to Riverside Drive. The boys, however, wanted to remain out and see what might take place further.

"We can pick up a little lunch somewhere—some sandwiches and pie and maybe a glass of milk," said Randy.

"Anything will do for me," announced Fred. "I'm almost too excited to eat."

"If you boys stay out you take good care of yourselves in this awful jam," warned Mrs. Tom Rover. "And don't you get into any mischief," she added to her twins.

The four lads saw the others safely to the automobiles, which were standing down one of the side streets, and then came back to Fifth Avenue.

"Let's walk down and look at the decorations and at the Arch of Victory," suggested Jack, and so it was decided.

In many places the sidewalks were littered with boxes which had been used to sit or stand upon. As a consequence, the best place to walk was in the street, and down this the boys pushed their way through the crowds which were gradually beginning to thin out.

"I never imagined buildings could be so handsomely decorated," declared Jack. "Those flags and banners and all that mass of bunting must have cost a fortune."

"Yes, and think of the money spent in decorating some of these windows," put in Fred.

They were gazing at a large show-window filled with a representation of American soldiers and sailors from colonial times to the present day. There were at least twenty-five figures in full uniform, and the display was as valuable to study from an historical standpoint as it was interesting to view as a picture.

"Some work to get all those uniforms together and to have everything exactly right," remarked Randy.

"I like the plain khaki of to-day as well as any of them," announced Jack. "The others are more gaudy, but when it comes to actual service—Ouch!"

Jack's remark broke off abruptly as a small but heavy box thrown from the gutter landed directly on his head. Then another box came flying through the air, to strike between the three other Rovers. It was followed by a ball of soaking-wet and muddy newspapers which struck the show-window with a thud, sending some dirty drops of water into the Rover boys' faces.

Fred was the first to whirl around in an endeavor to see where the two boxes and the wadded-up newspapers had come from. He was just in time to see two young fellows try to lose themselves in the rapidly moving crowd.

"Gabe Werner!" he ejaculated. "There he goes!"

"Yes, and there is Bill Glutts with him!" added Andy.

"What's that?" questioned Jack. He had received a small cut on one ear from the flying box and his cap had been knocked over his eyes.

"Werner and Glutts did it," answered Fred. "There they go down the street."

"If that's the case we've got to catch them," returned the oldest Rover boy. "Come on, quick!"

All started in pursuit of the two former bullies of Colby Hall. But to follow them through the rapidly moving crowd was not easy, and several times they were afraid the rascals would get away from them.

"Here, here! Take your time," said a policeman to Fred, as the latter brushed by him. "Take your time."

"I'm after a fellow who ought to be arrested," answered Fred quickly.

"Where is he?" demanded the bluecoat with interest.

"There he goes—down around the corner!" And then, as the policeman showed no disposition to leave his post, the youngest Rover boy hurried away after the others.

Werner and Glutts had looked back, and seeing that the Rovers were in pursuit, they had tried to throw them off the trail by passing around the nearest corner. Now they headed in the direction of the East Side.

"I told you not to bother with them," panted Glutts, who was somewhat out of breath. "Now, for all you know, they'll have us arrested."

"Oh, shut up your whining, Bill!" growled Werner in disgust. "I wish I had knocked that Jack Rover's head off with the box."

"You came very near busting the window."

"I wouldn't care if I did bust it," answered the other recklessly.

"It don't look as if that dose of pepper hurt Jack Rover much."

"Never mind. I'll fix him some day, you see if I don't."

The two glanced back once more and to their chagrin saw that the Rovers had come around the corner and were chasing after them faster than ever. This caused Bill Glutts to become more frightened than before.

"Oh, what shall we do? They'll catch us sure!" he wailed.

"No, they won't! Come on!" yelled Werner, and caught his crony by the arm.

He was too excited to notice carefully where he was running, and the next instant he, followed by Glutts, brought up against a stand on the sidewalk in front of a small shop. This stand was filled with various articles of bric-a-brac, and it went down with a crash, carrying dozens of small articles with it.

CHAPTER XVIII

BOUND FOR TEXAS

"Hi! hi! phat—phat you mean py knocking mine stand ofer?" cried out a voice from the doorway of the building, and a small, stockily built foreigner came running forward.

"Get off of me!" spluttered Bill Glutts, who was under Gabe Werner. "You're pressing some of this broken stuff into my face!"

Werner could not answer, being too surprised by the sudden turn affairs had taken. But then, as he realized that the four Rovers were close at hand, he rolled over on the sidewalk, upsetting a small boy as he did so, and then managed to scramble to his feet.

"Come on, Bill!" he panted, and set off down the street at the best gait he could command.

What Bill Glutts had said about being pushed into the broken bric-a-brac was true. His face had come down into the midst of several broken vases, and one hand rested on a broken bit of glassware. When he arose to his feet he found himself held fast by the storekeeper.

"You don't vas git away from me already!" bawled the owner of the place. "You vas pay for de damages you make."

"You let me go! It wasn't my fault!" stormed Glutts.

By this time the Rovers had come up. Bill Glutts looked the picture of despair, with blood flowing from several cuts on his face and on one hand.

"Where is Werner?" questioned Jack quickly.

"There he goes!" exclaimed Randy. "Come on after him before he gets away."

"Some one had better stay here and see that Glutts doesn't get away," suggested Fred.

"All right, Fred, you and Andy stay here until we get back," answered Randy, and then he sped off after Jack, who was already running at his best rate of speed in the direction Gabe Werner had taken.

By this time Werner was thoroughly scared. He knew that he was liable to arrest for smashing the bric-a-brac stand, and he had no desire to fall into the clutches of the Rovers, feeling instinctively that they might pummel him thoroughly before handing him over to the authorities. Besides that, he remembered that they might hold him to account for the pepper incident.

He had turned down a side street where there were a number of tenements. He dove through an open doorway and ran the length of the hall, coming out of the building at the rear. Here there was a small yard surrounded by a board fence. He leaped the fence with ease, and then dove into the back end of another tenement and out at the front, and soon lost himself in a crowd on the other street.

Jack and Randy hunted around for fully a quarter of an hour, and were then compelled to give up the chase.

"It's too bad," declared the oldest Rover boy, "but it can't be helped. Let us go back and see what they have done with Glutts."

They soon found their way back to where the bric-a-brac stand had been smashed. A woman was now in charge, and she was just finishing the cleaning away of the wreckage. Fred and Andy stood nearby watching her. Both wore a broad grin.

"What's the matter? Couldn't you catch Werner?" questioned Fred.

"No, he slipped us," answered Jack, and gave the particulars.

"The police just carted Bill Glutts off in a patrol wagon," announced Andy. "The keeper of the store, a Bohemian with an unpronounceable name, went along. He declared Glutts would have to pay the bill in full, and even then he wanted him put in prison for life or beheaded, or something

like that."

"Phew! In that case Glutts will get all that is coming to him!" exclaimed Randy.

"He sure will if that Bohemian has anything to do with it."

The four boys took another look around for Werner, and then walked back to Fifth Avenue and a little later went home. Here a fine dinner awaited them.

"It's certainly been a banner day," remarked Fred. "I'll never forget it as long as I live."

After that two weeks passed rapidly. The boys went on a visit to Valley Brook Farm, and also met Spouter, Gif and several of their other school chums. They had a glorious Fourth of July, and then came back to New York City.

During that time Jack wrote two letters to Ruth, and received one in return. The girl stated that she felt quite well, but that her eyes were still bothering her a good deal.

"It's too bad, Jack," said Martha, when her brother spoke about this. "Ruth is not the one to complain. Her eyes are probably in worse shape than she is willing to admit."

"I'm worried greatly, Martha," he answered. "I wish I could do something for her."

In a roundabout way the Rovers heard of what had happened to Bill Glutts. He had been locked up over night, and in the morning some relatives had come to his assistance and through paying a fine had had him released. Then Glutts and his relatives had paid for the damage done to the bric-a-brac stand, a damage amounting to nearly a hundred dollars. In the meanwhile, so far as they could ascertain, nothing further had been heard of Gabe Werner.

"Werner is evidently going to keep shady," remarked Fred. "Perhaps we'll never see him again." But in this surmise the youngest Rover boy was mistaken, as later events proved.

At last came another red-letter day when the command to which the older Rovers belonged was mustered out of the United States service. Tom and Sam came in one day, and Dick the next evening.

"Now for civilian clothes once more!" announced Tom Rover. "And then I guess it will be high time for me to get back to the offices in Wall Street."

"And I'm with you, Tom," said Sam. "I'd rather be at my desk than on a battlefield, any day."

When Dick Rover came back he was more filled than ever with a desire to get down to Texas to look over the land which had been left to him by Lorimer Spell.

"I've found out that it is right in a territory where a number of well-paying oil wells have been located," said he. "But I'm not altogether certain that his claim is a sure one, and it might be just possible that some prospectors might try to jump it, now that word has gone forth that he was killed in battle. They may think he died without leaving any heir."

"Well, Dad, you know what I said," cried Jack quickly. "If you went to Texas I'd like first rate to go along. Maybe I could help you with your claim."

"Oh, Uncle Dick! won't you take us all with you?" pleaded Fred. "It would be a grand outing for this Summer. We've been working very hard at school, you know."

"A trip to Texas would put us in A, Number One condition for Colby Hall this Fall," added Andy, with a grin.

"We wouldn't interfere with your business in the least," commented his twin.

At first Dick Rover was rather doubtful about taking four lively boys with him on the trip. But then he felt that they deserved something for applying themselves so diligently to their studies during the Winter, and also for helping matters to run smoothly while he and his brothers had been in France.

"You can go," he announced the next day, after a consultation with his brothers and their wives. "But I am going very quickly—by to-morrow night at the latest. Can you boys get ready so soon?"

"Can we get ready!" exclaimed Andy. "Say, Uncle Dick, just let me run upstairs and get an extra pair of socks and a toothbrush and I'll be ready to go to the North Pole if you say so!" And at this sally there was a general laugh.

After that matters moved with incredible swiftness. It was decided that the boys should take no baggage but what would go in their suitcases for the trip, and these were speedily packed. In the meanwhile, Dick Rover obtained the necessary railroad tickets and sleeping-car accommodations.

"Hurrah! we're off for Texas and the oil fields!" cried Fred.

"Off for the land of luck!" exclaimed Dick Rover, with a smile.

"The land of luck?" questioned Jack. "Is that what they call it, Dad?"

"Yes, Son. And it's truly the land of luck for some. For others it is the land of bitter disappointment."

"Then I would call it the land of luck—good or bad," announced Andy.

They were to leave from the Pennsylvania Terminal late in the evening. The whole family had dinner together, and those to be left behind did not hesitate to give the boys a great deal of advice.

"I hope you don't fall in with any rough characters down there," said Mrs. Dick Rover. "They tell me there are some men in the oil fields who are anything but nice."

"You may find you will have to rough it," said Tom Rover. "I understand some of the oil fields are ten or fifteen miles away from the nearest town."

"Well, we've roughed it before," answered Jack.

The mothers of the boys might have been more upset, but they felt relieved to think that Dick would be with the lads.

Soon the time came for parting, and all drove quickly to the railroad terminal. Then finally good-byes were said, and those bound for Texas hurried downstairs to the big underground train station. Porters with their bags took them to the proper car, and they soon found themselves settled. A few minutes later they were off.

The trip during the night was uneventful, and, strange as it may seem, all of the boys slept soundly. But they were up early and ready for their breakfast just as soon as that meal was announced from the diner.

"I'm afraid we're going to have a rainy day of it," said Dick Rover, as the four boys sat down to a large table while he took his place at a smaller one opposite. "But as we'll be on board all day, it won't matter."

During the meal Jack noticed that his father was reading a letter very attentively, and when the party walked back to their Pullman he mentioned this fact.

"This is a letter from an oil well promoter," said Dick Rover. "I don't exactly know what to make of it. He makes a proposition which on the face of it looks rather good, but somehow or other I have got it in my head that he is a crook."

"In that case, Dad, I'm sure you won't want to have anything to do with him."

"Is he a New York man or one from down in Texas?" questioned Fred, who overheard this conversation.

"He operates mostly in Texas, although he has some connection in New York. He is very anxious to form a new company, and, of course, sell the stock. Well, I am willing to go into a new thing and take stock for myself and try to dispose of some to others, provided the company is really a good one. But I don't want to get mixed up in any shady transaction."

"I should say not!" cried Jack. "The Rover name has always been a clean one."

"What is the name of this promoter?" questioned Fred.

"Carson Davenport."

"What's that?" exclaimed Jack, somewhat startled.

"Carson Davenport. Did you ever hear that name before?"

"I certainly did, Dad. This Carson Davenport has a son Perry, and this Perry Davenport and Nappy Martell were great chums, and unless I am mistaken, Mr. Martell and Carson Davenport were once partners in some mining scheme. I heard Perry and Nappy talking about it several times."

"Humph! if this Carson Davenport was a partner of Nelson Martell, I don't know as I want anything to do with him. That whole bunch is tarred with the same stick. Not one of them is honest," declared Dick Rover bluntly.

CHAPTER XIX

IN THE LAND OF LUCK

"Well, here we are in Texas at last."

"And what immense stretches of country there seem to be, Jack. Miles and miles without a house or any other building."

"You must remember, boys, that Texas is the largest State in the Union," came from Dick Rover. "Some of the farms, or ranches, down here cover thousands of acres."

"How much farther have we to ride?" questioned Randy.

"Ten miles, that's all," replied his uncle.

They had made two changes since leaving New York City, but each stop had been less than an hour in duration; so to these boys so used to outdoor activities it felt as if the whole journey had been continuous. They were bound for a small town which in years gone by had been known as Steerville, but the name of which since the oil boom had been changed to Columbina. This, so far as Dick Rover could ascertain, was the nearest point to where the Lorimer Spell tract was located.

"We'll take a look around Columbina first," Jack's father had said. "I want to see how that claim looks. Then I'll take a run over to Wichita Falls and get those documents belonging to Spell from the safe deposit box in the bank."

"I see an oil well!" shouted Fred presently, and he pointed out of the car window to where the huge derrick could be seen over a distant rise of ground.

"There is another! And another!" added Andy, a few minutes later.

"Now we must be coming into the oil fields," announced Dick Rover, and his face showed that he was just as eager as the boys. "Just think of how some of these wells have made a great many comparatively poor people almost millionaires over night!"

"It sounds like a fairy tale, doesn't it, Dad?" exclaimed Jack. "No wonder they call this the land of luck."

"But don't forget the disappointments, Son. Many a man has put his all into sinking a well only to find it absolutely dry."

"And wells cost so much to sink, too!" put in Fred. "Ten to forty thousand dollars each! It's an awful amount to gamble away."

"Not all of the wells cost that much, Fred. In some places they strike oil at a distance of a few hundred feet. But here they have to go down much deeper. Many good wells are down three thousand feet or more."

The train had stopped at one or two towns, and now the porter announced that the next stop would be Columbina, and he took their suitcases to the platform for them. Presently they rolled up to a small wooden station, and the travelers alighted. Then the heavy train rolled westward.

"Welcome to Columbina!" cried Andy jestingly. "Some big city, I must declare. I wonder where the Waldorf-Vanderbilt Hotel is located?"

"What's the matter with going to the Ritz-Copley Square?" added his twin, with a grin.

"Perhaps we'll be thankful to get any kind of a shake-down, boys," announced Dick Rover. "This certainly is worse than I anticipated, although I knew that we couldn't expect much in one of these boom towns."

