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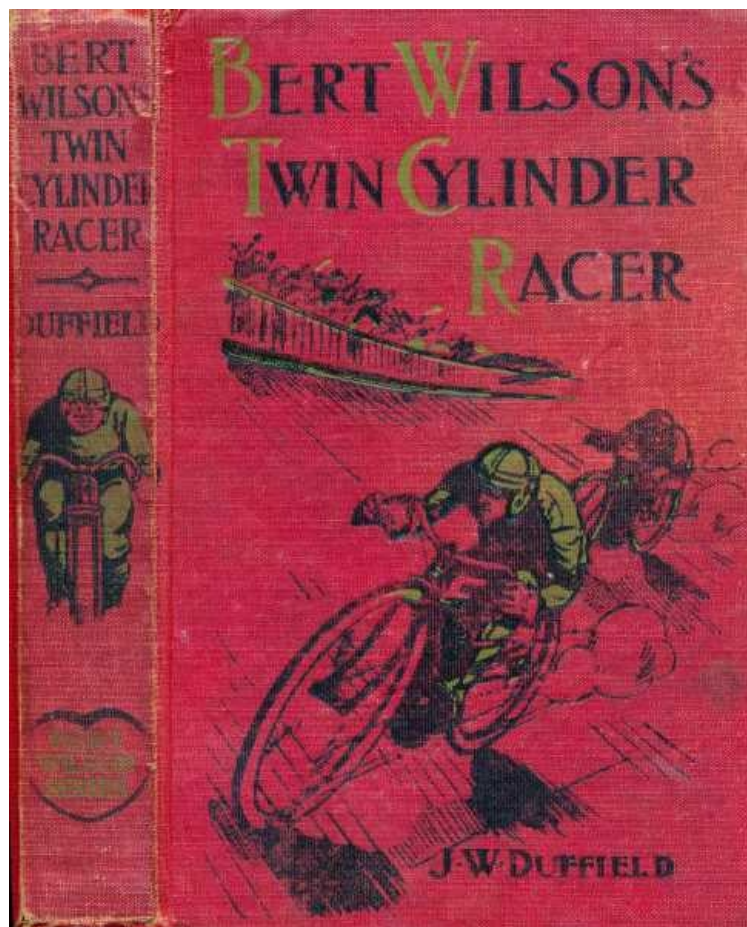
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## BERT WILSON'S Twin Cylinder Racer

BY

J. W. DUFFIELD

AUTHOR OF "BERT WILSON AT THE WHEEL,"  
"WIRELESS OPERATOR," "FADEAWAY BALL,"  
"MARATHON WINNER," "AT PANAMA."

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# BERT WILSON'S TWIN CYLINDER RACER

[1]

## CHAPTER I

### THE RUNAWAY LOCOMOTIVE

"**S**top her. Stop her. She's running wild!"

The cry ended almost in a shriek that rang high above the murmur of voices at the railroad station.

It was a bright sunny morning early in June. The usual crowd of rustics had gathered at the depot to see the train come in and depart. A few commercial travelers were consulting time tables and attending to the disposition of their baggage. Gay laughter and hasty farewells arose from a bevy of girls and the young men who had assembled to see them off. The conductor, watch in hand, stood ready to give the signal, and the black porters were already gathering up the folding steps preparatory to boarding the train. The bells were ringing and the whistle had given its preliminary toot, when all were startled at the sight of the station agent, who issued wild-eyed from his office and ran on the track, frantically waving his hands and shouting at the top of his voice.

As the startled passengers and trainmen followed the direction of his look, they saw what had occasioned the wild commotion, and, for a moment, their hearts stood still.

[2]

A big Mogul engine that had been shunted to a side track was moving down the line, slowly at

first but gathering speed with every passing second. Neither engineer nor fireman could be seen in the cab. It was evident that they had left before the power was completely shut off, or that some sudden jar had started the mechanism. Even while the frightened spectators watched as though under a spell, the pace grew swifter. Some of the men lounging about the roundhouse made a hurried rush for it, with a faint hope of getting aboard and shutting off steam. One of these made a desperate grab at the rear end of the tender, but was flung in a ditch alongside the track, where he rolled over and over. It was too late to stop her. Amid a tempest of yells and a tumult of excitement she gathered way and sped down the line.

The station master wrung his hands and tore his hair in desperation. For the moment he was crazed with fright.

A clear eyed young fellow, tall, stalwart, muscular, had been chatting with a party of friends on the road beside the platform. While he talked, his hand rested on the handle-bars of a motorcycle at which he glanced at intervals with a look of pride that was almost affection. It was a superb machine, evidently of the latest type, and in its graceful lines suggested in some vague way a resemblance to its owner. Both looked like thoroughbreds.

At the Babel of cries that rent the air the young motorcyclist looked up and his nostrils dilated with sudden purpose. At a glance he took in the situation—the running men, the panic cries, the runaway engine. Then he came plunging through the crowd and grasped the dazed agent by the shoulder.

“Come, wake up,” he cried. “Do something. Telegraph to the next station.”

The man looked up dully. Terror had benumbed his faculties. He was clearly not the man for a sudden emergency.

“No use,” he moaned. “The next station is thirteen miles away. And it’s a single track,” he wailed, “and No. 56 is due in twenty minutes. If she’s on time she’s already left there. They’ll meet head-on—O God!”

“Quick,” the newcomer commanded, as he fairly dragged him into the office. “There’s the key. Get busy. Call up the next station and see if you can stop 56.”

But as he saw the aimless, paralyzed way in which the agent fumbled at the key, he thrust him aside and took his place. He was an expert telegrapher, and his fingers fairly flew as he called up the operator at Corridon.

“Engine running wild,” he called. “Stop 56 and sidetrack the runaway.”

A moment of breathless suspense and the answer came in sharp, staccato clicks that betrayed the agitation of the man at the other end.

“56 just left. Rounding the curve half a mile away. Making up time, too. For heaven’s sake, do something.”

“Do something.” What bitter irony! What could be done? Death was at the throttle of that mad runaway rushing down the line.

But the young fellow was of the never say die kind, and always at his best when danger threatened. He thought with the rapidity of lightning. Then he clutched the station agent, who sat with his head bowed on his hands, a picture of abject misery.

“Is there a switch between here and Corridon?” he demanded fiercely.

“N-no,” muttered the stupefied man. “That is, there is one at the old stone quarry, but——”

The remainder of the sentence fell on empty air. Like a flash, the youth who had so cavalierly taken matters in his own hands was out of the room. He ploughed through the huddled group of passengers and trainmen, and flung himself into the saddle of the waiting motorcycle. A roar as he threw in the clutch, a quick scattering of those in front, and the machine, like a living thing, darted down the road that lay beside the track.

The wind sang in his ears and the path fell away behind him as he crouched low over the fork so that his body might offer as little resistance as possible. And, as he rushed along, his active mind was thinking—thinking—

He knew the surrounding country like an open book. There was scarcely a lane that he had not threaded, and as for the highways, he had gone over them again and again. Now, as in a panorama, he saw every turn and bend, every height and hollow of the road that lay before him. In sheer delight of living he had ridden it before; now he must do it to keep others from dying.

The old stone quarry was a familiar landmark. More than once, he and other fellows from the College interested in geology had come over there to hunt fossils. At an earlier date, it had been a buzzing hive of activity, and a side track had been laid by the railroad company in order to load the stone more easily. But of late it had proved unprofitable to work the quarry, and nothing now remained but the abandoned shacks of the workmen and some broken tools and machinery, rusting in the grass that had grown up around them. He remembered that the siding ran for about twenty rods and ended at bumpers set within a few feet of the wall of rock.

For two or three miles, the road he was traveling ran almost parallel to the railroad. At times, a shoulder of the path hid the rails from sight, and at one place he had to make quite a wide detour before he again came close to the right of way. The switch at the quarry was seven miles from the town, and, though he hoped to make it in less than that many minutes, it seemed as though he would never reach it. To his agonized mind he appeared to be merely crawling. In reality he

was flying.

For he was riding now as he had never ridden before. Human life was at stake—perhaps hundreds of lives. He pictured the long line of cars full of passengers—for 56 was the road's finest train, and almost always filled to capacity—coming toward him without a thought of danger. Some would be reading, others gazing out of the windows, still others laughing and talking. But everywhere would be confidence, ease of mind, an eager looking for the journey's end without the slightest apprehension. And all this time, death was grimly bearing down upon them in one of his most fearful forms.