To a newcomer Columbina certainly offered no special attractions. Only a few years before it had been nothing but a point where the ranchmen had shipped their steers on the railroad, with a tiny stockyard and a small ranchmen's hotel and saloon combined. Now the boom city, if such it might be called, consisted of a long straggling main street with a much dilapidated boardwalk on one side only. In the middle of the street the mud was all of a foot deep, and through this wagons and automobiles plowed along as best they could. All of the buildings were of wood, and none of them more than three stories in height. There were half a dozen general stores, the same number of eating and drinking places, and two buildings which were designated as hotels, O'Brian's being one and Smedley's the other. There was also a long, shed-like moving picture theater advertised to be open twice a week, in the evening.

"I was advised by a man on the train to try the Smedley Hotel first," said Dick Rover. "He thought I'd find a better class of people there than at the O'Brian place. Wait till I ask the station master where the hotel is located."

"You can't miss it," said the station man, when applied to. "It's down at the end of that boardwalk. If you go any further you'll sink into mud up to your knees," and he smiled feebly.

"Any chance of our getting in there?"

"Just as good a chance as getting in anywhere. They tell me O'Brian's place is so full they're falling out of the windows," and the station master chuckled over his little joke.

"Anything in the way of a taxicab around here to take us and our baggage up there?"

"Taxicab? The last man to run a taxicab was Jim Lumpkins, and now Jim's struck oil and he's so rich he won't do nothing. If you want to get up to Smedley's I reckon you'll have to hoof it."

"Come on, Dad, let's walk up there," said Jack.

"But your suitcases are pretty heavy," answered his father, with a smile.

"Oh, we won't mind those," declared Fred. "We've hiked around with just as much to carry many times."

"I sha'n't mind it myself," declared his uncle. "Campaigning in France was a splendid thing to harden one's muscles."

They set off down the one business street of which Columbina boasted. They had to pick their way carefully along the dilapidated boardwalk. At one point they came opposite O'Brian's Hotel. Downstairs was a saloon, and in this a noisy bunch were talking and singing.

"I don't know as I would care to stop there," remarked Randy. "It looks like rather a tough hole to me."

"You are right," responded Jack. "I'd rather go to some private house, if I could find one, or else buy a tent and hire a place where we could pitch it."

"Gee, that's an idea!" cried Andy. "I'd much rather go camping out and do my own cooking than put up with just any old thing."

At length they came to Smedley's Hotel. It was a new building, three stories in height, with a restaurant occupying one-half of the lower floor. Half a dozen men were occupying chairs on the front piazza, and they eyed the newcomers curiously.

"Looks fairly clean, anyway," whispered Fred to his cousins. "I wouldn't want to get into some old ranch that was full of bugs."

The office of the hotel was about twelve feet square, with a sanded floor. On one side was a plain wooden settee, and on the other an equally plain counter on which rested a register and a bell. Behind the counter was a tall, freckle-faced man with a shock of red hair.

"Good afternoon, gentlemen," he said hospitably. "What can I do for you?"

"We want to know if we can be accommodated here," answered Dick Rover. "There are five of us."

"How long do you want to stay?"

"I don't know exactly. Several days at least, and maybe a week or two."

"I see." The hotel proprietor scratched his head thoughtfully. "I've got one big room left and one small room directly opposite. The small room has only a single bed in it, but the other room has a double bed and I could easily put two cots in there besides that."

"Would you mind showing us the quarters?" questioned Jack's father. Experience had taught him when in out-of-the-way places not to accept hotel accommodations until he had inspected them.

"Sure thing, Brother. Just follow me."

The boys waited below while Dick Rover and the hotel man went upstairs. A minute later they came down, and then Jack's father registered for the entire crowd.

"You pay for your meals in the restaurant when you get 'em," announced the hotel man. "The rooms are separate. Three dollars each per day."

The rooms to which they had been assigned were on the third floor of the hotel. One was amply large for all of the boys, and the other, while much smaller, had good ventilation and Dick Rover said it would suit him very well.

"The whole outfit is better than I was afraid it might be," he announced. "Some of these boom towns have wretched quarters for newcomers. In fact, I've read in the newspapers that in many places the newcomers had to roll themselves in blankets and sleep out in the fields."

"I was reading about one place where they set up cots on the floor of a general store at night and sold the right to sleep on a cot until seven o'clock in the morning for one dollar," said Randy.

There was no running water, but each room was supplied with a bowl and pitcher, and after the extra cots were placed in the larger apartment an extra bucket of water was also brought up by a maid.

Although they did not know it, the Rovers had no sooner disappeared upstairs than two of the men sitting on the veranda of the hotel came into the office and looked over the register.

"Five Rovers, and all from New York City," muttered one of the men, and gazed knowingly at his companion.

"Four of them were nothing but kids," returned the other. "It's only the man who counts, and his name seems to be Richard Rover."

"Do you think he is the same Rover?"

"I shouldn't wonder, Tate. That name isn't a common one. However, we had better make sure before we make another move."

Andy and Fred were the first to get through washing up, and then they came downstairs to take a look around before going into the dining-room with the others for supper. They came out on the hotel porch, and were surveying the scene before them when the two men who had inspected the hotel register lounged up to them.

"Well, what do you think of our town?" questioned one of them pleasantly.

"I haven't seen enough of it to form an opinion," answered Fred.

"It will take us a week or two, I suppose, to take in all the sights," came from Andy, with a grin.

"It might take you a week or two if you went on foot through the mud," answered the second man. And then he continued: "I suppose you came from a distance, eh?"

"We came from New York."

"Going to invest in some oil wells, I suppose?" remarked the first man who had spoken, and he smiled broadly.

"That depends on how we find things here," answered Fred. "You see, my uncle is interested in a tract of land they say has oil on it. Of course he'll want to make an investigation before he goes ahead."

"Is that man who is with you your uncle?"

"Yes."

"Is the tract of land he is interested in near here?" questioned the second man.

"I don't know how close it is to this town."

"What's the tract called? If you don't know exactly where it is, perhaps we can help you locate it."

"It's the Lorimer Spell tract," answered Fred innocently. He thought the men were just asking out of idle curiosity.

"Oh, I see." The man frowned and looked at his companion.

"Do you know anything about that tract?"

"Oh, I've heard of it. It's up on the north side of the town. I understand Spell was shot during the war," the man continued, looking at the boys.

"He was," answered Andy. "And he left all his property to my Uncle Dick, who once saved his life."

"Oh, that's it, is it!" cried one of the men. "Seems to me I heard something about that. Your uncle played the regular hero act."

"As I said before, he saved Lorimer Spell's life, and did it at the risk of his own. It was in the midst of one of the fiercest fights."

At this moment Jack and Randy came rushing down the stairs and out on the porch of the hotel in great excitement.

"We just saw somebody up the street!" exclaimed Jack. "And who do you think it was? Gabe Werner!"

CHAPTER XX

PLOTTING AGAINST DICK ROVER

"Gabe Werner!"

"Where is he?"

"Up the street," answered Randy. "Come on after him."

"Who's the man you are after?" questioned one of the men who had been interviewing Andy and Fred.

"He's a young fellow who once went to a military academy with us. He's a regular bully and did something for which he ought to be locked up," was Fred's reply, and then he rushed down into the street, following his three cousins.

"How can Gabe Werner be down here?" questioned Andy. "Why, we left him in New York City!"

"I can't help that, Andy. It was Werner just as sure as I am standing here. I just happened to glance out of the window and saw him crossing the roadway. He turned his face straight toward me, and I couldn't help but recognize him."

"Where did he go?"

"I'll point out the place when we get there."

By this time the four Rovers had left the boardwalk and were plowing along on the side of the road through mud that varied from an inch to six inches in depth. They had started to run, but

were soon compelled to slow up.

"Gee, this is something fierce!" panted Andy.

"Oh, you cinder path!" chanted his twin. "Wouldn't you like to do a hundred-yard dash on this road?"

"It's not much farther," announced Jack. "I saw him heading for that shack yonder."

The place he mentioned was a small building erected of rough boards, with a galvanized roof. They neared the shack to find two men sitting before it on a log smoking their pipes. They appeared somewhat startled.

"Did a young fellow just pass this way?" questioned Jack quickly.

The two men looked at the Rovers curiously, and then one shook his head.

"Don't think he did, Stranger. I didn't see anybody, did you, Tom?"

"No," was the positive answer.

By the look on their faces Jack felt that the men were not telling the truth. Yet what he was to do he did not know.

"Maybe he went back to that garage," he suggested, pointing to a smaller building in the rear.

"Look around if you think anybody is there," said the first man who had spoken, and the boys hurried down to the garage, which stood open. As they did this one of the men sauntered into the shack.

"Say, what's the meaning of this?" he demanded of Gabe Werner, who stood hiding behind a door.

"I'll tell you as soon as they go away," was the answer of the former bully of Colby Hall. "Don't let them come in here and see me."

"All right, they sha'n't come in," was the man's laconic reply; and then he went outside again, to resume his smoking.

Having walked around the garage and peered inside, the four Rovers walked again to the shack. The man who had just come out of the building leered at them.

"Didn't find the fellow you were after, did you?" he queried.

"No," answered Jack shortly. He did not like the appearance of the man in the least.

"Want to see him particularly?"

"I want to give him a good thrashing—that's what I want to do!" exclaimed Jack. "And after that I might turn him over to the police, if there is any such thing in this town."

"We haven't any police here. We run things to suit ourselves."

"What do you want to lick him for?" questioned the other man.

"He threw pepper in my eyes once, and he's done a lot of other things he oughtn't to have done," returned Jack, and then turned back to the hotel, and his cousins followed.

"Those two men were on the hotel veranda when we first went there," said Randy. "I noticed them, and I did not like their looks at all."

"Do you know what I think?" returned Jack. "I believe Gabe Werner was in that shack all the time. I think he must have seen us coming and given those fellows the tip. They both tried to appear cool, but they were both flustered."

"But what can Gabe Werner be doing in this out-of-the-way place?" demanded Fred.

"He probably came here, Fred, just for the excitement. Hundreds of young fellows have drifted to the oil fields just as years ago they drifted to the gold fields. They gamble in oil stocks and do what they can, trying to strike it rich. It's a great temptation to any fellow who hasn't a well-paying job at home."

"But Gabe Werner ought to be going to school," put in Andy.

"True, Andy. But Gabe himself thinks he is old enough to do as he pleases. Evidently from the way he acts his folks can no longer control him."

When the boys got back to the hotel they found Dick Rover looking for them. He listened in surprise to what they had to say.

"It certainly is odd if that Gabe Werner is here," he said. "And more than likely you are right—otherwise that fellow wouldn't have taken such pains to hide himself. Well, if he is here, you must watch that he doesn't play any more tricks on you."

A fair supper was had at the hotel. During the meal both Fred and Andy noticed that the two men who had questioned them in the hotel office concerning the Lorimer Spell claim were watching

their Uncle Dick closely.

"They seem to want to know all about our business," said Fred, when mentioning this to his uncle.

"Oh, that's the case in every oil town or mining camp," answered Dick Rover. "Men are always anxious to get a lead, as they call it, on what is going to happen next. If they think a fellow may strike it rich in some particular location they rush after him like a flock of sheep and try to get claims as close to him as possible."

After the meal was finished the boys took a walk around the town to see how the place looked at night and thinking they might possibly run across Gabe Werner.

The narrow street with the single boardwalk was crowded with people, some well dressed and others in the roughest of costumes. There was loud talking and jesting, and most of the pedestrians seemed to be in good humor, although occasionally they would pass a group evidently out of luck and willing to let everybody know it.

"No more oil fields for me!" they heard one man exclaim, as he lunged past, evidently partly under the influence of liquor. "I've sunk forty-five thousand dollars in wells already, and not a sniff of gas to show for it. I'm through!"

"That's the other side of the picture," remarked Randy. "Evidently he's got rid of every cent he had, and now he's so downhearted he is taking to drink."

"I don't see where he can get it in these days," said Fred.

"Oh, they manage to get it somehow."

The moving picture theater was open, and a crowd was swarming inside. The pictures were old and of a wild Western nature, and none of the lads had any desire to see them. They passed on and looked into the windows of a couple of the general stores, where everything from matches to bedding seemed to be for sale. Then they came to a corner where there was a side street which was little more than an alleyway. Along this were a dozen or more shanties set in anything but a regular row.

On the corner was a flaring banner announcing that here was located the Famous California Chop Suey Restaurant. Behind the small dirty windows ten or fifteen men were eating at half a dozen tables covered with oilcloth.

"Look!" exclaimed Fred, pointing in through the open door of the restaurant. "There are those same men who were at our hotel. Evidently they can't be stopping there—or at least they don't eat there."

"Isn't it queer that they should hang around our hotel and then come down here for a meal?" remarked Randy.

"They're talking to another man—somebody who wasn't at our hotel," said Fred. "Just see how excited they seem to be!" he added quickly, after one of the men drew a paper from his pocket and all of them bent over it with interest.

Then the stranger of the crowd began to talk to the others very earnestly.

"Let us walk down the alleyway, and perhaps we can find out something about those men," suggested Jack. "You say they asked about Lorimer Spell and his claim? They may know something that my dad would like to find out."

"All right," said Fred.

The four Rovers turned the corner of the restaurant and walked slowly down the alleyway along a narrow cinder path. This path ran close to the side of the building, and here were located several small windows, one of them close to where stood the table at which the men inside were seated.

"It's a mighty good thing that we ran across those Rovers the very day they came in," one of the men was saying. "If it hadn't been for that they might have gone up to the Lorimer Spell claim and done something that would queer the whole thing."

"Oh, I don't think they could do that, Tate," returned the man whom the lads had not seen before. "You know at the best Spell's claim on the land was not perfectly clear."

"Well, that's how you look at it, Davenport," said another of the men. "You must remember, Lorimer Spell had a good many friends in this neighborhood. Of course he was a queer Dick and all that sort of thing, but in spite of that folks here would want to have Spell's wishes in this matter upheld."

"Oh, I know we run some risk," returned the man called Davenport. "But I think the stake is worth it."

"To be sure it is!" came from one of the others.

"The question is," came from the man named Tate, "how are we going to get at it? Do you think you'll be able to see the documents this man Rover must carry?"

"Of course I'll see them. I'll get at them some way," returned Carson Davenport firmly. He was a large-built man, with coal-black eyes and black hair and his face had a rather cruel expression.

"Somebody said that Lorimer Spell placed his valuables in some safe deposit vault," went on one of the men. "In that case, this Richard Rover wouldn't have them."

"I don't see why not," said another. "If he became Spell's heir he would have a right to do anything, and the bank would have to give the documents up."

More talk of a like nature followed, and the Rover boys listened with keen interest to every word that was said. They recognized in Carson Davenport the man who had written to Jack's father hoping to get the latter interested in some fake oil companies, trusting that The Rover Company in New York City would be able to dispose of the worthless stocks to their customers—people who trusted them implicitly in all their financial transactions. While these negotiations were going on Jake Tate, Davenport's right-hand man, had learned that Lorimer Spell was dead and that he had made Dick Rover his sole heir. This was at a time when Tate and Davenport, as well as the other men, were trying to get possession of the Spell land, feeling sure that there was oil on it. They had been on the point of communicating with Dick Rover, thinking they might get the claim away from him, when he had surprised the whole crowd by his unexpected appearance in Columbina.

"We've got to have quick action in this," declared Jake Tate. "The longer we delay the worse off we'll be."

"Yes, but you've got to find out about those papers first," said one of the other men, lighting a cigar.

"You leave me to do that," said Carson Davenport. "I'm sure I know exactly how to handle this man Rover."

"He must be a pretty shrewd fellow, Davenport. Otherwise he wouldn't be holding such an important position in that Wall Street company," remarked Tate.

"I've handled men like that before. You leave it to me."

"But you don't want him to suspect anything is off color," said one of the other men.

"I'm not so green, Jackson. I wasn't born yesterday."

"Didn't you say you thought this Rover had a lot of money?"

"Yes, the whole family has money. But, at the same time, that has nothing to do with it. I'll tell you what I propose to do," continued Carson Davenport earnestly. "I'll wait until I am sure that he——"

This was as much as the Rover boys heard for the time being. Around the corner of the building from the main street had come three figures. They had been abreast, but now they approached on the cinder path in single file. As they came closer the lights from the restaurant fell on their faces, and to their intense surprise the four Rovers recognized Gabe Werner, Nappy Martell, and Slugger Brown.

CHAPTER XXI

WORDS AND BLOWS

The surprise on both sides was equal, and for a moment neither the Rovers nor those in the other crowd uttered a word.

"What are you doing here, Jack Rover?" demanded Nappy Martell at length, as he scowled at the youth and his cousins.

"I might ask the same question of you, Nappy," was Jack's return.

"Did you come here from that detention camp?" questioned Fred.

"That's none of your business," retorted Slugger Brown.

"You got away from us this afternoon, Gabe Werner, but you're not going to do it this time," continued Jack, and caught the rascal by the arm.

"Hi! you let go of me," howled the bully roughly, and shoved Jack back against the building.

At this Randy leaped forward and also caught hold of Werner. Nappy Martell and Slugger Brown were about to jump in to the assistance of their friend when Fred and Andy interfered.

"You leave them alone," ordered Fred, with flashing eyes. "He's one of the meanest fellows in the world. He threw pepper in Jack's eyes and in the eyes of Ruth Stevenson."

The loud talking so close to a window of the restaurant attracted the attention of the men inside,

and the fellow named Jake Tate thrust his head out to see what was going on.

"Say, what do you know about this?" he exclaimed, turning to his companions. "Those four young Rovers are out here right by the window!"

"You don't say so!" burst out Carson Davenport.

"If they are by this window maybe they were spying on us," put in the man named Jackson.

In the meanwhile there was something of a fight going on outside. Gabe Werner had tried to break away, and then launched a blow at Jack, who returned by hitting him a crack in the jaw.

"See here, you leave Werner alone!" blustered Slugger Brown.

"You keep out of this, Slugger!" cried Jack, and then, as Werner hit out a second time, Jack dodged and the bully's fist struck the side of the building, skinning several of his knuckles. Then Jack landed a blow with all the force he could command on Werner's left ear, and the rascal went down on the cinder path and rolled over into the roadway.

By this time the men in the restaurant had run outside and were coming up.

"What's the rumpus here?" demanded Jake Tate, pushing his way through the crowd of boys. He was a burly individual, and could at times put on a most aggressive manner.

"We caught these four fellows right by this window," declared Nappy Martell, with a sharp look first at Tate and then at Davenport.

"It looked to us as though they might be spying on you," added Slugger Brown, and he too gave Davenport a peculiar look.

"Spying on us, eh?" muttered the oil company promoter in anything but a pleasant manner. "Fine piece of business to be in!"

By this time Gabe Werner had rolled over and gotten to his feet. But instead of coming at Jack again, he kept at a safe distance, in the meanwhile sucking his bruised knuckles and nursing his left ear.

"We have a right to walk on this street if we want to," remarked Randy.

"They were standing right by this window, and appeared to be listening to something," declared Slugger Brown.

"Then they must have been listening to what we were saying," grumbled Jackson.

"How long were you at this window, young fellow?" demanded Jake Tate.

"I guess that's our own business," and Randy's eyes flashed defiance.

"You want to keep your eyes on those Rovers," cautioned Nappy Martell. "They're as sly as foxes. I know 'em!"

"And they'll do you harm if they can," added Slugger Brown.

"He is saying that because we wouldn't stand for any of his underhanded work," explained Fred.

"We never did stand for anything that wasn't on the level," added Andy, and looked at Carson Davenport suggestively.

"See here, young fellow, don't you get fresh!" cried the oil company promoter. And then he added with a sneer: "I reckon you've been listening to more than was good for you."

"Well, if you want to know it, we heard a few things that surprised us," answered Jack boldly.

"What did you hear?" questioned Jake Tate quickly.

"We heard what you had to say about the Lorimer Spell claim, if you must know it," retorted Fred.

"Yes, and we are going to report it to my Uncle Dick at once," said Andy.

At this the men were evidently much disturbed, and Tate pulled Davenport back and whispered something into his ear. Then both conferred with Jackson. In the meantime Nappy and Slugger came forward again with Werner close behind them.

"You tried to run things to suit yourselves up at Colby Hall," sneered Slugger. "But you'll find it a different story down here."

"Don't you dare to tell any stories about us," warned Nappy. "If you do you'll get in bad, mark my words. I've stood all I'm going to stand from your crowd."

"If you are behaving yourself and trying to earn an honest living, we'll have nothing to say to anybody about your past," answered Jack. "The war is over, and the question of how you aided those German sympathizers is a thing of the past."

"Don't you trust 'em," growled Werner. "They'll do their level best to get you in bad. I know 'em!"

"You just let me get at you, Werner, and I'll show you what I'll do," retorted Jack, and made a move in the direction of the fellow. And at this the bully lost no time in retreating. He was evidently afraid that the Rovers would hand him over to the authorities.

By this time the men were coming forward again.

"See here, boys, we don't want any trouble," said Carson Davenport oilily. "We were only talking about that Lorimer Spell claim in a general way. I'll explain everything to Mr. Rover's satisfaction in the morning. I only want to work with him in this matter. We could get along so much better than if we worked separately."

"All right, then," answered Jack. "You know where my father can be found."

"You may have got a wrong impression from our talk," added Jake Tate. "We handle things in a rougher way down in this oil country than you do up in New York. Davenport will straighten out everything with your father."

After this the men continued to talk to the boys for several minutes, doing their best to allay the Rovers' suspicions. Nappy and Slugger listened with interest, as did also Werner, who, however, kept out of reach of Jack and his cousins.

"We might as well be going, Nappy," said Slugger presently, and turned and hurried up the narrow street, and Gabe Werner went after them. Then, a moment later, the men returned to the restaurant to finish the meal they had begun.

"I suppose we might as well return to the hotel," said Jack.

"Right you are!" declared Randy. "The best thing we can do is to let Uncle Dick know about this."

They found Dick Rover sitting in a corner of the hotel porch talking to an old oil man to whom he had brought a letter of introduction.

"This is Mr. Nick Ogilvie," said Jack's father after introducing the boys. "He will take charge of any operations we may commence in this territory. He is an old oil man, and knows this district thoroughly."

The boys sat down to listen to what the old oil man might have to say. Mr. Ogilvie remained the best part of an hour, and then went off, stating that he would be around again the next day. As soon as he had departed the boys, making sure that no one else was within hearing, told Jack's father of all they had learned concerning Carson Davenport and the men associated with him. Dick Rover listened with intense interest, his face clouding as they proceeded.

"This is certainly news, and I'll have to investigate it thoroughly," he declared, when they had finished. "Evidently this Carson Davenport is a worse sharper than I thought."

"He says he can explain everything to your satisfaction," said Jack. "But I don't see how it can be done."

"Nor I, either," declared Randy. "My opinion is that they are a bunch of crooks and nothing else."

"Evidently they think they have some sort of claim on the Spell land," answered Dick Rover. "And it is possible that such is a fact, because, as I said before, the title to Spell's land seemed to be clouded. Of course, I don't know what is in the documents in the safe-deposit vault at Wichita Falls. Those documents may clear the matter up."

"Then I should think the best thing would be to get those papers," said Jack.

"That's what I intend to do."

"Will you see Davenport in the morning?" questioned Fred curiously.

"Certainly, Fred. I am not afraid of that crowd, and the more they talk the better I'll like it, for then I can get some sort of line on what they are aiming at."

It was some time after breakfast the next morning when Carson Davenport put in an appearance. Dick Rover was busy writing some letters when he came in, and the boys were addressing post-cards to their folks and friends. Davenport was alone.

"I want to clear up any misunderstanding that may have arisen," said the oil well promoter smoothly, as he dropped into a chair beside Jack's father.

There followed a conversation lasting over an hour. At first Davenport did his best to smooth matters over, but gradually, as Dick Rover managed to draw out one fact after another, the oil well promoter showed more or less irritation. Dick's shrewdness bothered him, and finally he hardly knew how to proceed.

"You take it from me, Rover, the only way for us to do is to work this thing together," he remarked. "One claim is just as good as the other, and what is the use of our getting into a dispute over it when we are not real certain that there is oil on the land?"

"Then you mean to say that you think your claim on the land is just as good as mine?" asked Jack's father.

"My claim is just as good, and maybe better. But I don't want to have any trouble. I figure that it

will cost about thirty thousand dollars to sink a well on that land. Now why not go in together? We've got ten thousand dollars, and if you'll put up the other twenty thousand we can try our luck and see what comes of it."

"I'm not admitting that your claim is a good one," answered Dick Rover. "I'll know more about it in a few days."

"Why, what are you going to do?"

"When Lorimer Spell died he left me everything he possessed, and that included some things left in a safe deposit box at a bank in Wichita Falls. I am going to get that box and see if there are any documents in it relating to this claim. Then I'll know exactly how I stand in this matter. Until that time I sha'n't make any sort of a deal."

This was Dick Rover's final decision so far as it concerned Davenport, and the latter went off looking anything but pleased.

"He'll get the best of you if he can, Dad," remarked Jack, after the interview was over.

"I don't doubt it in the least, Son."

"What's the next move, if I may ask?" questioned Fred. The oil well proposition was beginning to interest him tremendously.

"I am going to take the first train for Wichita Falls to-day," answered his uncle. "I guess you boys can get along here until I get back."

"How far is that Lorimer Spell tract of land from here?" asked Randy.

"About three miles or so."

"Then what's the matter with our walking out there and taking a look around?" suggested Fred. "We've got the whole day before us."

"You can do that and welcome," said Jack's father. "But take my advice and take a good lunch along, because you may not be able to get anything up there. I don't know whether there are any farmhouses around or not."

An hour later Dick Rover was off for Wichita Falls by train. Then the lads asked the restaurant man to put up a substantial lunch for them, and a little later they set off in the direction where the Lorimer Spell tract was located.

Around Columbina the walking was anything but good. But presently they found themselves on a country road which had not been cut up by a steady stream of wagons and automobiles, and here they found going better.

They had covered about two miles when they came to a bend in the road, and there Andy called a halt.

"I've got something in my shoe. Wait till I take it off," he said, and sat down on a rock.

They were all resting when they saw an automobile truck rumble past them. There were three men on the front seat, and the lads were very much surprised to see that two of them were Jake Tate and the man called Jackson.

CHAPTER XXII

AMONG THE OIL WELLS

"Did you see those fellows?" exclaimed Randy, after the automobile truck had rumbled out of sight.

"I did," answered Jack. "They were Tate and Jackson."

"Can they be going up to the Lorimer Spell claim?" exclaimed Fred.

"It's possible."

"I don't think they saw us," put in Andy, lacing up his shoe again.

"No, they didn't seem to look this way at all. And, anyhow, they were too busy talking to notice," answered Jack.

The four Rovers continued on their way, following the automobile. Occasionally they met other automobiles, as well as wagons, some piled high with oil-drilling machinery. Then they came to a place where a pipe line was being constructed.

"We are certainly in the oil fields," announced Jack. "See all the derricks in the distance?"

Being-good walkers, it did not take the boys long to reach the Spell tract of land. To make sure that they had found the right spot, they asked an old teamster who was at the roadside mending

a harness.

"Yes, that's Lorimer Spell's ground—or at least it was his ground before he was killed. There is the old shack just as he left it."

The boys walked over to the house, which stood among some low bushes. It was a dilapidated structure, and had evidently been out of repair for several years. Most of the windows were gone, and the front door stood wide open. As was to be expected, the four rooms the house contained were empty save for some straw on the floor and a pile of half-burnt sticks on the open hearth.

"Some thieves must have come along and taken whatever there was of furniture," observed Jack.

"Yes, and somebody has been using it for a place to bunk in," added Fred. "But I don't believe they have been here within the last few days," he added, with a look at the ashes on the hearth.

From the house the boys proceeded to look around the farm, or ranch, if such it might be called. It was irregular in shape, one corner running over a hill and down towards a small brook. Here, to their surprise, they saw a pile of oil-drilling machinery, and a number of posts had been set up. On one of the posts was a placard reading:

The Carson Davenport Claim. Keep off.

"What do you know about this!" cried Jack, his eyes blazing.

"Let's knock the sign down," suggested Fred quickly.

"No, we won't do that—at least not yet, Fred. We'll wait until my father comes with those papers from Wichita Falls."

In the soft soil they could see numerous tracks of automobiles and wagons which had passed that way. One of these tracks was fresh.

"I'll bet that auto with Tate and Jackson was here just before we came!" cried Randy. "Those fellows are certainly on the job. They probably believe that 'possession is nine points of the law.'"

"And it may be down here," said Jack, his face clouding. "The authorities haven't things under their control in a wild country like this as they have in and around the big cities."

There were no oil wells near the Spell tract, and to get to the nearest the lads had to tramp over another hill, a distance of more than a quarter of a mile. Here they found several wells in operation, the combined flow of which, they were told, amounted to about four hundred barrels per day.

"Not so bad, when you consider this oil is worth about two dollars and a half a barrel," remarked Jack.

"That makes a thousand dollars a day," returned Fred. "Gee, just think of taking in that much every twenty-four hours!"

The boys were told that another well was to be shot off that afternoon. This was located about half a mile away, and they resolved to visit the place, first, however, stopping by the roadside for lunch. They were told where they could get a drink of water.

"Phew! how it smells of oil," remarked Randy, turning up his nose at the dose.

"I guess we'll get our fill of oil before we get through, Randy," laughed Jack. "Some of these neighborhoods are saturated with oil from end to end. The houses and barns are full of it, and so are the roads, and they tell me even the things in the dining-rooms and bedrooms smell of oil."

"And just see how black the stuff is," declared Fred. "It doesn't look one bit like the oil we are used to using. It certainly needs a lot of refining."

"And just think of the hundred and one things that come from it," said Jack. "Kerosene and gasoline, and benzine and naphtha and paraffin, and I don't know what all."

The middle of the afternoon found them at the place where the new well was to be brought in—that is, provided everything went well, the the head workman told them, with a grin. He was a good-natured Irishman with body and clothing saturated with oil from head to foot.

"'Tis not a noice way av makin' a livin'," he announced. "But 'tis clane money one gits in his pocket."

"Yes, and you haven't got to stay here forever," answered Jack, with a smile. "After you've made your pile you can go to some place more agreeable."

"Sure, an' that's true, Son, so 'tis," said the foreman.

He explained to them how the well had been drilled and how the charges had been lowered. They had tested out the well at eighteen hundred feet, but without success. Now they were down twenty-six hundred feet, and the indications for oil were decidedly good.

At length came the moment for shooting off the well. Some of the woodwork surrounding the derrick had been removed, and all the electric connections were pronounced in good working order. Then the boys and the others who had assembled were ordered back to a safe distance.

It was a thrilling moment, and no one felt it more than the four Rovers. They waited a few minutes, and then came a dull rumble, shaking the ground as if by an earthquake. Then they saw something shoot skyward, and then came a sudden rain of black oil, flying and spattering in all directions.

"They've struck it! They've struck it!" yelled Andy excitedly. "They've struck oil!"

"Gee, but I'll bet that makes them feel good," announced Fred. "That well must have cost a lot of money."

"Forty thousand dollars, the foreman said," came from Jack. "Come on, let us get back unless we want our clothing ruined." For the wind was shifting and sending a fine spray of oil in their direction.