He shuddered as in his mind's eye he saw the two monster locomotives leaping at each other like enraged giants. He had seen a wreck once and had fervently prayed that he might never see another. And as that scene now came before him, he bent lower over the bars and let out every ounce of speed that the machine possessed. [7]

It was leaping now, only touching the high places. Had he been a less skilful rider he would have been hurled from the saddle. Discretion was thrown to the winds. It was no time to measure possibilities or look out for his personal safety. He had to take chances. His siren warned all comers to give him the road. A team was hauled up on its haunches by the frightened driver; an automobile drew so hastily to one side that two wheels went into the ditch. He caught a glimpse of startled faces at doors and windows as he passed. Like a meteor he flashed by, all his heart and soul wrapped up in the thought of rescue.

Now he had overtaken the locomotive and was running parallel to it. The Mogul swayed and lurched as it tore along with all steam up on its mission of destruction. Steadily the rider drew up on even terms, with less than twenty feet separating the tracks from the high road. Then the motorcycle swept into the lead and increased it with every bound.

Only two miles more to the quarry! His heart exulted as he realized that he would get there first. But the margin would be fearfully close. The switch might prove rusty and refuse to work. Some part of it might be out of gear. For years it had been utterly abandoned. What a bitter jest of fate if, after reaching it ahead of the locomotive, he should have to stand helplessly by and see it dash past on its errand of slaughter. [8]

Then, too, a third factor entered into the problem. There was No. 56. She was a limited express and famous for her speed. The operator at Corridon had said that on this stretch of road, supposed to be clear, she would make up time. If she reached and passed the switch before the runaway, no power on earth could prevent a frightful disaster. And just then, while this fear was tugging at his heart, a faint whistle in the distance drove all the color from his face. 56 was coming!

He dared not take his eyes from the road in front, but he knew from the lessened noise behind him that he was increasing his lead. And then as he swept around a slight curve in the road, the abandoned quarry came into view. There were the empty shacks, the deserted platform and, a few rods further on, the switch.

He raced to the tracks and threw himself from the machine, almost falling headlong from the momentum, although he had turned off the power. Then he grasped the lever and tried to throw the switch.

It groaned and creaked, but, although it protested, it yielded to the powerful young muscles that would not be denied. But, when it had moved two-thirds of the way it balked, and, despite his frenzied attempts, refused to budge another inch. And now the runaway engine was coming close, rumbling and roaring hideously, while round the curve, a scant quarter of a mile away, appeared the smokestack of No. 56. [9]

Looking wildly about for the obstacle, he saw that a stone had been wedged into the frog. He tried to remove it, but the turning of the switch had jammed it against the rail. Straightening up, he swung the lever far enough back to release the stone. He worked as if in a nightmare. Fifty feet away, the Mogul was bearing down like a fire-breathing demon. With one swift movement he threw the stone aside; with the next he bowed his back over the lever until it felt as though it would break. Then the rusted rails groaned into place; with an infernal din and uproar the runaway took the switch. Scarcely had it cleared the track when 56 thundered past, its wheels sending out streams of sparks as the brakes ground against them.

The Mogul struck the bumpers with terrific force, tore them away and leaped headlong against the wall of the quarry. There was a crash that could be heard for miles, and the wrecked locomotive reared into the air and then rolled over on its side, enveloped in smoke and hissing steam.

As soon as the long train of 56 could be stopped, the throttle was reversed and it came gliding back to the switch. The engineer and fireman sprang from their cab, conductor and trainmen came running up, and the passengers swarmed from the cars. [10]

There was a tumult of excited questionings, as they gathered round the young fellow who stood there, panting with the strain of his tremendous efforts. Now that he had succeeded in the forlorn hope that he had undertaken, he was beginning to feel the reaction. He responded briefly and modestly to the questions that were showered upon him, and, as the full meaning of their narrow escape from death burst upon them, passengers and trainmen alike were loud in their praise of his presence of mind and thanks for their deliverance. They were for making him a hero, but he shrank from this and would have none of it.

"Don't thank me," he laughed. "It was this that made it possible;" and he patted the handlebars

of the motorcycle. "She certainly did herself proud this day."

"She surely is a dandy," smiled the conductor, "but you must admit that you had a *little* to do with it. We'll never forget what you have done for us to-day. But now we must be starting. We'll put the machine in the baggage car, and you come in here with me."

A blast of the whistle and No. 56 had resumed its interrupted journey.

A ringing cheer burst from the anxious crowds that surged about the platform as the great train, puffing and snorting, came into the station. The agent, white as a ghost, could not believe his eyes. [11]

"Thank God," he cried. "I thought it was all over. I've telegraphed for the wrecking crew, and all the doctors in town have been called to go along. How on earth did you escape? Where is the Mogul?"

"You'll find that down in the quarry smashed to bits," answered the conductor. "You'll need the wrecking train for that, all right, but you can call off the doctors. We would have needed plenty of them—and undertakers too—if it hadn't been for this young man. He threw the switch without a second to spare."

The station agent grasped the rider's hand and stammered and stuttered, as he tried to pour out his thanks. But just then a flying wedge of college boys came through the crowd and, grabbing the reluctant hero, hoisted him to their shoulders.

"Wilson." "Bert Wilson." "O, you Bert." "O, you speed boy," they yelled. The enthusiastic lookers on took up the shout and it was a long time before Bert, blushing and embarrassed, could free himself from his boisterous admirers.

"O, cut it out, fellows," he protested. "It was all in the day's work."

"Sure," assented Tom Henderson, "but *such* a day's work." [12]

"And such a worker," added Dick Trent.

"Three times three and a tiger for Bert Wilson," roared a stentorian voice. The answer came in a tempest of cheers, and, as the train pulled out, the last sound that came to the waving passengers was the lusty chorus:

"For he's a jolly good fellow,  
Which nobody can deny."

---

## CHAPTER II

 [13]

### THE "BLUE STREAK"

"Isn't it a beauty?" exclaimed Bert, as, a few days later, he swept up to a waiting group of friends and leaped from the saddle.

There was a unanimous assent as the boys crowded around the motorcycle, looking at it almost with the rapt intentness of worshippers at a shrine.

"It's a dandy, all right," declared Dick, with an enthusiasm equal to Bert's own. "You skimmed along that last stretch of road like a bird."

"It's about the speediest and niftiest thing on the planet," chimed in Tom. "You'd give an airship all it wanted to do to keep up with you."

"Easy, easy there," laughed Bert. "I wouldn't go as far as that. But on 'terra cotta,' as Mrs. Partington calls it, there are mighty few things that will make me take their dust." And he patted the machine with as much affection as if it could feel and respond to the touch.

"About how fast can that streak of greased lightning travel, any way?" asked Drake. "What's the record for a motorcycle?"

"The best so far is a mile in thirty-six and four-fifths seconds," was the answer. "That's at the rate of ninety-eight miles an hour." [14]

"Some traveling," murmured Dick.

"Of course," went on Bert, "that was for a sprint. But even over long distances some great records have been hung up. In England last year a motorcycle made 300 miles in 280 minutes. I don't think the fastest express train in the world has ever beaten that."

"Gee," said Tom, "I'd hate to be in the path of a cannon ball like that. It would be the 'sweet by and by' for yours truly."

"It might possibly muss you up some," grinned Bert. "It's a case of 'the quick or the dead' when you amble across the path of a twin-cylinder."

"I should think," remarked Drake, "that it would shake the daylights out of you to travel at the speed you were going just now along that last bit of road."

"A few years ago it would have," admitted Bert. "The way they bumped along was a sure cure for dyspepsia. But with this saddle I could ride all day and scarcely feel a jar. Why, look at this

cradle spring frame," he went on enthusiastically; "it has the same flat leaf springs that they use in the finest kind of automobiles. You wouldn't believe that there are over 250 inches of supple, highly tempered springs between the saddle and the road. It's as elastic and flexible as a bamboo cane. Each spring has double scrolls that come into action one after another whenever you have a jolt. Then, too, there are rubber bumpers to take the recoil. Why, it's like a parlor car on a limited express. No fellow sitting back in a Pullman has anything on me."

[15]

"You're a pampered son of luxury, all right," mocked Tom. "We children of toil take off our hats to you."

Bert made a playful pass at him and went on:

"As to power, it would take the strength of seven horses to match it. The engine has a piston displacement of 61 inches. And yet you can control that tremendous power so far as to slow down to three miles an hour. Not that I often get down to that, though. Fifty or sixty suit me better."

"You ought to name it 'Pegasus,' after the flying horse," suggested Hinsdale.

"Old Pegasus would have his work cut out for him if he tried to show me the way," smiled Bert. "Still I don't claim to beat anything that goes through the air. But when you get down to solid earth, I'd back this daisy of mine to hold its own."

"The old Red Scout might make you hustle some," suggested Tom.

"Yes," admitted Bert, "she certainly was a hummer. Do you remember the time she ran away from the Gray Ghost? Speed was her middle name that day."

"It was, for fair," agreed Dick, "but perhaps she went still faster when we scudded up the track that day, with the express thundering behind."

[16]

"Our hearts went faster, anyway," declared Tom. "Gee, but that was a narrow squeak. It makes me shiver now when I think of it."

"Same here," echoed Bert, little dreaming that before long, on the splendid machine whose handlebars he held, he would graze the very garments of death.

Happily, however, the future was hidden, and for the moment the little group were absorbed in the mechanical wonders of the motorcycle that loomed large in the road before them. It stood for the last word in up-to-date construction. The inventive genius of the twentieth century had spent itself on every contrivance that would add to its speed, strength and beauty. It was a poem in bronze and steel and rubber. From the extremity of the handlebars in front to the rim of its rear wheel, not the tiniest thing had been overlooked or left undone that could add to its perfection. Fork and cams and valves and carburetor—all were of the finest material and the most careful workmanship.

"It seemed an awful lot to pay, when I heard that it cost you over three hundred bucks," said Tom, "but after looking it over, I guess you got your money's worth."

"The value's there, all right," asserted Bert confidently. "I wouldn't take that amount of money for the fun I've had already. And what I'm going to have"—he made a comprehensive wave of the hand—"it simply can't be reckoned in cold coin."

[17]

"It's getting to be a mighty popular way of traveling," said Dick. "I saw it stated somewhere that a quarter of a million are in use and that the output is increasing all the time."

"Yes," added Drake, "they certainly cover a wide field. Ministers, doctors, rural mail carriers, gas, electric and telephone companies are using them more and more. In the great pastures of the West, the herders use them in making their rounds and looking after the sheep. All the police departments in the big cities employ a lot of them, and in about every foreign army there is a motorcycle corps. You've surely got lots of company, old man."

"Yes, and we're only the vanguard. The time is coming when they'll be used as widely as the bicycle in its palmiest days."

"A bicycle wouldn't have done you much good the other day, in that wild ride down to the switch," grinned Drake. "By the way, Bert, the press associations got hold of that, and now the whole country's humming with it."

"Well," said Bert, anxious to change the subject, "if she'll only do as well in the race from coast to coast, I won't have any kick coming."

[18]

"How about that contest anyway?" queried Hinsdale. "Have you really decided to go into it?"

"Sure thing," answered Bert. "I don't see why I shouldn't. Commencement will be over by the eighth, and the race doesn't start until the tenth. That will give me plenty of time to get into shape. As a matter of fact, I'm almost fit now, and Reddy is training me for two hours every afternoon. I've almost got down to my best weight already, and I'm going to take the rest off so slowly that I'll be in the pink of condition when the race begins. Reddy knows me like a book and he says he never saw me in better form."

"Of course," he went on thoughtfully, "the game is new to me and I'm not at all sure of winning. But I think I have a chance. I'd like to win for the honor of it and because I hate to lose. And then, too, that purse of ten thousand dollars looks awfully good to me."

The race to which the boys referred had been for some time past a subject of eager interest, and had provoked much discussion in sporting and college circles. The idea had been developing since the preceding winter from a chance remark as to the time it would take a motorcycle to go

from the Atlantic to the Pacific. A guess had been hazarded that it could be done in twenty days. This had been disputed, and, as an outcome of the discussion, a general race had been projected to settle the question. The Good Roads Association of America, in conjunction with a number of motorcycle manufacturers, had offered a purse of five thousand dollars for the competitor who made the journey in the shortest time. If that time came within twenty days, an additional two thousand dollars was to be given to the winner.

[19]

One other element entered into the problem. The San Francisco Exposition, designed to celebrate the opening of the Panama Canal, would be in full swing at the time the survivors of the race reached the coast. One of the great features of the Fair was to be an international carnival of sports. There were to be contests in cavalry riding, in fencing, in auto racing, and the pick of the world were expected to compete. But of special interest to Bert was the international motorcycle race, which for the first time was to be held in America. Two years before, it had taken place in Paris and, a year later, in London. But this year it was America's turn, and because of the immense crowds expected at the Exposition, San Francisco had been chosen as the city to stage the event. There was to be a first prize of three thousand dollars and lesser purses for those that came in second and third. If, by any chance, the winner of the long distance race should break the twenty day limit and also win the final race at the Fair, his total reward would amount to ten thousand dollars.

[20]

With such a possibility in prospect, it was not surprising that Bert should be strongly tempted to enter the race. He was a natural athlete, and in his college course so far had stood head and shoulders above his competitors. As pitcher on the Varsity team, he had cinched the pennant by his superb twirling in a most exciting series of diamond battles. He had been chosen as a contender on the American Olympic team, and had carried off the Marathon after a heart-breaking race, in which every ounce of speed and stamina had been tried to the utmost. In an auto race between rival campers, his hand at the wheel had guided the Red Scout to victory over the Gray Ghost, its redoubtable antagonist. He was a splendid physical machine of brawn and sinew and nerve and muscle. Outdoor life, vigorous exercise and clean living, combined with his natural gifts, made him a competitor to be feared and respected in any contest that he chose to enter.

But his lithe, supple body was not his only, or indeed, his chief asset. What made him preëminent was his quick mind and indomitable will, of which his body was only the servant. His courage and audacity were superb. Again and again he had been confronted with accidents and discouragements that would have caused a weaker fellow to quit and blame the result on fate. He had won the deciding game in the baseball race, after his comrades had virtually thrown it away. In the Marathon, it was with bruised and bleeding feet that he overtook his antagonist at the very tape. The harder bad luck tried to down him, the more fiercely he rose in rebellion. And it was this bulldog grip, this unshaken tenacity, this "never know when you are beaten" spirit that put him in a class by himself and made him the idol of his comrades. They had seen him so often snatch victory from the very jaws of defeat, that they were prepared to back him to the limit. Win or lose, they knew that he would do his best, and, if defeated, go down fighting.

[21]

With such a character and record back of him, his enthusiastic friends were inclined to think that it was "all over but the shouting." Bert, however, had no such delusion. If it had been simply a matter of muscle or swiftness or courage, he would have felt more confident of the outcome. But here the "human equation" was not the only thing involved. The quality and strength of the machine he rode would be a very prominent and perhaps a deciding factor. He felt sure that he was in such prime physical condition that he could endure the gruelling grind. But would his machine be equal to the task? The most dashing horseman would have to halt, if his steed foundered beneath him. The most daring aviator would have to descend to earth, if his motor stopped. So Bert, no matter how strong and plucky, must fail, if his machine should go back on him.

[22]

For there could be no substitute. This was one of the conditions of the race. He must finish, if at all, on the same machine with which he started. The contestants were permitted to make repairs to any extent. Tires, forks, springs and any other parts could be replaced, and, at intervals along the route, supplies could be held in readiness, in addition to those that the rider carried. But essentially the identical machine must be used throughout the race. In the event of a hopeless smashup, the luckless rider was, of course, out for good. The racer and the machine were thus indispensable to each other. Neither could win if the other balked. They were like the two blades of a shears—strong when together but useless when separated.

To guard as much as possible against defects, Bert had been especially careful in selecting his motorcycle. He had the eye for a machine that a gipsy has for a horse. Among a host of others, he had chosen one that appealed to him as the acme of what a motorcycle should be. It was a seven horse power, twin cylinder racer, with every appliance and improvement known at the time it left the factory.

[23]

The brakes, for instance, were more powerful than those fitted to any previous type. It could be operated by a foot lever on the right side of the machine and also by a grip lever in the left handlebar. The double action was caused by the expansion and contraction of two bands inside and outside a brake drum.