It was hard work to control the flow of oil, and the men around the new well had to work like Trojans. The black mass was flowing off in a depression of the ground which had been dammed around to receive it.

"It certainly is a great proceeding," was Fred's comment, when they finally turned away and started on their return to Columbina. "I don't wonder that those men get interested. It certainly is the greatest gamble of the age. One minute you have nothing, and the next, if you are lucky, the oil is pouring thousands of dollars into your pocket every week."

"It's the land of luck, all right enough," answered Fred.

"And you mustn't forget one thing," added Jack. "There are just as many failures as there are successes. There have been millions and millions of dollars sunk in Texas, Oklahoma and Kansas, and some promoters haven't got even a smell of oil for their money."

When the lads returned to the hotel they found that several letters had come in for them. One was from Jack's sister, and this he read with interest, and then passed it around to his cousins to peruse.

In her letter Martha wrote that she had heard from Ruth Stevenson's mother, who stated that Ruth's eyes were not in as good shape as the local doctor had hoped for and he had advised that a specialist be consulted.

"Gee, that's the worst yet!" said Jack, and his face showed his concern. "Poor Ruth! I do hope she comes out of it all right, and that very soon."

Both Jack and the others would have been more concerned had they known the truth, which was that Ruth had already been placed in the care of an eye specialist and been removed to that physician's private sanitarium. Pressed to tell the exact truth by Mr. Stevenson, the specialist had admitted that Ruth's eyes had suffered exceedingly, and that she was in danger of losing the sight of one of them and that that might possibly affect the other. As Mrs. Stevenson was very nervous already, the doctor had advised her husband to keep the truth to himself for the present and hope for the best.

Among the other letters received was one forwarded by Mary to her brother Fred. This was from Gif Garrison, and in the communication Gif told how he had heard in a roundabout way of Nappy and Slugger.

"It seems that there was once a man named Davenport in business with Mr. Martell," wrote Gif. "This Davenport is now down in the oil fields of Texas, and he has agreed, so I understand, to give Nappy and Slugger a chance to work for a company he has formed. So they are likely down there, and maybe you will meet them. They also say that Glutts and Werner used to correspond with Nappy and Slugger, so that it is just possible they will go down there too."

"Well, Glutts isn't here," said Fred, with a grin. "I guess that mix-up in New York was too much for him."

"If those fellows want to work for Carson Davenport they can do so," said Jack. "But they've got to keep their distance—Werner especially."

Late that evening there came a telegram for Jack. It was from his father, announcing the fact that he would have to remain in Wichita Falls for a day or two.

"Perhaps he's got to fix up some legal matters in connection with this Spell claim," suggested Fred.

There was not much to interest the boys around Columbina, and the next day hung rather heavily on their hands. They visited the general stores and also walked over to the depot and watched two of the trains come in. They saw Carson Davenport alight from one and hurry away as rapidly as possible, carrying a Gladstone bag with him.

"Hello! I wonder if he has been to Wichita Falls too," cried Jack.

"He certainly came from that direction," answered Fred. "But you must remember there are lots of other towns along the line."

The following afternoon found the four boys on a highway leading from Columbina to Derrickville. They had fallen in with an old oil prospector who knew Nick Ogilvie well, and this prospector had offered to take them over to Derrickville in his five-passenger touring-car.

"It's a great sight around Derrickville," said the man. "There are hundreds of oil wells in that vicinity. It's about the busiest place for miles around."

Warned by their previous experience, the boys had purchased some overalls and plain caps, and these they donned to protect their other clothing. They found the road to Derrickville deep in mud, and more than once it looked as if the car in which they were riding would get stuck. But Mr. Bradley was a good driver, and always managed somehow to get through.

"It ain't like driving on Broadway," he grinned, "but we've got to make the best of it."

Two hours later found the Rovers in Derrickville. They were left to shift for themselves, Mr. Bradley stating he would take them back to Columbina at five o'clock. They visited a dozen wells or more, and also the pumping station connected with a large pipe line, and then walked over to where the drilling of some new wells was in progress.

"Look!" shouted Fred suddenly. "Look! Am I mistaken, or is that Phil Franklin over there?"

He pointed to a distance, and then he and the others hurried to the spot. There, looking at the work which was going on around a new well, were the man and the boy they had once rescued from the freshet on the Rick Rack River.

CHAPTER XXIII

A QUEER SUMMONS

"Am I seeing straight, and is it really the Rovers?" exclaimed John Franklin, when confronted by the boys.

"You are seeing straight enough, Mr. Franklin," answered Fred, as he shook hands first with the father and then the son. "Is your claim around here?"

"No, our claim is some miles from here," answered John Franklin. "It's at a place called Pottown."

"I've heard of that place," said Jack, as he too shook hands, as did the others. "They say there are quite a few oil wells in that neighborhood."

"What have you done about your claim, if I may ask?" questioned Randy.

"Oh, I've got myself all straightened out," said Mr. Franklin, with a broad smile. "You see, when I got down here I played in luck right from the start. Those swindlers had got tired of trying to do something on my farm, and then I ran into an old friend of mine who was a lawyer. He took the matter up for me, and the swindlers got scared and all of them quit the claim over night; so I am now in sole possession."

"And have you struck oil?" asked Jack.

"No, I haven't got that far yet, but I have great hopes of going ahead. You see, I'm handicapped for money. I could get some capitalists interested, but they generally want the lion's share of the proceeds, and that I don't want to give them."

"I don't blame you," said Fred. "You ought to get the most of the money if the oil is found on your land."

"I'm telling dad to take his time," put in Phil Franklin. "The land won't run away, and the more oil wells that are producing around us, the more valuable our place will become."

"But what brought you young fellows down here?" questioned the man. "Are you on a sightseeing tour?"

"Not altogether," answered Jack. "My father is interested in a claim down here, and he allowed us to come along with him." And thereupon he gave some of the particulars.

John Franklin listened attentively to the story, and his eyes flashed angrily when the names of Tate and Jackson were mentioned.

"Those are the swindlers who were trying to do me out of my property!" he ejaculated. "And I'm of the opinion this Carson Davenport was in with them. They are a bunch of crooks, and nothing else. They ought all to be in prison."

"Well, they'll land there sooner or later if they don't look out," returned Fred.

"If I was your father I would have nothing to do with this Davenport or the men acting with him," went on Mr. Franklin to Jack.

"Do you know anything at all about the Lorimer Spell claim?"

"I don't know anything about what has happened lately so far as that claim is concerned," was John Franklin's reply. "But I do know when oil was first discovered in this region some of the experts went over the whole territory carefully and they did not consider the Spell claim as being of any value. That's the reason no wells were located there. They claimed that the geological formation was not good for oil."

"Oh! then you mean to say there is no oil on that claim?" questioned Fred disappointedly.

"I don't know anything about it, lad. I am only telling you what the experts said. Those fellows miss it once in a while, just the same as other people. At the same time, if an expert doesn't think ground is worth drilling for oil, you can make up your mind that the chances of striking it rich there are very slim."

"But are you sure the experts went over it very carefully?" questioned Andy.

"I am."

"And who were they?"

"They were from Wichita Falls—a firm by the name of Fitch and Lunberry."

"Then probably if my father wanted it he could get a report from Fitch and Lunberry," said Jack.

"I think he could—provided, of course, he was willing to pay for it. These experts don't work for nothing!" and John Franklin grinned.

"If you stay down here any length of time I wish you'd come over to our place and see us," said Phil Franklin.

"We'll be sure to do that," answered Randy.

"Maybe I can get your uncle interested in my land," suggested Mr. Franklin. "I wish he'd look it over. It wouldn't cost him anything."

"I'll speak to dad about it," answered Jack quickly. There was something about the Franklins which had pleased him ever since he had first known them. They appeared to be perfectly honest and reliable.

Accompanied by the Franklins, the Rovers tramped around the various oil wells located in and near Derrickville. Mr. Franklin understood a great deal about the wells and the machinery, and explained these things in an interesting way, so the afternoon passed quickly. Almost before they knew it the Rovers had to say good-bye and start on the return trip with Mr. Bradley.

"Gee, I wonder if what Mr. Franklin said about the Spell claim can be true!" remarked Jack, on the way to Columbina.

"He ought to know what he is talking about, Jack," answered Fred. "And certainly he had no axe to grind in the matter. He doesn't want to see Uncle Dick throw his money away."

Two more days passed, and still Dick Rover did not return from Wichita Falls. The boys went out sightseeing and amused themselves as best they could, but this was not saying much. The most fun they had was in a shooting-gallery where they astonished the proprietor by the bull's-eyes they made.

"You young fellows are some shots," said he. "You must be used to guns."

"We are," answered Fred.

The four Rovers had gone into the target gallery directly after supper and while it was still light. Now, when they came out, Jack suggested that they return to the hotel.

"We might send out a letter or two," he suggested, "and I'd like to look over a newspaper if I can find one."

The Rovers were heading in the direction of the hotel when, glancing across the street, they saw Nappy Martell and Slugger Brown.

"They seem to be watching us," declared Jack.

"Probably they'd like to know what we intend to do," answered Randy. "I think we might as well ignore them," he went on, as he saw Nappy and Slugger crossing the muddy roadway.

"Hello!" called Slugger coolly. "We've been looking for you fellows."

"Looking for us!" exclaimed Fred.

"Yes, we found out you were not at the hotel, and so we thought you must be somewhere around town."

"What do you want of us?" demanded Jack suspiciously.

"We came to see you on Gabe Werner's account," answered Nappy. As he spoke he showed that he was nervous.

"On Gabe Werner's account! What do you mean?"

"I guess you had better ask Gabe about that," answered Slugger. "He's very anxious to see all of you—wants to see you this evening, too."

"Where is he?"

"We left him at a house up on the Derrickville road. It's about half a mile or so out of town," answered Slugger.

"Is he sick?" questioned Fred.

"He's worse than that—he's down and out," answered Nappy. "But he said to tell all of you that he wanted to see you this evening sure—that to-morrow morning wouldn't do."

"See here, Nappy, is this some sort of trick?" demanded Jack bluntly. "If it is, I want to tell you right now it won't work."

"It's no trick. How could it be? We are all alone, and we're not armed. We are doing this solely because Gabe Werner asked us to do it. He couldn't come himself, not with a broken leg."

"Oh, then he has broken his leg, has he?" said Andy, with something of sympathy in his voice. "That, of course, is another matter." He turned to the others. "I'm willing to go and see him if you are."

"All right, let's go," put in Fred.

"We'll go," said Jack, after a few whispered words to Randy. "But you remember what I said, both of you. If this is a trick we'll see to it that you get the worst of it."

"You'll find out that it's no trick as soon as you get to the house," declared Slugger Brown.

He and Nappy Martell led the way, and soon the whole crowd had left Columbina behind and were trudging along the muddy road leading to Derrickville. The way was dark and anything but inviting, and all of them made slow progress.

"The house is over there in the field," said Slugger presently, as he came to a halt. "You needn't be afraid, because there are only a very old man and a woman living there. Gabe Werner has been boarding with them since he came down here."

"Are you fellows working for Carson Davenport?" questioned Randy.

"We expect to work for him, yes. But nothing has been settled as yet," answered Nappy. "He has offered us thirty dollars a week, but we think we can get more than that elsewhere," he added loftily.

"And what of Werner? Is he going to work with you?"

"That was the idea," answered Slugger. "But I don't know what he'll do now. He's certainly in bad shape."

"How did he get his leg broken?"

"He didn't tell us a word about it," answered Nappy. "There is something queer about the whole transaction. But he said he must see all of you Rovers and do it to-night. What he's got on his mind, I don't know."

The Rovers hardly knew what to do. They were unarmed, and the place certainly looked like a lonely one. They wondered if it would be possible for Carson Davenport and his crowd to be at the house waiting for them.

"You and Slugger go ahead," Jack said. "We'll follow behind. And mark you, no tricks!"

"There is nothing to be afraid of," Slugger assured him. And then he and Nappy stalked off in the fast-gathering darkness. They walked up to the lonely house, and disappeared around a corner of the building.

"Say, Jack, this doesn't look right to me at all," announced Fred. "I wish I had a pistol."

"I'm going to arm myself with a club," said Randy, and looked around for such a weapon.

The others did the same, two of them picking up sticks and the others arming themselves with stones. Then they advanced with caution, keeping their eyes wide open for the appearance of anything that might look dangerous.

"I don't see any light around the place," announced Jack, as they drew closer.

"I wonder what became of Nappy and Slugger?" broke in Fred. "I don't see them anywhere."

"Suppose we call them," suggested Andy.

"Let us walk around the house first," returned his twin. "They may have gone in by the back way. Most of the folks living around here use the back door for everything."

With added caution the Rover boys walked slowly around one side of the building. In the rear they found everything as dark and deserted as in the front.

"This is certainly strange," announced Jack. He advanced and knocked sharply on the closed

door.

There was no reply, and he knocked a second time. Then Randy beat upon the door with his stick.

"It looks to me as if there wasn't a soul in the place," announced Andy. "I wonder what has become of Nappy and Slugger?"

"See here, will you?" cried Fred suddenly. "It looks to me as if nobody lived here. Every one of the windows is boarded up on the inside. I believe this house is being used for nothing but a storehouse. I don't believe a soul lives here."

"Hello, Nappy! Hello, Slugger!" called out Jack loudly. "Where are you?"

To this call there was no reply.

CHAPTER XXIV

DICK ROVER'S REVELATION

"We've been tricked!" exclaimed Randy.

"Just what I think!" burst out Fred. "They didn't bring us here to see Gabe Werner at all!"

"There isn't a soul around the building, that's certain," remarked Andy. "What do you suppose has become of Nappy and Slugger?"

The Rovers looked around in the fast-gathering darkness, but could see no one. Then they walked around the building several times, peering in all directions for a sight of the fellows who had brought them on this strange mission.

"It's a storehouse, right enough," announced Jack. "And my opinion is that everything is nailed up except the front door, and that, as you can see, has a padlock on it."

It was certainly a mystery, and for the time being the Rover boys were unable to solve it. Looking down on the ground, they saw a number of footprints, but it was now too dark to follow any of these.

"Wish we had brought a pocket flashlight along," remarked Fred.

"It's getting as dark as a stack of black cats," said Andy.

"Yes, and we had better be getting back to town before it gets so dark we lose our way," returned Jack.

As it was, they had some difficulty in finding the path down to the road. Then they stumbled along in the darkness, occasionally heading into some mud hole up to their ankles.

"Nappy and Slugger certainly have the laugh on us for this," said Fred, as they plowed along. "Maybe they thought we would lose our way completely in this darkness."

It was a good half-hour before the Rovers reached the outskirts of Columbina. At a great distance they could see many twinkling electric lights, one of which hung on the top of every oil derrick. But these were so far off they did nothing towards illuminating the way.

"Almost ten o'clock," announced Jack, consulting his watch. "About all we can do is to clean the mud from our shoes and go to bed."

There was a sleepy young clerk behind the counter of the hotel, and he showed them where they could clean up.

"No bootblacks in Columbina," said Randy, with a grin. And then all set to work with a whisk broom and brushes to clean up.

"I wonder if Uncle Dick will get in to-night," remarked Fred. The last train to stop at Columbina was due in fifteen minutes.

"I think I'll stay up and find out," said Jack.

"You waiting for Mr. Rover?" demanded the boy behind the counter, as he yawned and stretched himself. "If you are, he came in a couple of hours ago."

"Is that so!" cried Jack, in surprise. "Where is he now?"