Then, too, there was a foot-starting device that was a marvel of simplicity. A single downward pressure of the foot, and the racer started off at once.

An improved rear hub also aroused Bert's enthusiasm, because of its extra large size and the fact that it ran on ball bearings that were absolutely frictionless. In both the front and rear hubs

there was a knock-out axle, so that the wheels could be removed without interfering with the adjustment of the bearings.

In fact, the more Bert studied what had become his most precious possession the more convinced he grew that he had secured a "gem of the first water." And now that the first stiffness had worn off, the machine was "running like a watch."

The ignition was perfect, the transmission left nothing to be desired, and the most critical inspection could find no fault with any detail of the steel charger that was to carry him and his fortunes to victory or defeat.

[24]

"What are you going to christen it, Bert?" asked Tom. "Cut out the Pegasus stuff and tell it to us straight."

"On the level, I think I'll call it the 'Blue Streak,'" answered Bert. "That's the way it covers the ground, as a rule, and I hope it will be prophetic. Besides, blue is our college color and it ought to bring me luck. That's the color I wore when we took the Grays and Maroons into camp, and I had it at my belt when I collared Dorner in the Stadium. Everything goes in threes, you know, and this will be the third time I'm out to win since I was a Freshie."

"Bully for you, old top," exclaimed Drake, with a rousing thump on the shoulder. "The fellows will be tickled to death to know that the good old blue is showing the way across country. And when we hear that you've come in first, there'll be a yell that you'll hear way off in Frisco."

"Don't count your chickens too soon, my boy," cautioned Bert; but his heart was warmed and elated by the confidence his comrades had in him, and he vowed to himself that he would justify it, if it were humanly possible.

"To judge from the names already entered, it's going to be a weird color scheme," laughed Dick. "There's the Yellow Dragon and the Red Devil and the Brown Antelope and the White Cloud and the Black Knight; and there'll probably be others before the list is full."

[25]

"Gee," chortled Tom, "if a hobo should see them coming all at once, he'd think that he had them again, sure."

"Yes," agreed Bert, "it would certainly be a crazy quilt effect, if they should all come along together. But there are so many different routes that, ten to one, we won't catch sight of each other after the bunch scatters at the start."

"How about the route?" asked Martin. "I should think that would be one of the most important things to take into account."

"So it would, if it were left to me. But it isn't. You see, one of the great objects of the Good Roads Association is to plan a great national highway from coast to coast. They want to get all the facts about every possible route, so that they'll have something to go on, when they put it up to the different States to get legislation on their pet hobby. This race they think will be of great importance for this purpose, because it won't be based on theory but on actual experience. So they have mapped out a large number of possible lines to be followed—northern, central and southern,—and when they've got them all marked out, lots will be drawn and the fellows will have to follow the route that chance gives them. Of course, they can't be exactly alike in the matter of distance. But it will be as fair for one as the other, and, all things considered, they'll average up about alike. I expect to get a letter any day now, giving the special trip that luck has picked out for me.

[26]

"Of course," he went on, "it isn't all absolutely cut and dried. They don't mark out every highway and byway that you must travel, on pain of being disqualified. But you're given a chain of important towns and great centers that you must hit one after the other on your trip across the continent. As long as you do that, you are left to your own judgment as to the best and quickest way of getting there."

"How about any crooked work?" put in Axtell. "Is there any chance of that?"

"I'm not worrying much about that," answered Bert. "To be sure, where so much is at stake, there's always a chance of some one trying to turn a trick. But I don't see where they could 'put it over.' At every important place there'll be timers and checkers to keep tally on the riders. The machines are all registered and numbered and so carefully described that, in case of a smashup, a fellow couldn't slip in another one without being found out at the next stopping place. Then, too, if they tried to get a lift on a train, there would have to be too many in the secret. Besides, in all the names I've seen so far of the racers, there's only one that might possibly stoop to anything of that kind. His name is Hayward, and from what I've heard he's been mixed up with one or two shady deals. There have only been whispers and suspicions, however, and they've never been able actually to prove anything against him. So he is still nominally in good standing and eligible to ride. It may be all conjecture anyway. He probably wouldn't cheat if he could, and couldn't if he would."

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"No," said Dick, "it certainly seems as though the best man and the best machine ought to win."

"I understand that the race is to start from New York," remarked Drake.

"Yes," answered Bert, preparing to mount the machine, "from one of the beaches near the city. It's to be actually from ocean to ocean. The rear wheel is to be wet in the Atlantic. Then the fight is on in earnest and only ends when the front wheel is dipped in the Pacific."

"'Twill be some race," remarked Martin.



"You'll have to travel like the wind," warned Hinsdale.

"Yes," laughed Bert, as he threw in the clutch, "to make it in twenty days, I'll have to go like a blue streak."

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## CHAPTER III

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### FROM COAST TO COAST

The next few days flew by with magical swiftness. There were a thousand things to be done, and Bert found himself wishing that each day had a hundred hours instead of twenty-four. The term examinations were on, and he buckled down to them manfully. He had never neglected his class work in favor of athletic sports and his standing had always been high. He worked as hard as he played, and in both study and games was up in the front rank.

But when these ordeals were over and he had passed triumphantly, every spare moment was devoted to the coming race. He put into his preparation all his heart and soul. And in this, he was ably aided and abetted by Reddy, the college trainer.

"Reddy," as he was called from the flaming mop of hair that adorned his far from classic brow, was a character. For many years he had been in complete control of the football, baseball and general track teams of the college. He had formerly been a crack second baseman in a major league, but an injured ankle had forced his withdrawal from the active playing ranks. He had a shrewd, though uneducated, mind, and his knowledge of sports and ability as a trainer had made him famous in the athletic world. His dry wit and genial disposition made him a great favorite with the boys, though he ruled with an iron hand when discipline was needed.

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He was especially proud and fond of Bert for two reasons. In the first place, his trainers' soul rejoiced in having such a superb physical specimen to develop into a winner. He had so often been called upon to "make bricks without straw," that he exulted in this splendid material ready to his hand. And when his faith had been justified by the great victories that Bert had won, Reddy felt that it was, in part, his own personal triumph.

Then, too, Bert had never shirked or broken training. His sense of honor was high and fine, and he kept as rigidly to his work in the trainer's absence as in his presence. Reddy had never had to put detectives on his track or search him out in the poolrooms and saloons of the town. He was true to himself, true to his team, true to his college, and could always be counted on to be in first-class condition.

So that, although this was not a college event, Reddy took a keen personal interest in the coming contest. Every afternoon, he held the watch while Bert circled the track, and he personally superintended the bath and rubdown, after the test was over. He knew the exact weight at which his charge was most effective, and he took off the superfluous flesh just fast enough not to weaken him. And his Irish blue eyes twinkled with satisfaction, as he noted that just now he had never seen him in better shape for the task that lay before him.

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"Ye'll do," he said, with an air of finality, two days before the race, as he snapped his split-second chronometer, after a whirlwind sprint. "I'll not tell ye jist the time ye made for that last five miles, as I don't want ye to get the swelled head. But, my word for it, ye're on edge, and I don't want ye to touch that machine again until ye face the starter. Ye're down fine enough and I don't want ye to go stale before the race begins. I've left jist enough beef on ye to give ye a wee bit of a margin to work off. The rest is solid bone and muscle, and, if the machine is as good as yerself, ye'll get to the coast first with something to spare."

"Well," said Bert warmly, "it will be your victory as well as mine if I do. You're my 'one best bet' when it comes to getting into form. I wouldn't have had half a chance to pull off any of the stunts I have, if it hadn't been for you."

But Reddy tossed this lightly aside.

"Not a bit of it," he protested, "'tis yersilf has done the work, and yersilf should get the credit. And ye've done it too in the face of accident and hard luck. This time I'm hoping that luck will be on yer side. And to make sure," he grinned, "I'm going to give yer a sprig of four-leaved shamrock that came to me from the folks at home, last seventeenth of March. 'Twill not be hurting ye any to have it along with yer."

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"Sure thing," laughed Bert. "I'll slip it in the tool box and carry it every foot of the way."

And as Reddy had groomed Bert, so Bert groomed his machine. Every nut and bolt, valve and spring was gone over again and again, until even his critical judgment was satisfied. It was to carry not only his fortune but perhaps his life, and he did not rest until he was convinced that nothing could add to its perfection. It had become almost a part of himself, and it was with a feeling of reluctance that at last he had it carefully crated and sent on to the starting point, to await his coming forty-eight hours later.

That evening, as he returned from the post office, he met Tom and Dick at the foot of the steps leading to their dormitory. He waved at them an open letter that he had been reading.

"It's from the Committee," he explained. "It gives the route and final instructions. Come up to

the rooms and we'll go over it together."

A bond of friendship, far from common, united these three comrades—the "Three Guardsmen," as they were jokingly called, because they were so constantly together. They had first met at a summer camp, some years before, and a strong similarity of character and tastes had drawn them to each other at once. From that time on, it had been "one for three and three for one."

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Full to the brim as they were of high spirits and love of adventure, they often got into scrapes from which it required all their nerve and ingenuity to emerge with a whole skin. Their supreme confidence in themselves often led them to take chances from which older and wiser heads would have shrunk. And the various exploits in which they had indulged had taught each how fully and absolutely he might rely on the others. On more than one occasion, death itself had been among the possibilities, but even that supreme test had been met without flinching.

Only a few months before, when, on their journey through Mexico, Dick had fallen into the hands of El Tigre, the dreaded leader of guerillas, Bert and Tom had taken the trail at once, and after a most exciting chase, had rescued him from the bandit's clutches. During a trip to the Adirondacks, Tom had been bitten by a rattler and would have perished, had it not been for Bert's quickness of mind and swiftness of foot. And Bert himself never expected to come closer to death than that day on the San Francisco wharf, when Dick had grasped the knife hand of the Malay running amuck, just as it was upraised to strike.

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Any man or any danger that threatened one would have to count on tackling three. Each knew that in a pinch the others would stick at nothing in the effort to back him up. And this conviction, growing stronger with every new experience, had cemented their friendship beyond all possibility of breaking.

Their early ties had ripened and broadened under the influence of their college life. Dick had entered a year before the other two, and it was this that had moved them to choose the same Alma Mater. Dick and Tom were studying to be civil engineers, while Bert was more strongly drawn toward the field of electricity and wireless telegraphy. Their keen intelligence had won them high honors in scholarship, and their brawn and muscle had achieved an enviable distinction in athletics. On the pennant winning team of the year before, Bert's brilliant pitching had been ably supported by the star work of Tom at third, while Dick, beside being the champion slugger of the team, had held down first base like a veteran. All were immensely popular with the student body in general, not only for their prowess, but because of the qualities of mind and heart that would have singled them out anywhere as splendid specimens of young American manhood.

Bert and Dick roomed together, while Tom's quarters were on the floor below. Now, as it was nearer, they all piled into Tom's sitting-room, eager to discuss the contents of the official letter.

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"Here it is," said Bert, as he tossed it over to the others. "You see, I have the southern route."

"O, thunder," groaned Tom, "the toughest of the lot. You'll fairly melt down there at this time of year."

"It *is* rough," said Dick. "The roads there are something fierce. The northern or central route would have been ten times better."

"Yes," agreed Bert, "it certainly is a handicap. If I'd been left to choose, myself, I wouldn't have dreamed of going that way. Still, it's all a matter of lot, and I've got no kick coming. Somebody would have had to draw it, and I might as well be the victim as any one else."

"Spoken like a sport, all right," grumbled Tom. "But it makes me sore at fate. You'll need something more than Reddy's shamrock to make up for it."

"You might hunt me up the hind foot of a rabbit, shot by a cross-eyed coon in a graveyard, in the 'dark of the moon,' if you want to make sure of my winning," jested Bert. "But, seriously, fellows, I'm not going to let that rattle me a little bit. It may be harder, but if I do come in first, there'll be all the more credit in winning. As for the heat, I'll make my own breeze as I go along, and I'll take my chances on the roads."

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"Well, I suppose there's no use growling," admitted Tom, grudgingly. "At any rate, we'll see a section of the country we've never seen before."

"*We*," cried Bert. "What do you mean by that?"

"Just what I say," answered Tom, looking a little guiltily at Dick.

"What," yelled Bert, leaping to his feet. "Are you two rascals going along?"

"Surest thing you know," said Dick, calmly. "Did you think for a minute that Tom and I would miss the fun of seeing you scoot across the continent and win that ten thousand dollars? Not on your life. We were going to surprise you, but since this dub has let the cat out of the bag, we might as well own up. There's nothing to do, now that we know the route but to go out and get the tickets."

"Well, you're a pair of bricks," gasped Bert. "The finest pals a fellow ever had. That's the best news I've had 'since Hector was a pup.' I didn't know that I'd see a friend's face from the start to the finish. Talk about shamrocks and rabbit's feet! This news has got them skinned to death. It won't be any trick at all to toss off a few hundred miles, if I can figure on seeing you fellows when I turn in for the night. Say, fellows, I can't put it into words, but you know how I feel."

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"Pure selfishness on our part," said Dick, airily, to mask his own deep feeling. "We want to see

the San Francisco Fair, and figured that we'd never have a better chance."

"Yes," mocked Bert, delightedly, "I size up that selfishness all right. But now let's study the route and figure out the schedule. Then you gay deceivers can get through tickets with stopover privileges, and I'll know just where to find you along the way."

"You see," explained Tom, "we figured that we could get into the big towns ahead of you and act as a sort of base of supplies. You can keep tab on the way the 'Blue Streak' is running, and if anything goes wrong—if a tire bursts or a fork breaks or you have engine trouble—you can wire ahead and we'll have everything ready for you to make a lightning change the minute you heave in sight. Of course, you may have to do some temporary patching and tinkering along the way, but in really big things we may come in handy. But now let's cut out the hallelujahs and get down to brass tacks."

Which they did to such good effect that before they turned in for the night, they had outlined a plan that covered every probable contingency. Of course there was no such precision possible as in the case of a railroad schedule. A hundred things might happen to cause a change here, a delay there, but, between certain elastic limits, the route and time were carefully worked out. If they should have to revise it, as they doubtless would, the telegraph and long distance telephone could be depended on to help them out. [37]

Starting from New York, Bert figured that the first leg of the journey would take him as far as Philadelphia. This, of course, would not be typical of the regular distance he would have to cover each day, in order to beat the time record. But the race was not to start until noon, so that a half day was all that would be left the riders. And that half day would be slower than the average, because they would have to thread the streets of the greater city with all its hindrances and speed regulations, and would have bridges and ferries to cross before they could fairly let themselves out. Of course this would not count for a day in the timing, as they would be allowed a half day at the end of the journey to make up for it. In other words, the day ran from noon to noon, instead of from midnight to midnight.

From Philadelphia the route would lead to Baltimore and Washington. Then he proposed to strike down through West Virginia and into the famous Blue Grass region of Kentucky and thence swing down toward Little Rock, Arkansas, which would mark the extreme southern point of the journey. After that, he would be going almost directly west, with a slight trend to the north. He would cut through Oklahoma on a direct horizontal, and then for a short time traverse the upper part of Texas. Leaving the Lone Star State, he would strike in succession Santa Fé, New Mexico, and Flagstaff, Arizona. Then, at last, he would be in California, getting a glimpse of the sea at Santa Barbara, and then sweeping up the valley to San Francisco. [38]

The record he had to beat was twenty days. He planned to do it in fifteen. That is, he was confident that as far as mere time were concerned, he could reel off enough miles every day to take him over the route within that limit. But that was assuming that everything went smoothly, and, in a trip of this length, he knew that such an assumption was absurd. He gave himself three days for accidents and delays. This, added to the fifteen of actual running time, would still give him a comfortable margin of forty-eight hours. But, on the average, despite accident or breakdown, wind or rain, sickness or health, mistaken roads or dangerous spills, flood or freshet or tempest, he must make from two to three hundred miles every day. Not only he must be in shape to do it, but the "Blue Streak" also. There were two machines that had to take all the chances of wear and tear and mishap—the physical machine above the saddle, and the steel and rubber machine below it. [39]

He wanted to make the most of the good roads that he would have at the very beginning of the trip. The first three days would be the best ones, as far as this feature was concerned. The Eastern and Northern States were far ahead of the rest of the country in this respect. Their wealth and population, as well as the vastly greater number of motor vehicles in use, had early turned their attention to the value and necessity of the best kind of roads that money could buy and science invent. After he left Louisville, the going would be harder. While, at places, there would be magnificent turnpikes along the main arteries of travel, these would be more than counterbalanced by roads where clay and sand predominated. But, to make up for this, would be the fact that for long distances the roads would be clearer and the speed regulations less stringent. And, on these stretches, Bert promised himself to "hit it up" hard enough to compensate for the inferior quality of the road. It was "all in the game," and, in the long run, things would about even up.