"I think he's up in his room, although I'm not sure. You see, I was out to a dance last night, and I'm pretty tired, and I fell asleep a couple of times sitting here doing nothing. Somehow or other, it seems to be an off night around this hotel. Nothing doing at all," and the sleepy clerk yawned again.

"Maybe he's up in his room looking over those papers he brought," suggested Randy. "Come on up and see."

All mounted the stairs to the third floor of the hotel. When they reached the room occupied by Dick Rover they found the door locked, and a rap upon it brought no response.

"He isn't here, that's sure," said Jack. "Maybe he went out on an errand."

"Unless he's in our room," said Fred. In the larger apartment which the four boys occupied there was a small table, and Jack's father had several times come in to use this for writing purposes.

Jack had one of the keys to the room, and, stepping across the hallway, he attempted to insert this in the lock. Much to his surprise, the key would not go into the keyhole.

"That is strange——" he began, and then tried the door, to find it unlocked. Another key was on the inside.

The room was pitch dark, only a dim lamp being lighted in the rear of the long hallway. Jack stepped forward to get a match from a bureau, and as he did so he stumbled over something on the floor and pitched headlong.

"Oh!" he gasped, and then gave a sudden shudder, for he had felt the body of someone beside him. "Be careful," he went on. "Make a light, quick! Here is someone on the floor! I'm afraid it's dad!"

The others piled into the room, and Randy, who happened to have some matches in his pocket, struck a light and lit the lamp.

There, on the floor of the bedroom, lay Dick Rover. There was a small cut on his left temple from which the blood was flowing. He was breathing heavily, and evidently trying to speak.

"Dad! Dad! what happened to you?" cried Jack hoarsely, as he bent over and raised his parent up.

"He's been hurt!" exclaimed Fred. "See the cut on his forehead. Wait—I'll get some water."

He made a dash for the pitcher and also for a towel, and while Jack supported his father on his arm the others bathed Dick Rover's face and washed away the trickling blood.

"He's been hit," declared Randy. "See the lump on the back of his head," and he pointed it out.

Presently Dick Rover opened his eyes and stared vacantly at the anxious lads.

"What—what—what happened to me?" he stammered and gave a gasp. "Who—who knocked me down?"

"That we don't know, Dad," answered Jack, and he was glad to realize that his parent was coming to his senses. "Gee! I was afraid you had been killed."

The four boys raised Dick Rover up and laid him on one of the cots. They had a little first-aid kit with them, and from this they got some plaster with which they bound up the small cut.

It was some time before Dick Rover felt able to tell his story. In the meanwhile Fred dashed downstairs for some hot water, which was applied to the lump on the sufferer's head.

"I guess I'll get over it," said Jack's father, with a wan smile. "But they certainly did give it to me." Then he gave a sudden start. "What about my papers? Are they safe?"

The boys looked around, but saw no papers of any kind in the room.

"I had them in my bag. I brought them in here to look them over, and to do some writing at the table."

"Well, there's no bag here now, or papers either," announced Randy.

"Then those rascals must have taken them! That was probably why they knocked me down. They wanted to rob me."

"But who attacked you, Dad?" questioned Jack.

"That I don't know, Son. I was seated at the table with the open bag beside me, and was looking over some of the documents I had brought from the safe deposit vault in Wichita Falls when I heard a noise behind me near the door. I was just about to get up to see what it meant, when all of a sudden I received a terrible crack on the back of the head. I turned around, and then somebody aimed another blow at me that caught me on the left temple. Then everything seemed to dance before my eyes, and I guess I must have gone down in a heap on the floor. And that's all I knew until I found you supporting me and bathing my forehead."

"It must have been those oil-well fellows!" ejaculated Fred.

"I think I see a light!" almost shouted Jack. "Nappy and Slugger were in this plot. They made us go away out of town just so we wouldn't be here with my dad when the other fellows attacked him!"

"I guess you're right," answered Randy.

"What's this you are saying?" questioned Dick Rover, rather feebly.

In a few words the boys explained the trick Nappy Martell and Slugger Brown had played on

them.

"Yes, I guess you are right. It must have been a part of the game," said Jack's father. "And are you sure my bag and everything that was in it are gone?"

"Yes, there isn't a single paper in this room," answered Jack. "And when we came up we found the door to your room locked, so it isn't likely they are there."

"They must have dug out the minute they knocked me over and got the papers," answered Dick Rover. "Probably they were afraid you or somebody else might come up and catch them at their dastardly work. As it is, it is queer somebody didn't see them."

"There happens to be no one down in the office but the young clerk, and he's half asleep," answered Randy. "Besides that, those fellows may have come in by the back way. Did you catch sight of them at all?"

"I can't say that I did, Randy. The first blow dazed me, and while I remember something of two or three forms, it is all so vague that it amounts to nothing. I rather think, however, that there were at least three men."

"And if there were, I'll bet a new hat those men were Davenport, Tate, and Jackson," returned Jack firmly.

"You may be right, Son. But you know what they say in court: It is one thing to know the truth, and quite another to be able to prove it."

"But who would want to steal those papers if not Davenport and his crowd?" questioned Randy. And then he added hurriedly: "Did they rob you of anything else, Uncle Dick?"

"I don't think so." Dick Rover felt in his pockets. "No, my money and watch and my diamond ring are all safe. If they had been ordinary thieves they would certainly have taken everything of value."

"Our baggage doesn't seem to be disturbed," said Andy, who was looking around. "I guess you are right—they were after those documents and nothing else."

There was a pause, and suddenly the boys saw a queer smile pass over Dick Rover's face, and then he uttered a peculiar whistle.

"What is it, Dad?" said Jack wonderingly. He knew that his father had a habit of whistling in that fashion when something struck him as funny.

"I was just thinking that perhaps those fellows who robbed me had taken a white elephant off my hands," returned Dick Rover.

"Why, what do you mean by white elephant?" questioned Andy.

"I mean that maybe they are fighting tooth and nail to get possession of something which I might be only too glad to give them for nothing."

"Oh, Dad, are you talking about the Lorimer Spell claim?" questioned Jack.

"Yes."

"But I don't understand."

"Of course you don't. But maybe you will after I've told my story. As you know, I went to Wichita Falls mainly to get the documents which Lorimer Spell had stored away in the safe deposit vault of a bank there. Well, I got the documents, and in looking them over found that while Lorimer Spell's claim to the land seemed to be fairly well established, still there was something of a cloud to the title—the cloud of which Carson Davenport and his crowd are taking advantage. But more than that, I found that a firm of oil experts named Fitch and Lunberry had gone over the property both for Spell and for an oil promoter who had thought to put some money into operations there. So then I called on the firm and had a long talk with Mr. Fitch."

"And what did Mr. Fitch have to say about the land?" asked Jack quickly.

"He was very frank to say that in his opinion there was no oil of any kind on the claim. He told me that he knew Lorimer Spell very well, and that while Spell was all right in the main, he had been daffy on the subject of oil, so much so that it had just about turned the poor fellow's brain until he imagined that there was fabulous wealth in oil on every acre he possessed. Mr. Fitch got down to facts and figures, and showed me all of his deductions, and he said that it was his honest opinion that any money spent on the Lorimer Spell claim would be utterly wasted."

CHAPTER XXV

DAVENPORT'S ACCUSATION

"Then the Lorimer Spell claim is positively no good!" exclaimed Jack.

"I wouldn't say that exactly, Jack. No claim down here can be said to be worthless until it has actually been bored for oil. It is just possible that those oil experts may be mistaken. At the same time, from what Mr. Fitch said, I would be very slow about putting money in that land."

"It's too bad, Uncle Dick, if that claim's no good when we all supposed it would be so wonderful," came from Fred, and his face showed his disappointment.

"Well, I haven't lost anything," answered his Uncle Dick. "I feel a great deal better than if I had sunk thirty or forty thousand dollars in a dry hole."

Andy began to snicker.

"Gee! it's rich, Uncle Dick, to pass Davenport and that crowd the white elephant," he chuckled. "I only hope they get bit bad, especially if they were the rascals who came here and knocked you out."

"They must have been the crowd, because no one else would be interested in those documents. They knew I was going to Wichita Falls to get them, and they probably hung around waiting for my return. And they probably got Martell and Brown to get you boys out of the way. The story about Gabe Werner having a broken leg was probably faked up."

"Nappy admitted that he and Slugger expected to work for the Davenport crowd," said Jack. "They are all tarred with the same stick, and I hope they get stuck bad."

"Uncle Dick, why don't you pretend to be terribly put out over the fact that you have lost your interest in the claim?" cried Andy. "That will throw them completely off the track. Let them imagine that you think there is a lot of oil to be found there."

"I'll think it over and at the same time I'll think over what other investments I might make while I'm down here. But just at present I think I'll try to get a good night's sleep and reduce this swelling on my head," added Jack's father, as he felt of the bump tenderly.

"I know one person who would like you to interest yourself in his claim!" exclaimed Jack. "That is Mr. John Franklin, the man we saved from drowning in the Rick Rack River freshet."

Thereupon the boys told of their meeting with Mr. Franklin and Phil, and also related what particulars they knew concerning the man's land and how he had gotten it out of the clutches of the oil sharpers.

"That might be worth looking into," said Dick Rover. "I'll take it up a little later, after I feel better, and after I have had it out with Davenport and his crowd."

The boys assisted Jack's father to his room and Jack aided him in retiring. Meanwhile Randy went down to interview the sleepy hotel clerk.

"That fellow doesn't know a thing about what happened," announced Randy on his return. "Those men must have come in and gone out while he was taking a snooze. And as luck would have it for those rascals, no one else seems to have been around."

With nothing of special importance to do, the whole crowd slept late on the following morning, which was Sunday. Dick Rover was glad to take it easy, but declined to have a physician when that was suggested.

"It was only an ordinary blow, and did nothing more than knock me out for a little while," said he. "The swelling on my head is gradually going down, and that little cut on the temple doesn't amount to much."

"Those men ought all to be put in prison!" burst out Fred.

"Possibly you are right, Fred. But you must remember that you are now in a section of the country where living is rather rough. A new oil town and a new mining camp are pretty much on the same level. You often have to take the law into your own hands and fight your way through the best you can. Later there will be regular law and order, and then matters will run more smoothly."

Dick Rover did not mention the matter to the boys, but from that day on he went armed, resolved to take no more chances should any of the oil land swindlers attack him again.

Two more days passed, and during that time the boys visited a number of localities in that vicinity, trying to catch sight of Nappy and Slugger, and also Werner. But those three unworthies did not show themselves.

"They know we've got it in for them," declared Jack. "They'll keep in hiding until they think this affair has blown over."

On the third day Dick Rover felt quite like himself, and he hired an automobile to take him and the boys, as well as Nick Ogilvie, to the Lorimer Spell claim. Somewhat to his surprise, he found Carson Davenport on the land, along with Tate and Jackson and half a dozen other men. More oil-well machinery had been brought up and dumped in a spot near the brook.

"What's the meaning of this, Davenport?" questioned Jack's father shortly.

"It means that I'm going to work on my own hook, Rover," answered Davenport, and there was a

sneer in his voice. "I've got tired of trying to make a deal with you, and I've come to the conclusion that your claim is no good."

"I think I understand you perfectly," answered Dick Rover, and looked at the man so sharply that Davenport had to drop his eyes. "You think you have everything your own way, eh?"

"Never mind what I think. If you've got any real claim on this property you show the evidences. That little paper that Lorimer Spell wrote out on the battlefield of France doesn't hold water with me. You've got to show me the deeds, and all that sort of thing."

"A man can't show papers when he has been robbed of them," went on Jack's father pointedly.

"Humph! So that's your latest story, is it, Rover? First when I asked you for the papers you said they were in a safe deposit vault in Wichita Falls."

"So they were. But now I have been robbed of them, and you know it."

"I know it? Say, Rover, are you going crazy? I don't know any such thing," and now Davenport put on an assumption of anger.

"I say you do know it—you and your whole crowd!" retorted Dick Rover. "This land is a tract said to be full of oil, and you want to do me out of my rights." And now Jack's father appeared to warm up.

"Rover, I've had enough of your bluffing, and I won't stand for any more of it!" cried Carson Davenport. "You may be able to put up a big front with some folks, but it won't go with me. I claim that this land is mine, and I won't pay any more attention to what you say until you produce those precious papers that you have said so much about. And even then I may not listen to you. My private opinion is that the army authorities ought to take up your case and make an example of you," went on the oil promoter, with more of a sneer than before.

"The army authorities?" questioned Dick Rover, puzzled.

"That's what I said. I've heard a thing or two about you. It was all well enough for you to pull Spell in and get a medal for doing it. But when that poor fool wrote out a so-called will leaving you everything he possessed, I reckon he rather put his foot into it," finished Davenport significantly.

Jack's father and the boys were, of course, astonished, and even Davenport's companions showed that this was something they had not been expecting. The men crowded around to find out what was coming next.

"Davenport, I'll have to ask you to explain yourself!" exclaimed Dick Rover, and strode forward, his eyes flashing.

"Want me to explain myself, do you?" cried the oil promoter savagely. "All right, then, I will. According to reports Lorimer Spell ran out ahead of you in that fight, and then he was shot in the back. Do you understand that—shot in the back! Well, who did it? Certainly not the Germans. They were in front of him."

"Do you mean to insinuate that I or one of our other men shot Spell?" demanded Dick Rover, and now his face was almost white.

"He had made a will in your favor—you were the only one to profit by his death."

"You cur, you!" cried Dick Rover. And beside himself with righteous anger, he sprang forward and planted a blow on Carson Davenport's chin that made the oil well promoter stagger back and fall flat.

"Hi! Hi! None of that around here!" bellowed Jake Tate, and caught Dick Rover by the arm.

"You get back there," was the quick reply. "This is none of your affair. This man has accused me of something, and he is going to take it back."

"You let my father alone!" broke in Jack, and rushed toward Tate, followed by Randy and Nick Ogilvie. Then the fellow fell back. Jackson viewed the contest in silence.

By this time Carson Davenport was struggling to his feet. He was in a terrible rage and came at Dick Rover blusteringly.

"What do you mean by hitting me that way, Rover?" he howled.

"You take back what you said, Davenport. If you don't I'll give you another one!" exclaimed Jack's father.

"I'll take back nothing."

"All right, then—here goes!" And once more Dick Rover's fist shot out, and again the oil well promoter measured his length on the ground.

This time as he arose he put his hand behind him in his hip pocket. But before he could draw any weapon, if such was his intention, Dick Rover was on him and had his arms pinioned.

"There'll be no shooting here, Davenport. You try it, and you'll get the worst of it. Now, then, you

take back what you said!" and Dick Rover shoved his clenched fist under the other's nose.

Carson Davenport could bluster, but at heart he was more or less of a coward. He tried to retreat, and as Jack's father followed him up he mumbled some words about there being a mistake and that he had not meant to say just what Jack's father had imagined.

"Poor Lorimer Spell was shot by the Huns," said Dick Rover, for the benefit of the other men standing around. "He had gone on ahead of our party, and then, finding out his mistake, he was in the act of turning around to get back in line when the shot struck him that killed him. To say that he was shot down by any of his own crowd is a wicked falsehood. Half a dozen men of our command can prove every word of what I have said."

"You'll rue the day you pitched into me, Rover," grumbled Davenport, but took good care to keep out of reach.

"You brought it on yourself," retorted Jack's father. "And now, as for this claim," he added, after a slight pause. "As all of my papers have been stolen I presume I can do nothing, even though this land may be the most valuable in oil in this vicinity. But I will watch the turn of affairs, and if I get a chance to prove anything I'll do it."

"You show me your papers, and if they are all right, I'll see that you get what is coming to you," mumbled Davenport. "But just the same, let me repeat—I don't believe there are any papers. The whole thing was a faked-up story to get me to give up my claim." Davenport was nursing his bruised chin. "And don't forget that you knocked me down when you had no right to do it," he added uglily.