"It's a good deal of a lottery, when all is said and done," was the way he summed it up, as they rose from the maps and papers spread out before them; "I may get knocked out on the first day, and then again I may turn up smiling at the finish." [40]

"Of course," assented Tom, "there's no telling what may happen before the race is over. But I have a hunch that in this lottery you are going to draw the capital prize."

"Well," laughed Bert, "if you're as good a prophet as you are a pal, I'd be sure of it."

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## CHAPTER IV

### A FLYING START

The day of the race dawned bright and clear. There was just enough breeze to temper the heat of the sun, but not enough to interfere with the riders. There had been no rain since three days before, and the roads, while a little dusty, were firm and fast. Everything bespoke ideal conditions for the event that, it was hoped, would hang up new records in one of the most modern of sports.

The three friends had left college the day before, and had taken up their quarters at one of the hotels near the beach. They were full of health and hope and enthusiasm. The work of the college year was over, and they felt like colts kicking up their heels in a pasture. Dick and Tom were looking forward to the trip across the continent and the wonders of the great Exposition. This of itself would have been enough to account for their exuberance, but there was the added excitement of watching the progress of the great race, and, in a sense, taking part in it. And, with all the optimism of youth, they did not let themselves feel the shadow of a doubt that their comrade would come in triumphant.

And Bert, although somewhat sobered by the weight of responsibility that rested upon him, was almost as jubilant as they. He was a born fighter, and his spirits always rose on the eve of a contest. He was "tuned to the hour." The muscles of his arms and legs glided like snakes beneath the white skin, his color was good, his eyes shone, and he had never in all his many contests felt in better physical trim. [42]

Early in the morning, he had hurried to the garage to which the "Blue Streak" had been consigned, and was delighted to find that it had made the journey without a scratch. No one but himself was permitted to give it the final grooming. He personally filled the tank, looked to the oil, and went over every nut and bolt and valve. Then he sprang into the saddle and took a five-mile spin around the neighboring race track. And even his exacting criticism could find no shadow of defect. The "Blue Streak," like its master, was in perfect condition.

"Well, old boy," said Bert, as he patted the beautiful machine, after the test, "we're going to be pretty close companions for the next few weeks, and you've got a big job cut out for you. But I believe you're game for it, and if your rider is as good as you are, I won't have anything left to ask."

As the hour drew near, a great crowd assembled to see the start. The contest had stirred up a vast amount of interest among motor enthusiasts, and many of the motorcycle clubs were represented by big delegations. One or two of the entries had dropped out at the last moment, and there were ten contestants who faced the starter. Each had his coterie of friends and well wishers who had gathered to give him a rousing send off. But none were greeted so uproariously as Bert, who had a reception that "warmed the cockles of his heart." Undergraduates of the old college flocked around him, and these were reinforced by hundreds of alumni, living in or near the city, who scented one more victory for the blue colors that they loved so dearly. They swarmed about him, grasped his hand and thumped him on the back, until if he had been in poorer condition, he would have been black and blue. It was with difficulty that he could tear himself away from the multitude whose enthusiasm outran their discretion. But many a day thereafter, in loneliness and peril and the shadow of death, the memory of that boisterous farewell was an inspiration. The last hands he clasped were those of Tom and Dick and Reddy, whose face was as red as his hair from excitement. [43]

"Good luck, me bye," he called. Then in a whisper, "Ye haven't forgot the shamrock?"

"You bet I haven't," laughed Bert, and lifting the cover of his tool box, he showed it lying on top. Whereat, Reddy heaved a sigh of relief, and fell back satisfied. [44]

And now everything was ready for the start. The wheels had been dipped in the Atlantic, whose surf curled up to meet them, as though to whisper a message to its sister ocean. Then all the riders, standing by their machines, were drawn up in line on the boulevard that came down almost to the beach. The conditions of the race were read aloud and all of the racers with uplifted hand swore to observe them. A letter from the Mayor of New York to the Mayor of San Francisco was delivered to each contestant. Only the one who reached there first was to deliver his. The others would be of value as souvenirs of perhaps a gallant but unsuccessful struggle.

Then there was a moment's silence, while the excitement grew tense. The starter lifted his pistol and glanced along the waiting line. There came a flash, a sharp report, and before the echoes died away the riders were in the saddle. A tremendous roar from the exhausts made the crowd shrink back, and it scattered as the great machines leaped forward. It was like the bursting of a rainbow. Blue and red and black and white darted forward in flying streaks of color, spreading out like the sticks of a gigantic fan. Before the startled spectators could catch their breath, the racers were vanishing from sight up the boulevard. The dash from coast to coast had begun. [45]

For the five mile ride along the parkway there was no need of observing the speed regulations. The road had been kept clear of all other vehicles, and policemen placed along the route kept the crowds to the paths on either side. The "motor cops," who were personally interested in that race, that involved their own pet machine, waved greetings as they passed.

In a few minutes they had left this atmosphere of friendliness and enthusiasm, and were getting into the stream of the city's traffic. From now on, there was need of constant vigilance. The riders began to separate, each steering through the street that they figured would bring them most quickly and easily to the bridges that spanned the river. By the time Bert had crossed the old Brooklyn Bridge, he had lost sight of all his competitors. By different roads, from now on,

they would fly toward the common goal, so many thousand miles distant. The spectacular features were in the past. Now each one, alone and unaided, was to “work out his own salvation.”

But there was no sinking of the heart, as Bert, after crossing the bridge and winding through the packed streets of lower New York, stood on the ferry boat and watched the irregular sky line of the great city. What would happen to him before he saw it again, it was fortunate that he could not guess. But just now, his heart beat high with the delight of struggle and achievement. He had his chance. And he was determined to make that chance a certainty. [46]

He was the first one off the boat when it swung into its slip, and as soon as he got beyond the business quarter of Jersey City, he began to “eat up” the space across the meadows. He was flying when he reached Newark, where he again had to let up in his pace for a few minutes. But luck was with him and gave him an unexpected pace maker, just as he drew into the open spaces beyond the city limits.

The broad road ran right alongside the railroad track, and just as Bert let out a link and got into his stride, a limited express came thundering along at a high rate of speed. The racing instinct woke in Bert and he let his machine out until it was traveling like the wind. For a mile or two they went along like a team, neither seeming able to lose the other.

The passengers, gazing listlessly out of the windows, gradually woke up to the fact that this tiny machine was actually racing with their train. At first they were amused at the seeming impudence, but as mile after mile passed, with the “Blue Streak” holding its own, they became excited. The sportsman spirit that seems characteristic of America was aroused, and all the windows on that side of the train were filled with crowding faces. It was like a pygmy daring a giant, a tugboat challenging the *Imperator*. [47]

The engineer, at first looking languidly at the impertinent racer, made no special effort to increase his speed. But when Bert hung to his flank and refused to be shaken off, he turned and said something to his fireman. The latter shoveled desperately, the engineer let out his throttle, and the great train lunged forward.

But Bert, too, had something “up his sleeve.” He had been keeping well within his limit, and he knew the speed of which his gallant mount was capable. A mile ahead he could see where the road crossed the track. With a quick twist of the wrist, he threw in the highest speed and had to grip his handlebars hard to keep his seat as his iron steed responded. He flashed on ahead, fairly scorching up the road, and dashed across the track fifty feet ahead of the onrushing locomotive. Then, as the passengers rushed over to the other side of the cars, he waved his cap to them, shook it defiantly at the discomfited engineer and fireman, and disappeared around the bend of the road. Then he gradually slackened his pace, though still maintaining a high rate of speed.

Bert was hilarious. It was his first race, so far, and he had come out ahead. He took it as an omen. [48]

“Some race, old scout,” he confided joyously to his mount. “You certainly lived up to your name that time.” And he laughed aloud, as he remembered the look on the faces in the cab.

The race had been a capital thing, not only for the many miles he had covered, but because of the added confidence that had been infused into his veins by the successful outcome. He had “ridden rings” around his redoubtable opponent, and his heart was full of elation.

As he neared Trenton, he stopped at a garage to replenish his gasoline. He had plenty left to finish out the stretch that he had mapped out for that day’s work, but he was taking no chances, and always felt better when he knew that his tank was full.

A tall young fellow had preceded him on the same errand, and was just about to mount his wheel when Bert entered. There was something familiar about him and Bert cudgeled his brains to remember where he had met him. The stranger seemed equally puzzled. Then a sudden gleam of memory lighted up his face, and he came toward Bert with outstretched hand.

“Beg pardon,” he said. “But isn’t your name Wilson—Bert Wilson, the college pitcher?”

“Yes,” answered Bert, taking the hand held out to him, “and you—sure I know,” he exclaimed, as recognition flashed upon him—“you’re Gunther of the Maroons. I couldn’t place you for a minute.” [49]

“You placed me all right in that last game, when you struck me out in the ninth inning,” grinned Gunther. “Do you remember?”

Did Bert remember? Could he ever forget? Again the scene came before him as though it were yesterday. He saw the diamond gleaming in the afternoon sun, the stands packed with twenty-five thousand howling maniacs. It was the final game of the season, and the pennant hung upon the outcome. Two men were out when Gunther came to the bat. He was the heaviest slugger of the league, and the home crowd was begging him to “kill the ball.” Bert had outguessed him on the first strike, and snapped one over by surprise on the second. Then, on the third, he had cut loose that mighty “fadeaway” of his. For forty feet it had gone on a line—hesitated—swerved sharply down and in, and, evading Gunther’s despairing swing, plumped into the catcher’s mitt. And the howl that went up—and the mighty swoop of the fellows on the field—and the wild enthusiasm over Bert—and the bonfires—and the snake dances! Did he remember?

“You certainly had me buffaloed that day, all right,” went on Gunther. “It isn’t often that I hit a foot above a ball, but that fadeaway of yours had me going. I simply couldn’t gauge it. It’s a teaser, for fair. You were the whole team that day.” [50]

"We had the luck, that's all," protested Bert. "The breaks of the game were with us."

"It wasn't luck," said Gunther, generously; "you simply outplayed us. But we did make you work to win," he added, with a reminiscent smile.

By this time, the tank had been replenished, and he was recalled from his "fanning bee" by the necessity of resuming his trip. Gunther had heard of the contest and had seen Bert's name among the competitors, but had not associated it with the Wilson of baseball fame.

"You can't get away from the game," he joked, referring to the ten contestants. "I see that you are still playing against a 'nine.' If that pun isn't bad enough, I'll go you one better—or worse—and bet that you'll bowl them over like ninepins."

"Thanks, old man," responded Bert. "I hope I'll make a 'strike.' But now I'll have to skip and cut out the merry jesting. Jump on your wheel and set the pace for me for the next ten miles or so."

"Swell chance of my making pace for that crackerjack you have there," said Gunther, looking admiringly at the "Blue Streak," "but I'll try to keep alongside, anyway."

He had a surprisingly good machine and doubled Bert's dare by riding twenty miles or more, before he finally hauled up and, with a warm handgrip, said goodbye. [51]

"Two pleasant things to-day," mused Bert, as he sped on, referring to the popular theory that events, good or bad, come in threes. "I guess the third will be in meeting good old Tom and Dick, when I swing into the City of Brotherly Love."

And pleasant it certainly was, when, after reporting to the checkers and timers at the club headquarters, and putting up his motorcycle, he turned toward the hotel where his chums awaited him with a royal welcome.

"You've surely got off to a flying start, old top," said Tom. "I hadn't any idea that you'd hit this burg so soon. We've just fairly got in ourselves. But before anything else, let's wrap ourselves about some eats. Are you hungry?"

"Am I hungry?" echoed Bert. "Is a wolf hungry? Is a hawk hungry? Is a cormorant—say, lead me to it."

And at the bountiful table to which they straightway adjourned, Bert proved that none of the natural history specimens he had mentioned "had anything on him." Nor did his friends lag far behind, and it is doubtful if three happier and fuller young fellows could have been found in Philadelphia, as, afterward, they discussed the events of the day. They were especially interested in Bert's meeting with Gunther, as they themselves had taken part in that famous game. Dick's mighty work with the stick on that occasion and Tom's great steal home from third were matters of baseball history. [52]

Then Bert mentioned the railroad episode.

"You ought to have seen the way I beat a train, fellows," he gloated. "My, but it took some tall speeding."

"Beat a train?" questioned Tom, incredulously.

"What was it—a freight?" bantered Dick.

"Freight nothing," retorted Bert, a little nettled. "A limited express, if you ask me."

"Near Newark, did you say?" queried Tom.

"I didn't say," was Bert's rejoinder, "but as it happened, it was just outside of Newark."

"Beat a limited express," murmured Dick, shaking his head. "Tom, I'm afraid Bert's stringing us."

"Imposing on our innocence, it seems to me," assented Tom, gloomily. "The next thing, he'll be telling us that he made a daredevil dash across the track in front of the locomotive."

"And waved his cap at the passengers," mourned Dick.

"And shook it at the engineer," added Tom.

"Say," began Bert, "what——" But the sight of his bewildered face was too much, and they burst into a roar.

"You poor boob," sputtered Tom, as soon as he could speak. "We were on that train."

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## CHAPTER V

### THE DESERTED HUT

Bert's first thought, when he opened his eyes the next morning, was of the weather. This was destined to be the chief object of anxiety all through the trip. As long as it kept reasonably dry and clear, one big element of danger and delay could be left out of his calculations. The lowering of the sky meant the lowering of his hopes.

As he rushed to the window and drew aside the curtain, he was relieved to see that the sun was rising. To be sure, there was a slight haze around it that might portend rain later on. But for the

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present, at least, the roads were good. If rain were on the way, all the more reason why he should do some tall "hustling" while the going was fair.

His sleep had been restful and refreshing, and he hummed gaily to himself, as he rushed through his ablutions. He stowed away a hasty but ample breakfast, and then after a hearty farewell to his chums, hurried around to the garage where his machine was stored.

He was surprised to find a large gathering of motorcycle enthusiasts on hand. The news had spread abroad that one of the contestants in the great race had reached the city the night before, and delegations from the many clubs had gathered to give him a send-off and accompany him for a few miles out of town. Bert greeted them warmly, and, after assuring himself that the "Blue Streak" was in first-class condition, leaped into the saddle and started out at the head of the procession. [54]

First one and then the other would make the pace, sprinting for a short distance for all that he was worth, and then dropping back into the ruck. But Bert "saw their bluff and went them one better," and no matter how hard they "hit it up," he was always within striking distance of their rear wheel. One by one they gave it up, and by the time that thirty miles had been covered, Bert found himself riding on alone. He had welcomed the visitors, because of the goodwill that they had shown and the pace that they had made. Their company made the miles less long and furnished him a mental tonic. Yet he was glad, when, with nothing to distract him, he could bend all his energies to the task before him and put the "Blue Streak" to the top of its speed.

For he wanted to make this day a record breaker in the matter of miles covered. The roads were superb, and it behooved him to make the most of them, with a view to having some surplus of time on hand, when he struck the slower stretches further on. [55]

There was plenty about him to enlist his thoughts, had he allowed them to wander. He was on historic ground, and every foot was rich in Revolutionary memories. Here had Washington with his ragged and barefooted and hungry armies defied all the power of Great Britain. Mifflin and Greene and Lafayette and "Light Horse Harry Lee" had here done deeds of daring that electrified the world. And, before night, he expected to be on the scene of that greater and sadder struggle, where Grant and Lee had flung their giant armies at each other and drenched the soil with fraternal blood. But, although Bert was an ardent patriot, and, at any other time, nothing would have more strongly appealed to him, now he was utterly engrossed in the colossal task set before him. This, in fact, was the one great quality that had won him so many victories in the athletic world—the ability of shutting out every thing else for the time being, and concentrating all his strength and attention on the task that lay at hand.