"Are you going to sink a well here?"

"That's our business."

"What's the use of trying to hide it, anyhow?" put in Jake Tate. "Yes, we're going to sink a well here just as soon as we can get our machinery in working order."

"And we're going to do it with our own money. We're not asking any assistance from you," added Jackson.

"All right, then, go ahead," said Dick Rover. "I have no more to say—at least for the present." And then, motioning to the four boys and Nick Ogilvie to follow him, he withdrew.

CHAPTER XXVI

NEWS OF RUTH

"I guess they are pretty sure there is oil on that land," chuckled Andy, as the whole party got aboard the automobile and started back for town.

"I hope they sink about a hundred thousand dollars in that ground and get nothing for their trouble," added his twin.

"Gee, Dad, you certainly did soak Davenport a couple!" cried Jack admiringly.

"I did it on the spur of the moment, Son. I couldn't help it," declared Dick Rover. "It was too great an insult to pass unnoticed."

"And to think he didn't have the nerve to fight back!" added Fred. "I didn't imagine he was such a coward."

"Well, I was surprised at that myself," answered his uncle, with something of a smile. "But now listen to me, boys," he added seriously. "Don't think because I flew into Davenport that that is the right thing to do under all circumstances. He simply got me going before I knew it. Ordinarily fighting doesn't pay, and I want you to know it."

"But, Uncle Dick, that wasn't a fight—that was only a good spanking," said Andy, and at this all the others had to snicker.

"I reckon Davenport knew he was in the wrong when he made that dirty remark," came from Nick Ogilvie. "Why, in these parts many a man would have shot him down for those words. I don't wonder your father flew into him. He should have been licked until he was a fit subject for the hospital."

"Do you think I am doing right to let them work the claim?" questioned Jack's father.

"I certainly do, Mr. Rover. I want to get busy and earn the salary you have promised me, but I wouldn't want to start operations anywhere on that Spell claim. I know it has been thoroughly gone over by both Fitch and Lunberry, and both of those men are as good experts as you can find anywhere."

"Well, that forces me out of business for the time being, Ogilvie. I'll have to look around a little and see if it is worth while for me to take hold elsewhere. I presume all the really good claims

around here have been covered."

"I don't know as to that, Mr. Rover. You see, lots of the ranches haven't been investigated very thoroughly. A fellow hits oil in one place and the whole gang follow him like a lot of sheep, and in doing that they may be passing by something a good deal better."

"Dad, why not look into this claim the Franklins own?" came from Jack.

"Are you talking of John Franklin?" questioned Nick Ogilvie.

"Yes."

"I thought that claim was in the hands of some other fellows—Tate, Jackson, and that crowd."

"They did make a claim on it, so Mr. Franklin says, but he managed in some way or other to get them out of it. I guess they left it mostly because they thought they could do better on the Spell place."

"Well, I don't know anything about John Franklin's place, but I do know he's a decent sort of fellow and I'd like to see him do well."

"If you are satisfied that Mr. Fitch is all right, Dad, why not have him make a survey of the Franklin place?" suggested Jack.

"Perhaps I'll do that—after I've had a talk with Franklin," answered his father.

Dick Rover was not a person to waste time, and he sought out John Franklin and his son Phil the very next day and had a long talk with the pair. Then, on the Monday following, he visited the Franklin farm, taking Nick Ogilvie and two other oil men with him. The boys wished to go along, but to this Jack's father demurred.

"I don't want too much of a crowd along," he said. "If anything comes of it you can visit the place later. At present you had better try to amuse yourselves around the town. And do try to keep out of trouble," he added, with a smile.

Left to themselves, the four young Rovers visited the railroad station and then drifted into the shooting gallery. Here they got up a little contest among themselves, shooting at the longest range target the gallery afforded. In this contest, which lasted the best part of an hour, Jack came out ahead, making seventeen bull's-eyes out of a possible twenty-five. Next to him came Randy with a score of fifteen.

"Say, what kind of a prize do I get?" questioned Andy, who had hit the bull's-eye but nine times, two less than Fred.

"You get a decorated cabbage head, Andy," replied his twin. "A cabbage head and two lemons."

"I don't care, I saved the target for the man, anyway," grinned the fun-loving Rover. "The one Jack shot at is all mussed up." And at this sally the others had to laugh.

After lunch the boys sat down to write some letters and to read some newspapers which had just come in. In the news was word of some big oil well strikes at a place about forty miles distant.

"Gosh! look at this, will you?" cried Fred, pointing to the article. "Two wells just came in, and each of them good for twelve hundred barrels of oil a day! Now that's what I call something like!"

"Wouldn't it be glorious if my dad could strike something like that?"

"I wish we could hit half a dozen wells, then our dads could start The Rover Oil Company. We'd make money hand over fist. Wouldn't that be grand!"

"You keep on and you'll be dreaming of oil," laughed Jack.

"It certainly is the land of luck," returned Randy.

"It doesn't look like the land of luck for this fellow," remarked Fred, pointing to a ragged and unkempt individual who had just entered the reading room of the hotel. The man was about middle age, and had a most decidedly dejected appearance.

"I was wondering if you young gents couldn't aid me a little?" he whined, coming up to Jack and Randy. "I've been playing in mighty hard luck lately. I haven't had a square meal in two days."

"What's the matter—can't you get a job?" asked Jack.

"Job! What do you mean?" questioned the unkempt individual in wonder.

"If you're out of luck, why don't you go to work?"

"Say, maybe you don't know who I am!" exclaimed the man indignantly.

"You're right there. Who are you?"

"I am Wellington Jonkers, the man who opened the Little Kitty and the Fat Herring. You must have heard about those properties. We sold eighty thousand shares of one and sixty thousand shares of the other."

"What at?" questioned Randy. "Two cents a share?"

"No, sir! Those shares went for twenty and twenty-five cents," said the man. And then, lowering his voice to a confidential tone, he continued: "If you young gents can stake me to a hundred or two I can put you wise to the biggest proposition in oil down here—a proposition that is bound to bring in hundreds of thousands of dollars three months after it's started. I've got everything fixed to go right ahead. You just put up the two hundred, and I'll show you some facts and figures that will open your eyes. I've got the real dope, and——"

"You poor fish, you!" exclaimed Jack. "What do you take us for, anyhow?"

He and the others had seen this type of oil well community parasite before. In the restaurant attached to the hotel and also at the railroad station and at the shooting gallery they had met more than one slick individual who had wanted to "put them wise to the biggest oil proposition" imaginable, all for the small sum of from two cents to fifty cents per share in oil wells with such fanciful names as Sure Winner, Daylight Luck, and Sunshine Sally.

"Then you don't want to go into a real good thing?" said the man, his face falling.

"Not with you."

The man turned away, but then turned back:

"Say, you couldn't lend me five dollars until to-night, could you? I'm a little short. My pard will be back on the seven-fifteen train, and then I'll be all fixed again."

"I haven't anything for you," answered Jack shortly.

"And neither have I," added Randy. And then, lighting a cigarette, the man shuffled away to see if he could not find some victims elsewhere.

"There's your land of luck from another angle," remarked Jack. "What pests those fellows are."

"Well, I suppose they start in with all sorts of hopes, Jack. And then they sink lower and lower as nothing proves lucky," answered his cousin.

The boys were waiting for the mail, and presently it came in. There were letters for all of them, some from home and others from their chums who were now enjoying themselves in various places. Dan Soppinger had gone to Atlantic City, while Ned Lowe and Walt Baxter were on an island in Casco Bay on the Maine coast. Gif was visiting Spouter and his folks in a camp at Lake George.

"I'll bet they're having a lot of fun at Lake George," remarked Fred, "swimming and motor-boating, and all that."

"Fred is thinking of May," returned Andy, with a grin.

"Aw, you cut that out, Andy!" retorted his cousin, growing slightly red in the face. "You know you'd like to be up there yourself."

One of Jack's letters was from Gif, and in that his chum mentioned the fact that Ruth was still in the care of the eye specialist and that her case was a very serious one. He told Jack much more than Martha had let out, and this news made the oldest Rover boy worry greatly.

"It's a terrible thing," he confided to Randy. "Just suppose poor Ruth should go blind!" and he shuddered.

"Oh, Jack! I don't believe it's as bad as all that," cried his cousin. "Why, Ruth was almost over it when we came away from school."

"No, she wasn't. That's just the trouble. The doctor up there evidently didn't give her enough care—or, at least, just the right kind of care. Of course, he did the best he knew how, but he wasn't an expert in that line. After Ruth got home her eyes must have developed some new trouble, all, of course, on account of that pepper Werner threw."

"It was a rotten thing for Werner to do!" declared Randy, his eyes flashing. "Really, do you know, Jack, I think we should have had him arrested for it."

"He'll certainly have to account to the Stevensons if Ruth goes blind—he and his father. I believe the Stevensons could sue Mr. Werner for big damages."

"Of course they could."

"That certainly is a terrible affair," remarked Fred, who had been perusing Gif's letter. "I think we ought to round Werner up and give it to him good and plenty. He deserves the licking of his life."

"The question is—where is Werner?" put in Andy.

"If he is still around Columbina he must be with Nappy and Slugger," said Randy. "But it's just possible that he has cleared out, thinking that we might hand him over to the authorities."

"I can't understand what would possess a fellow to do such a dirty thing as that," was Fred's comment. "Why, he might have blinded Jack, as well as Ruth. And, by the way, Jack, how do your eyes feel?"

"They feel just about as usual. At first they felt rather scratchy and watery, but now I haven't noticed anything unusual for some time—in fact, never since we came down to Texas. But, you see, I got very little of the pepper. The most of it went over my shoulder and right into poor Ruth's eyes."

The boys discussed the matter for some time, and then turned to finish the letters they had started to write. Soon the twins and Fred were deep in their writing, but Jack could not settle himself to put down a word. His mind was with Ruth. What if the girl he thought so much of should go blind? It was a thought that chilled him to the heart.

CHAPTER XXVII

CAUGHT BY THE ENEMY

Dick Rover did not return to the hotel until late that evening. The boys were waiting for him, and Jack noted that his father's face wore a smile of satisfaction.

"I think I have struck something worth while," said he. "I have been over the Franklin claim very carefully with Nick Ogilvie and the two men he recommended, and as a result I have already telegraphed for Mr. Fitch to come here."

"Then Ogilvie and the others think there is oil on that claim?" questioned Randy quickly.

"They say the indications are very good. In fact, one of the men was very enthusiastic and he was willing to put up five thousand dollars toward boring a well in one spot that he picked out."

"That certainly shows he must have faith in it," remarked Fred.

"When do you expect Mr. Fitch?" asked Andy.

"I asked him to come over as soon as possible—to-morrow if he could."

"Do you think you can make some kind of a reasonable arrangement with Mr. Franklin, in case the oil expert's report is good?" asked Jack.

"Yes, I found Mr. Franklin a very fair man. Of course, he would like to get as much as possible out of any deal that is made. But he is reasonable, and has agreed to give me entire charge of the matter and take his pay at the rate of one-eighth of all the oil that may be produced."

After that Dick Rover went into many of the details concerning the land and what the different oil men had said regarding it. Of course the boys were tremendously interested, not only on their own account, but also because of Phil Franklin.

"I liked that fellow first rate," said Fred, "and I do hope his father is able to get some money out of this."

On the following day Mr. Fitch came in, and he and Jack's father went over the matter very carefully. Then the oil expert said he would begin an inspection of the property as soon as he could send for his outfit.

After that there was little for the boys to do but wait. Dick Rover took another trip to Wichita Falls, and then to several other places in the oil fields, including two towns in Oklahoma. He was getting figures of oil-well machinery, and also trying to become better acquainted with the whole oil proposition.

"You see, it's a new thing to me," he explained to Jack. "It's altogether different from those mining interests your uncles and I hold in the West and in Alaska. I've never had anything to do with oil before, and so I am going a bit slow, so as to avoid mistakes if possible."

As mentioned before, the Franklin farm was located near a place called Pottown. The Rovers visited this community and found there a small but well-kept hotel at which they took dinner one day.

"I think I like this just as well as the hotel in Columbina," remarked Fred.

"In some respects I think I like it better," answered Randy.

"What would you say to transferring to Pottown?" questioned their uncle. "Then you could be quite close to the Franklins while you stay here."

This suited the boys, and as a result the transfer was made early the next week. The Rovers had a suite of three rooms, Jack's father occupying one, the twins another, and Fred and Jack the third.

In the meantime Mr. Fitch had gone to work on the Franklin farm. He had with him two of his best men, and all of them went over the entire place with care. They also visited all of the wells in that vicinity, as well as the unfinished borings.

"When do you think you can make a report, Mr. Fitch?" questioned Dick Rover one day.

"I'm almost ready now, Mr. Rover. You shall have the report by next Monday."

The weather had been rather dry, and now the roads throughout that section were much better than they had been. In Pottown the boys had little trouble in hiring an automobile, and they often took trips to various places where the oil wells were in operation. They saw another well set off, and managed to get themselves covered with not a little of the black fluid.

"Suppose we take a run over to the Spell farm?" suggested Jack one day. "I've been wondering whether they really went ahead or whether it was only a bluff."

"I don't think it was any bluff," returned Randy. "They were getting in their machinery just as fast as they could."

If Dick Rover had been present he might have advised against visiting the Lorimer Spell claim. In a roundabout way he had heard from Carson Davenport. The oil well promoter had not forgotten how he had been knocked down, and he had told a number of people that he intended sooner or later to square accounts with "that fellow from New York."

But Jack's father was not on hand to see them ride away, and so without giving the matter much more consideration the boys had the driver of the automobile head towards the place where the encounter between Davenport and Dick Rover had taken place.

"My gracious! just see how the oil wells are coming in, will you?" cried Fred, while they were riding along. He pointed to a hillside where two new wells were at work. "Those weren't here when we went through before."

"It looks to me as if some of these folks were fairly crazy about oil," remarked Randy.

"Well, it's a terrible temptation to get busy when you think that under your very feet there may be thousands and thousands of dollars' worth of that stuff," returned Jack.

"What a different place this is from around Colby Hall," commented Fred.

"Yes. And quite different from Valley Brook Farm, too," added Randy.

"What's the matter with comparing it with Riverside Drive?" questioned Andy, with a grin. "Don't you see the Hudson River over there with the stately warships?" and as he spoke he pointed to a pond of water, the surface of which was black with oil and on which floated several logs.

"In one way I think the old fellow I was talking with last night was right," declared Jack. "He said that the oil had spoiled the whole country. Just look around, will you? Everything is black and greasy with oil."

"Well, they say 'dirty work makes clean money,'" cried Randy. "And I guess a lot of these men don't care how much they muss up the scenery and muss up themselves so long as they get good fat bank accounts out of it."

At length they came in sight of the Lorimer Spell tract, and they were both surprised and interested at the activity being displayed there. A gang of at least thirty men were at work, some around a well which was being sunk and others in erecting several buildings.

"They certainly mean business," remarked Jack, as they came to a halt near the bank of the little brook which flowed through one of the corners of the property. "You've got to give them credit—they didn't let the grass grow under their feet."

"I wonder if they are using their own money or whether they got some outsiders to invest," mused Fred.

Not wishing to get into any altercation with the workers, the Rovers kept at a distance. They saw Tate and Jackson among the men. Each was giving orders, and both seemed to be in charge of the operations. Carson Davenport was not visible.

One small building was already complete, and this was being used as an office. The door stood open, and presently a young fellow came out, lighting a cigarette as he did so.

"Hello, there is Nappy Martell!" exclaimed Andy.

Martell stood leaning against the corner of the building, smoking his cigarette and gazing idly at the workmen. Then he chanced to glance around and caught sight of the Rovers. He at once poked his head back into the building and said something to someone inside.

"He's coming this way," announced Fred.

"Yes, and there is Slugger Brown behind him," added Randy.

"They've got their nerve with them, after the way they treated us!" growled Jack.

"What do you fellows want around here?" demanded Nappy coolly, as he came closer.

"I'll bet they want to see how we are getting along," put in Slugger Brown. He was puffing away at a briar-root pipe, trying his best to look mannish.

"See here, you fellows, what did you mean by your actions the night you got us to walk out to that storehouse?" demanded Jack.

"That wasn't our fault," broke out Nappy hastily. "We weren't responsible for what Gabe Werner did."

"I don't believe Gabe was in it at all!" cried Fred.

"He was too. He got us to go after you, exactly as I told you," protested Nappy.

"But he wasn't there," said Fred. "And it wasn't a boarding house either."

"I don't care. He was there when we left him to find you. And he wanted to see all of you the worst way." Nappy turned to Slugger. "Isn't that right, Slug?"

"It certainly is. He said he would wait there until we got back. In fact, he said his leg hurt him so he couldn't go a step further, and he said he knew the old folks who lived there very well. We didn't know anything more than what he told us."

"I don't believe a word of your story, Nappy. I believe it's made up from end to end," answered Jack. "You simply had your orders to keep us from going into the hotel, and you carried those orders out to the best of your ability. My opinion is you were in league with those men who robbed my father of his papers."

"I was not. I don't know what you're talking about!" roared Nappy, but his face grew pale as he spoke. "I didn't even know your father had been robbed. Gabe Werner had been hurt. We thought his leg had been broken, although we found out afterwards it was only hurt. He wanted to see all of you—why, I don't know. We simply tried to do him a favor, and this is what we get for it."

"Nappy is telling things just as they were," declared Slugger.

"It's a fairy tale," declared Andy. "If it was true, why did you and Nappy hide when we came up?"

"Because we knew you would be mad when you got there and found that Gabe was missing," answered Slugger.

"Where is Werner now?"

"I don't know. I think he has gone home—anyway, he said something about going," was the glib reply.

"What are you fellows doing here?"

"We own an interest in this claim," answered Nappy loftily, and as he spoke he lit a fresh cigarette.

"Own an interest here?" demanded Jack in pardonable astonishment.

"That's it. I got my folks to buy an eighth interest in the whole outfit, and Slugger's folks bought an equal amount."

"Must have cost you something," said Fred.

"It cost our folks ten thousand dollars each," answered Slugger, in a bragging tone. "But we'll get that back, and a good deal more, too," he added.

"Did Gabe Werner's folks put up anything?" questioned Randy.

"Yes, they have an eighth interest, too," answered Nappy. "Oh, this is going to be some big concern, believe me."

"What about it if my father gets back those papers of which he was robbed?" questioned Jack pointedly.

"Oh, say, Jack Rover, you needn't come to me with that old yarn," growled Slugger. "We know there isn't a word of truth in it. Your father never had any such papers."

"He certainly did have them, and some day he may be able to prove it," answered Jack warmly. "On the very night that you fellows got us to go out to that storehouse he was knocked down in one of our rooms by two or three men and the papers were taken from him. And what is more, I am pretty sure in my mind that the fellows who took them were Davenport and his partners."

"Then you mean to say that Mr. Davenport is a thief?" cried Slugger, looking Jack full in the face.

"That's what I firmly believe."

Jack had scarcely uttered the words when he felt a heavy hand placed upon his shoulder. He was whirled around, to find himself face to face with the oil promoter.



JACK WAS WHIRLED AROUND AND FACED THE OIL PROMOTER.

"So that is the way you are talking about me, is it?" cried Carson Davenport, in a rage. "Calling me a thief, and all that sort of thing! I reckon I have an account to settle with you, and I'll settle it right now. You come with me."

And thus speaking he grasped Jack by the arm and dragged him across the field to where his gang of men were at work.

CHAPTER XXVIII

AT THE FRANKLIN PLACE

Carson Davenport's action came so unexpectedly that for the instant Jack did not know what to do. Then, however, he tried to wrench himself free from the oil well promoter's grasp.

"You let go of me!" he cried. "Let go, I say!" And then, as Davenport continued to hold him, he struck the man on the chest.

"Ha! you're the same kind of a spitfire as your father, are you?" bellowed Davenport. And in a greater rage than ever he let go of Jack and hit him a stinging blow on the side of the face.

"Hi! Stop that! How dare you?" yelled Randy, and sprang forward to Jack's assistance. But before he could reach his cousin Jack had hauled off and hit Davenport a blow in the cheek.

By this time all of the Rovers were advancing upon Davenport, and the oil well promoter thought it the best policy to fall back.

"Come on, Nappy! Let's get into this!" cried Slugger, and, rushing forward, he caught Randy by the shoulder. "You let them have it out alone!" he ordered.

"This isn't your fight, Slugger, and you had better keep out of it," retorted Randy. And then, as Slugger still tried to hold him back, Randy put out his foot, gave the bully a shove, and Slugger measured his length on his back.

In the meanwhile Nappy had also sprung forward. He tried to get at Jack, but Andy and Fred got in the way, and though Nappy struck out several times, hitting both of the Rovers on the arm, they retaliated with a stinging crack in the ear and another on the nose which caused the blood to flow freely and made Nappy retire to a safe distance.

By this time the all-around fight had attracted the attention of a number of the workmen, and they came rushing up to find out what it was all about. The driver of the automobile, who had remained in the car, also came forward.

"I'll fix you, you young whelp!" roared Davenport, as he came again toward Jack.

"You leave me alone," returned Jack. "Don't you dare put your hands on me again!"

"Here, what's the rumpus?" demanded the driver of the automobile, a fellow named George Rogers.

The boys started to explain, not only for the benefit of Rogers, but also for the benefit of the

workmen who were coming up.

"That whole bunch ought to be arrested!" blustered Slugger.

"That's what I say!" added Nappy, with his handkerchief to his bleeding nose.

"That man started it," declared Jack, pointing to Davenport. "He caught hold of me, and I told him to let me go. He had no right to put his hands on me."

After this there was a war of words in which Tate and Jackson, who had come up, joined. The oil well promoters were all anxious to do something to the Rover boys, and in this they were seconded by Nappy and Slugger. But, strange as it may seem, hardly any of the workmen took kindly to this.

"Oh, they're only a bunch of kids," said one of the men. "What's the use of bothering with them?"

"That man is mad at me because my father knocked him down twice the other day," declared Jack, turning to the workmen. "And he knows why he was knocked down," he added significantly.

"Was it your dad who did that?" questioned one of the men in the rear of the crowd.

"It was. This farm was left to my father by Lorimer Spell because my father saved Spell's life on a battlefield in France. My father had a lot of papers to prove his claim, but the papers were stolen from him."

"I heard something about that," said another of the workmen.

"See here! if you fellows are going to believe such a story as these kids are giving you, you can't work for me!" roared Carson Davenport, with a scowl.

"I don't have to work for you if I don't want to," answered one of the workmen quickly and with a scowl.

"See here, Carson Davenport, you let me have a word or two to say!" broke in George Rogers. "I know you just about as well as anybody here. You are the fellow who sold stock in the Yellow Pansy Extension, something that I and a whole lot of others got bit on badly. Maybe you'd like me to rake up that little deal in the courts for you."

"Rats! You don't have to dig up ancient history, Rogers!" growled Davenport; but it was easy to see that the other's words disturbed him not a little.

"I'll dig it up good and plenty if you don't leave these boys alone! I don't know much about 'em, but they seem to be perfectly straightforward, and their father is as nice a man as I ever met."

More words followed, Davenport, as well as Tate and Jackson, doing a lot of grumbling. Once or twice Slugger and Nappy tried to take part, but some of the workmen cut them short, and in the end one crowd moved toward the automobile while the other headed in the opposite direction.

"Well, that's the time matters got pretty hot," was Andy's comment.

"Gee! one time I thought we'd all be at it tooth and nail," declared Fred.

"In my opinion that fellow Davenport is nothing but a skunk," declared George Rogers. "I've known him for years. He has been in half a dozen oil-well propositions, selling stocks and leases. One time he caught three young fellows from Chicago and sold them a lease for several thousand dollars that wasn't worth a pinch of snuff. Then he started what he called the Yellow Pansy Extension. The regular Yellow Pansy was doing very well—hitting it up for about eight hundred barrels a day—and of course lots of people, including myself, thought that the Extension belonged to the same crowd. But it didn't, and the lease was absolutely worthless; so that all of the buyers of stock got stung. I myself was hung up for fifteen hundred dollars, almost all the cash I had at that time."

"Why didn't they put Davenport and his partners in prison?" asked Fred.

"Because he is one of those slick fellows who can worm out of almost anything. One or two fellows did make some sort of charges against him, but they all fell through. There are hundreds of swindlers in the oil business, and not one out of a dozen is ever caught."

"If Uncle Dick makes up his mind to go ahead on the Franklin farm I think I know a way of helping him," said Andy, with a grin.

"What are you going to do, Andy? Take off your coat, roll up your sleeves, and grab a pick and shovel?" questioned his twin.

"Not exactly, although I might want to do that later on. But I was thinking that a good many of those workmen didn't seem to be satisfied with their job. Maybe they would be only too glad to shift."

Although they hated to do so, the boys felt it was their duty to tell the particulars of what had occurred to Jack's father as soon as they saw him.

"It's too bad you got into another mix-up with that rascal, as well as with Martell and Brown," said Dick Rover. "After this I think you had better stay away from that locality. We'll let them go ahead and sink all the money they care to."

Jack's father had been making some inquiries, and he learned that it was true that the Martells, the Browns, and Mr. Werner had contributed thirty thousand dollars towards driving two wells on the Spell claim. To this amount of money Davenport, Tate and Jackson had contributed another twenty thousand dollars.

"Fifty thousand dollars!" exclaimed Jack, when he heard of this. "That certainly is quite a sum of money."

"It costs money to bore for oil in these parts," answered his father.

As he had promised, Mr. Fitch came to Dick Rover on the following Monday with his report concerning the Franklin farm.

"I think you have found something well worth trying, Mr. Rover," said he. "There are indications of oil in half a dozen places, and two of the spots to me look particularly inviting."

Then he went into many details and brought in one of his assistants to verify some of the statements. Dick Rover listened carefully to all that was said, and then leaned back in his chair and looked at the oil expert sharply.

"Then on the strength of this report, Mr. Fitch, you would advise my sinking at least two wells?"

"I certainly would, Mr. Rover. That is, of course, if you can afford to take the gamble. I'm almost certain that the oil is there, but you must remember that even the best of us are sometimes deceived. However, I will say this—I am not a particularly rich man, but if you sink these two wells in the spots that I have picked out and you form a company at, say, one hundred thousand dollars, for that purpose, I am willing to put up five thousand dollars in cash for some of the stock."

"That certainly sounds as if you had faith in it," answered Dick Rover, with a smile. "Are you willing to put that in writing?"

"I am, sir," and Mr. Fitch's face showed that he meant what he said.

"Very well, then, you do so, and I'll start operations to-morrow."

As soon as it was definitely settled that Mr. Rover would go ahead and sink the two wells, the boys hurried over to see Phil Franklin. They found the lad all smiles.

"It's the best news I ever heard," said Phil, his eyes gleaming with pleasure. "Now, dad and I will have a chance of making some real money." For it had now been settled that John Franklin was to have an eighth interest in the new company to be formed.

"I'm awfully glad my dad is going ahead on your farm," answered Jack. "And I hope for your sake as well as our own that the wells prove regular gushers."

"That Mr. Fitch was very hopeful," answered Phil. "And my father says he's one of the best oil experts to be found anywhere. He's an old hand at the game."

That week and the week following proved to be tremendously busy ones for Dick Rover. In conference with Nick Ogilvie and several others, all the work preliminary to the sinking of the two wells was gotten under way, and deals were closed for nearly all the necessary machinery, and also for a quantity of lumber to be used in the construction of several buildings.

"We're going to stay right in our house," said Phil to the other boys. "We sha'n't get out until the flow of oil compels us to."

"Well, I hope the oil comes so fast it floats the old shack away," grinned Andy.

It soon became noised around that The Rover Oil Company had been formed to exploit the Franklin farm. In the meanwhile Nick Ogilvie and his assistants were hustling as much as possible to obtain the needed workmen. They managed to get together a gang of fifteen, but then there came a halt.

"They are hitting it up for oil over the line in Oklahoma," declared Ogilvie, "and that has taken away a good many of our workmen."

"Better go to Wichita Falls and see what you can do," suggested Dick Rover.

The next day Jack and Andy, while riding in George Rogers' automobile, ran across three of the men employed by Davenport. These men had had a quarrel with Tate, and were on the point of leaving their job. They listened with interest to what the boys had to say about the Franklin place.

"If they want men I think I'll go over and see about it," said one of the workmen.

"So will I," came from another; and the third nodded to show that he agreed.

As a result of this interview the three men called on Nick Ogilvie and were speedily engaged. They told some of their friends; and before the week was up six of Carson Davenport's best workers had left the Spell claim and had signed up to work on the Franklin farm.

CHAPTER XXIX

DAYS OF ANXIETY

"I wonder what Davenport will say when he finds those men are working here?" remarked Fred.

"I don't care what he says," answered Jack.

"Do you think he'll dare come over here and have it out with Uncle Dick?" questioned Andy.

"I don't think so," answered his brother. "I believe behind it all he is afraid we'll have him arrested for the theft of those documents."

"If he really took them, what do you think he did with them?" came from Fred.

"More than likely he destroyed them," answered Jack. "He wouldn't want evidence like that lying around loose, you know."

When Carson Davenport learned that six of his men had deserted and gone over to the Rovers he was more angry than ever.

"They're going to do their best to undermine us," he said to Tate. "I wish I knew just how to get square with them."

"We'll get square enough if we strike oil here," said Tate. "Those Rovers will feel sick enough if they learn we are making a barrel of money."

"It's easy enough to talk about making a barrel of money," came from Jackson, who was present. "But I don't see the money flowing in very fast." He had been talking to a number of his friends, and many of them had said they thought the chances of getting oil from the Spell claim were very slim.

"Oh, you just hold your horses, Jackson," said Carson Davenport smoothly. "Take my word for it, this well we are putting down is going to be one of the biggest in this territory."

But though he spoke thus, Davenport did not believe what he said. He, too, was becoming suspicious that they might be drilling a well which would prove dry. However, he had the traits of a gambler, and was willing to go ahead so long as there was the least possibility of success.

As the days slipped by the work on both claims progressed rapidly. Nick Ogilvie managed to hire a few men in and around Wichita Falls, and Davenport also picked up some workers to take the places of those who had deserted him.

In those days the Rover boys became almost as enthusiastic as Jack's father, and their enthusiasm increased when Tom Rover and Sam Rover took a run down from New York to see how matters were progressing.

"It certainly is a gamble—this boring for oil," remarked Sam Rover.

"But it looks like a good gamble to me," answered his brother Tom. "And I like the way that man Fitch talks." He had had an interview with the oil expert which had pleased him greatly.

On one occasion the Rover boys rode over from Pottown to Columbina. There, at the shooting-gallery they had visited before, they ran most unexpectedly, not only into Nappy and Slugger, but also Gabe Werner. At the sight of them Werner tried to get out of the gallery by the back way, but was stopped by the proprietor.

"You haven't settled with me yet," said the shooting-gallery man.

"Oh, that's all right. Take it out of this," growled Werner, and threw down a dollar bill. Then he tried to pass out again, but before he could do so Randy and Fred caught and held the rascal.

Cornered, Gabe Werner tried to put up a fight, and in this he got by far the worst of it. He managed to get in one or two blows, but then Randy knocked him down, and when he arose to his feet Fred landed on his ear so that the bully spun around and lurched heavily against the counter on which rested a number of guns.

"You let me alone!" roared Werner. And then he suddenly caught up one of the guns and made a move as though to aim it at the Rovers. But the keeper of the shooting gallery was too quick for him, and wrested the weapon from the big youth's grasp.

And then Gabe Werner did catch it. Not only did Randy and Fred pounce upon him, but also Jack and Andy, and as a consequence, bruised and bleeding, the big bully staggered from the shooting gallery and set off down the muddy street at the best speed he could command.

"There! I guess we've settled him for a while," panted Randy, when the encounter was over. "Hello! where are Nappy and Slugger?"

"They slid out while we were taking care of Gabe," answered Andy. "I guess they thought things were getting too warm." And in that surmise the fun-loving Rover was correct. Dismayed by the beating Werner was receiving, Nappy and Slugger had lost no time in departing for parts unknown. It was a long time before the Rovers saw them again.

A few days later came word from the Spell claim that filled the Rovers with astonishment mingled somewhat with dismay. Oil had been reported, and every one connected with the Davenport outfit was of the opinion that the well when shot off would open up big.

"Gee! suppose they do strike it rich?" cried Fred.

"I don't think they will—not after what the experts said," answered Jack.

"But even Mr. Fitch said they sometimes made mistakes," put in Randy.

A few days later the well on the Spell claim was shot off, and this was followed by a flow of oil amounting to forty or fifty barrels a day. Then it was announced that the Davenport crowd was going to sink the well several hundred feet deeper and they were also going to put down another well farther up the brook.

"I reckon that flow of oil has got 'em a-going," remarked Nick Ogilvie, and there was just a trace of envy in his tones. "Well, that's the luck of it. You can't tell anything about it," and he shook his head wonderingly as he went about his duties.

So far, there had been no indications of oil at the first well which the Rovers were boring. But Mr. Fitch had told Jack's father not to expect too much until a depth of at least twenty-five hundred feet was reached.

It made the boys feel a little blue to think that the Davenport crowd had been the first to strike oil.

"Won't Nappy and Slugger crow over this—especially as their folks have an interest in the well?" remarked Jack.

But the next day something happened which made Jack forget all his troubles for the time being. A telegram came in from his sister Martha, reading as follows:

"Ruth's eyes operated on yesterday. Very successful. Expert says she will see perfectly."

"Isn't this grand!" cried Jack, his whole face beaming with pleasure. "I declare, this is the best news yet!"

"I don't blame you for being pleased, Jack," answered Randy. "I'll wager the Stevensons feel relieved."

The telegram was followed by a letter which gave many details. But the main feature was that the operation had been entirely successful and that the surgeon in charge had said positively that Ruth's eyes would soon be as well and as strong as they had ever been.

"I am going to send her a telegram of congratulation," declared Jack. "Even if she can't read it herself, they can read it to her," and he hurried off to the telegraph station for that purpose.

After that the boys waited anxiously for some sort of development at the Franklin farm. Tom Rover and his brother Sam had returned to New York, and they had wanted the boys to go with them, but all had pleaded that they be allowed to remain in Texas.

"We want to see the wells shot off and want to see the oil flow—that is, provided it does flow," said Randy.

"We might as well put in our vacation here as anywhere," put in Fred. And so the four lads were allowed to remain.

Of course, the Franklins were as anxious as any one to see how matters would turn out. Father and son were working for the company and doing their best to hurry matters along. Dick Rover was also on hand daily, consulting with Ogilvie and his assistants to make sure that everything was going right.

"These two wells are going to cost us about seventy thousand dollars," Jack's father confided to him. "It's a mint of money, isn't it?" and he smiled slightly.

"It certainly is, Dad. Especially if the wells don't pan out."

"Well, we've got to take what comes. You must remember this is the land of luck—good or bad."

At last Ogilvie announced that they were getting to the point where the first well would soon be shot off. There were some indications of oil, although not as strong as Mr. Fitch had hoped. The oil expert had put up his five thousand dollars in the company which had been formed, so he was almost as anxious as those who had larger sums invested.

"Here's news for you!" shouted Andy, bursting in on the others the next noon. "What do you know about this? Say, I guess those fellows are going to catch it all right enough!" and he began to dance around the floor.

"What are you talking about, Andy?" demanded his brother.

"They say the well on the Lorimer Spell claim has run dry!"

"Run dry!" came from the others.

"Yes, run dry—or next door to it! They got only fifteen barrels the day before yesterday, and yesterday they got not more than three."

"You don't mean it!" exclaimed Jack. "Who told you this?"

"One of the men who worked there. Carson Davenport was so mad that when the man said something to him about it he fired him. The man said he was coming over here to look for a job—that he was sure the whole thing was petering out."

The news soon circulated, and Dick Rover was so interested that he went off the next day to Columbina to ascertain the truth.

"It's so, all right enough," he said, on returning. "They didn't get more than a barrel or so to-day. It has certainly gone back on them. Of course, they can bore the well deeper. But I guess Mr. Fitch was right. He said that there was more or less surface oil—that they hadn't tapped any real vein or pocket."

The day before the first of the wells on the Franklin farm was to be shot off the Rover boys went to Columbina on an errand to one of the stores. Just as they were coming out of this establishment they saw an automobile dash through the mud on the way to the railroad station. Behind it came another automobile filled with a number of men, all yelling wildly for those in the first automobile to stop.

"Hello, something is going on!" exclaimed Jack.

"Let's go after them and see what's doing," suggested Fred.

The others were willing, and all set off on a run down the main thoroughfare of the town. As they ran they heard the distant whistle of a locomotive.

"I guess the crowd in the first auto want to catch that three-o'clock express," remarked Fred.

"Yes, and evidently the second crowd want to stop them," returned Andy.

The excitement had attracted the attention of a number of people, and a crowd of a dozen or more followed the boys to the railroad station, all wondering what was the matter.

As soon as the first automobile reached the railroad platform a man sprang from the car, holding a Gladstone bag in one hand and a suitcase in the other. He looked back, and then made a wild dash for the train, which was just rolling into the station.

"Look! It's Carson Davenport!" exclaimed Jack.

"And see who are after him—Tate, Jackson and three or four other men!"

"Stop, Davenport!" yelled one of the men. "Stop or I'll shoot!" and he flourished a revolver, and another man in the crowd did the same. Then the bunch jumped from the second automobile and dashed pell-mell toward the train.

CHAPTER XXX

THE NEW WELL—CONCLUSION

Carson Davenport was halfway up the steps of the car when Jake Tate and another man hauled him backward to the station platform.

"They've got him!" exclaimed Jack, as he and his cousins, along with the rest of the gathering crowd, came closer.

"Hi! Hi! Let me alone!" yelled Davenport. "Don't shoot! What is the meaning of this, anyway?"

"You know well enough what it means!" bellowed Tate, still clutching him by the arm. "You come back here. You are not going to take that train or any other just yet."

"And you're not going to carry off that bag, either," put in Jackson, as he wrenched the Gladstone away.

By this time the crowd completely surrounded Carson Davenport, and the pistols which had been drawn were speedily thrust out of sight. The oil well promoter was pushed in the direction of the little railroad station, and in the midst of this excitement the train pulled out.

"What's the rumpus about, anyway?" exclaimed one man in the crowd.

"Never mind what it's about," broke in Tate hastily. "This is our affair."

"That's right—maybe we had better keep it to ourselves," muttered Jackson.

"I don't believe in shielding him," cried one man who had chased Davenport and who wore several soldier's medals on his vest. "He's a swindler, and it's best everybody knew it. He was on the point of lighting out for parts unknown with all the money that was put into his oil wells up on

the Spell ranch."

"Is that right?" burst out another man.

"It is. And Tate and Jackson know it as well as I do. I guess Davenport came to the conclusion that those wells he was putting down were no good, and rather than sink any more money into them he was going to run off with it."

"I wasn't running off with anything," declared Carson Davenport. "I was going to put the money into the bank at Wichita Falls. I had a perfect right to do that," and as he spoke he glared at Tate and Jackson.

"Say, if you're going to talk that way, I won't stand in with you any longer!" cried Jackson, in a rage. "That money is going to stay right here, where I and all the rest of us can keep our eyes on it!"

"That's right—don't let him get away with a dollar of it!" burst out another man in the crowd.

"We'd better examine this bag first and make sure that we've got what we came after," declared the man who wore the medals on his vest.

Davenport tried to demur, but none of the crowd would listen to him. Although the Gladstone bag was locked, the oil well promoter was compelled to give up the key, and then the others looked over the contents of the bag.

"Twenty-six thousand dollars here," announced Tate, as he counted the money in the presence of the others.

"What's this package?" demanded the man who wore the medals. "Hello! Look here!" he exclaimed an instant later, after he had glanced at one of several documents held together by a rubber band.

"What have you got?" questioned Tate curiously.

"You let those alone!" bellowed Davenport, his face turning pale. "Give them to me! They are my private property!" and he endeavored to snatch the documents from the other man's hand.

"Not much!" answered the man with the medals, Corporal John Dunning, who had served over a year in France. "These papers belong to Mr. Richard Rover, and he is the one who is going to get them."

"Richard Rover!" burst out Jack, who was close enough to catch the words. "Why, that's my father!"

"I tell you I want those papers! They are mine!" screamed Carson Davenport, and now he made another struggle to get them.

In the mêlée which followed Corporal Dunning was hit by the oil well promoter, who in return received a blow full in the mouth which loosened several of his teeth.

"If those are my father's papers they must be the same that were stolen from him while we were stopping at a hotel here," said Jack. "Several men entered one of our rooms and my father was knocked down from behind, and while he was unconscious the men took the papers and ran away. They were papers relating to the Lorimer Spell claim."

"Then tell your father that Corporal John Dunning, who is stopping at O'Brian's Hotel, has them and will give them up to him just as soon as he can prove his property," said the ex-soldier, as he placed the documents in an inside pocket.

By this time two under-sheriffs had arrived on the scene, and they were wanting to know if their services were required. Tate, Jackson, and one or two others, for purely personal reasons, were in favor of hushing the matter up, but not so Corporal Dunning or the Rover boys.

"If he is the man who knocked my father down and robbed him, I want him arrested," declared Jack.

"He ought to be arrested if he did anything like that," acquiesced Dunning. "I'm through with him! No more work for me at his place!"

"If you want another job I guess my father's foreman, Nick Ogilvie, will be glad to take you on," answered Jack quickly. "You know, my dad is an ex-service man, too. And so are my cousins' fathers," he added, motioning to the other boys.

Carson Davenport blustered and tried to protest, and so did Tate and Jackson. But it was all of no avail, and in the end the oil well promoter was marched off by the under-sheriffs to the local lockup. Then Tate and Jackson hurried away, looking anything but pleased.

"If he's exposed, he'll expose us too," said Tate sourly.

"Right you are, Jake," answered Jackson. "Maybe we'd better clear out."

And they did, the next day. They tried to get hold of some of the funds of the oil company, but Dunning and others were on guard, so this little plan was frustrated.

Of course Dick Rover was astonished when the boys burst in on him with their story. He quickly sought out Dunning and proved to the satisfaction of that individual that the documents taken from Davenport were his property. Then Davenport was put through the "third degree," as it is called by the authorities, and finally broke down and admitted that he, Tate, and Jackson had committed the assault and theft, and that he had likewise tried to abscond with the remaining funds of his new oil company. As a result of all this he was later sentenced to a term of years in prison. About three months later still Tate and Jackson were caught, and also made to do time at hard labor.

With Davenport, Tate and Jackson out of it, the management of the new oil company fell upon Gabe Werner's father. Mr. Werner went ahead with the two wells as planned by the others, and in them sunk not only a large amount of his own funds, but also funds belonging to the Martells and Browns. But in the end these wells proved to be little better than dry holes, so all of the money was lost.

"It's a terrible blow for all three families," said Dick Rover, when this occurred. "It will make Mr. Werner quite a poor man."

"Well, I don't particularly wish them any hard luck," remarked Andy. "Just the same, I guess Nappy, Slugger and Gabe got what was coming to them."

On the day following the arrest of Davenport the first of the wells on the Franklin farm was shot off. It proved to be an immense success, the flood of oil carrying away almost everything before it.

"Jumping toothpicks!" exclaimed Randy, when the excitement was over. "Nick Ogilvie says she will go six thousand barrels a day!"

"Just to think of it!" cried Jack, his eyes gleaming with pleasure. "Six thousand barrels! Isn't it wonderful? Six thousand barrels at two dollars and a half a barrel amounts to fifteen thousand dollars! Why, it's a fortune and more!"

"We'll all be rich! We'll all be rich!" sang out Andy, and, grabbing his brother, both set up a wild dance, knocking over the chairs as they did so.

It was certainly a gala event, and the Rovers lost no time in telegraphing the news to the folks in New York and also to a number of their friends. Then preparations were made to bring in the second well, and this proved almost as good as the first, running between four and five thousand barrels per day at first, and then settling down to fifteen hundred, while the first well for a long while never ran below twenty-five hundred.

"They sure are a pair of peaches!" declared Dunning, who had come to work for The Rover Oil Company. "A pair of peaches, as good as any in this district."

"Do you know, I can scarcely believe it's true," said Phil Franklin to the Rover boys. "Why, my father will have more money than he ever dreamed of."

"We're as glad as you are, Phil," declared Jack. "Glad on your account as well as our own. Now maybe you can go to Colby Hall with us."

"Say, that would be immense!" exclaimed Phil with pleasure.

And how Phil Franklin went that Fall with the Rovers to Colby Hall will be related in a new volume, to be entitled, "The Rover Boys at Big Horn Ranch; or, The Cowboys' Double Round-Up." In that book we shall learn more concerning the doings of Jack and his cousins, and also learn the particulars of a most remarkable trip to the far West.

Two weeks after the coming in of the first well the four Rover boys returned to their homes in New York City. There an agreeable surprise awaited them. Gif and Spouter had come down from Lake George to pay them a visit.

"Say, this is just all right!" cried Jack, as the lads shook hands all around.

"There is another surprise coming this evening," said Mary. "But we're not going to tell you what it is."

That surprise proved to be the coming of Ruth and May. As yet Ruth had to wear dark glasses, but she said that the eye specialist had told her that these could be discarded in a week or two.

"You don't know how thankful I am that your eyes are coming around all right," said Jack, as he caught both her hands. "It's the best news in the world, Ruth—far better than that big oil well coming in on our place in Texas."

"I am thankful, too, Jack," she answered. "And doubly thankful that you haven't had to go through what I did with your eyes."

"I guess Gabe Werner has got his deserts," put in Randy. "His father is sinking all his money in those good-for-nothing wells on the Spell claim."

That night the young folks had something of a party, and it is perhaps needless to say that every one of them enjoyed it thoroughly. Ruth, of course, had to be careful of herself, and could not dance, but Jack gave her a good deal of his company, and with this she seemed quite content.

Then followed a week or more in which the young folks went out on numerous outings, both in the city and elsewhere. Then all motored up to Valley Brook Farm, there to spend some time with Grandfather Rover and Aunt Martha and Uncle Randolph before returning to school.

"Well, it's certainly been a great Summer, after all!" remarked Fred.

"It sure has!" returned Andy.

"And we got quite a lot of fun out of it," added his twin.

"Fun, and a good deal of information," said Jack. "It certainly paid us to visit The Land of Luck."

THE END

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