Now, he was fairly flying. Mile after mile swept away behind him, as he gave the "Blue Streak" its head and let it show him what it could do. The "speed lust" ran riot in his veins. As he neared the different villages, on his route, he was forced to slacken speed to some extent. It would never do to be arrested for breaking the speed limit. He foresaw all the heart-breaking delay, the officious constable, the dilatory country justice of the peace, the crowd of gaping rustics, the possible jail detention. He was amply supplied with money to meet any possible fine—but imprisonment was another matter, that might be fraught with the direst consequences. So, although he inwardly raged at the necessity, he curbed his natural impulse, and slowed up at crossings and country towns. But when again he found himself out in the open, he amply reimbursed himself for "crawling," as he called it, through the towns. It is doubtful whether the startled townspeople would have called it "crawling." But everything in this world is comparative, and where they would have thought themselves flying at twenty miles an hour, Bert felt that he was creeping at forty. [56]

Few faster things had ever flashed like a streak of light along the country roads. Horses, grazing in the adjoining pastures, after one wild glance, tossed up their heels and fled madly across the fields. Even the cows, placidly chewing their cud, were roused from their bovine calm and struggled to their feet. Chickens, squawking wildly, ran across the road, and although Bert tried his best to avoid them, more than one paid the penalty for miscalculating his speed. Dogs started fiercely in pursuit, and then disgustedly gave it up and crept away with their tail between their legs. And all the time the speedometer kept creeping rapidly up and up, until, within two hours after the start, he had wiped a hundred miles off his schedule. [57]

Just once he had stopped in his mad flight, to get a glass of milk at a farmhouse. He was in the Pennsylvania Dutch district, the richest and thriftiest farming country in the world. All about him were opulent acres and waving fields of corn and big red barns crammed to bursting. They were worthy, sober people, rather prone to regard every new invention as a snare of the Devil, and the farmer's wife was inclined to look askance at the panting machine that Bert bestrode. But his friendly, genial face thawed her prejudice and reserve, and she smilingly refused the money that he had offered for the rich creamy milk she brought from one of the shining pans in her dairy.

By ten o'clock, he had passed through Baltimore, and, before noon, he was riding over the splendid roads of the nation's capitol. Here, despite the temptation to spend an hour or two, he only paused long enough to take a hearty meal and check his time. He thrust aside the well-meant invitations that were pressed upon him at the club, and by two o'clock had left Washington behind him and was riding like a fiend toward West Virginia. He wanted if possible to reach Charleston before night closed in. If he could do this, he would be very well content to dismount and call it a day's work. [58]

But now old Nature took a hand. All through the morning, the haze had been thickening, and now black clouds, big with threats of rain, were climbing up the sky. The wind, too, was rising

and came souging along in fitful gusts. Every moment now was precious, and Bert bent low, as he coaxed his machine to do its utmost.

And it responded beautifully. Like Sheridan's horse on the road to Winchester, it seemed to feel the mood of its rider. It was working like a charm. Mile after mile sped away beneath the wheels that passed light as a ghost over the broad path beneath. Even when it had to tackle hills, it never hesitated or faltered, but went up one slope almost as fast as it went down another.

And the hills were growing more frequent. Up to this time the roads had been almost as level as a floor. But now, Bert was approaching the foothills of the Blue Ridge, and not until he struck the lowlands of Arkansas, would he be out of the shadow of the mountains, which, while they added immensely to the sublimity of the scenery, were no friends to any one trying to make a record for speed.

Still, this did not worry Bert. He expected to get the "lean" as well as the "fat." The North American continent had not been framed to meet his convenience, and he had to take it as it came. All that especially bothered him was that threatening sky and those frowning clouds that steadily grew blacker. [59]

His eyes and thoughts had been so steadily fixed upon the heavens, that he had scarcely realized the change in the surrounding country. But now he woke up to the fact that his environment was entirely different from that of the morning. Then he had been in a rich farming country, the "garden of the Lord"; now he was in the barren coal regions of West Virginia. Beautiful mansions had given place to tiny cabins; prosperous towns to mountain hamlets. The farms were stony and poorly cultivated. Great coal breakers stood out against the landscape like gaunt skeletons. The automobiles that had crowded the eastern roads were here conspicuous by their absence. The faces of those he passed on the road were pinched and careworn. He was seeing life on one of its threadbare levels.

But his musings on the inequalities of life were rudely interrupted by a drop of rain that splashed on his face. It was coming, then. But perhaps it would only prove a shower. That would not deter him. In fact he would welcome it, as it would serve to lay the dust. But if it developed into a steady downpour, he would have to seek shelter. It would only be foolhardy to plough through the mud with his tires skidding and threatening an ugly fall that might mean a broken leg or arm. [60]

Faster and faster the drops came down, and faster and faster the "Blue Streak" scorched along the road, as though to grasp every possible advantage, before the elements had their way. Gradually the roads lost their white, dusty appearance and grew yellow in the waning light. Bert could feel a perceptible slowing up as the mud began to grip the wheel. Still he kept on, holding like a miser to every precious mile that meant so much to him.

Soon, however, he realized that "the game was up." The rain was coming down now in torrents, and he was wet to the skin. And with the rain came darkness so thick as "almost to be felt." Then a flash of lightning rent the sky, and a terrific crash of thunder warned him that the storm was on in earnest.

He looked about him for some place of shelter. But there was nothing in sight, not even one of the little cabins, of whose hospitality he would so gladly have availed himself. The lightning came so fast now that the sky was aflame with it, and the thunder was continuous and deafening. He did not dare to seek shelter under the trees, and, in the open, the steel and iron of his motorcycle might easily attract a lightning stroke.

As he looked about him in perplexity, a peculiarly blinding flash showed him a little shack at the top of the hill he had been climbing when the storm had broken. It was only a few rods ahead of him, and, with a feeling of immense relief and thankfulness, he made for it. There was no light coming from it, and he did not know whether it was inhabited or abandoned. But, in either case, it was shelter from the fierceness of the storm, and that was enough. [61]

Leading the wheel from which he had dismounted, he climbed the intervening space and rapped at the door. He waited an instant and then knocked again. Still there was no answer and after pausing a moment, he pushed open the door, that had no latch and yielded to his touch, as he stepped inside.

At first, coming from the outer air, he could only make out the outlines of the single room, of which the cabin seemed to consist. He called out, but there was no response. Then he rummaged in his tool box, and got out a bit of candle that he had provided for an emergency. From a waterproof pouch in his khaki suit, he produced a match and lighted the candle. Then, as the flickering light grew into a steady flame, he was able to take stock of his surroundings.

As he had surmised on his entrance, there was only a single room. The floor was of dirt, and the shack had been simply slung together in the rudest kind of a way. There was a small table of unplanned boards and a stool, from which one of the three legs was missing. A bunk in the corner and a tattered blanket completed the entire outfit of the temporary shelter in which Bert had so unexpectedly found himself. [62]

It might have been a cabin formerly dwelt in by one of the "poor whites" of the mountains, or possibly a hunter's shack that served at intervals for a temporary camp. At all events, it was shelter, and, in his present wet and desperate condition, Bert was not inclined to "look a gift horse in the mouth."

"It isn't exactly the Waldorf-Astoria," he thought to himself, as he brought his motorcycle in out of the pounding rain, "but it surely looks mighty good to me just now."



There was a rude fireplace at one side and some wood and kindling left by the previous occupant, and it was only a few moments before a cheery blaze gave an air of comfort to the small interior. After the fire was well started, Bert took his wet garments one by one and dried them before the fire. In a little while he was snug and dry, and inclined to look philosophically on the day that had had such an unlooked for ending. He even chuckled, as he looked at the speedometer and found that it registered over two hundred and fifty miles. He at least was nearly up to his schedule, in spite of the rain, and to-morrow was "a new day."

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"It might easily have been worse," he thought. "Suppose it had rained that way this morning, instead of holding off as long as it did. I've cleared the Eastern States, at any rate, and am at last 'down South.'"

As a precaution, when he stopped at Washington, he had secured a few sandwiches and a can of sardines. These he put out on the rough table, and, as hunger is always "the best sauce," he enjoyed it hugely. There wasn't a crumb left, when at last he leaned back contentedly and stretched his legs before the fire.

"Like Robinson Crusoe, I'm master of all I survey," he mused. "Not that my kingdom is a very extensive one," as he looked about the little room, that he could have covered with one jump.

The rain still kept on with unabated fury, but the harder it poured, the more cozy the shack seemed by contrast.

"Guess you and I will have to bunk it out together, old chap," he said, addressing his faithful wheel. "Well, I might easily find myself in worse company. You're a good old pal, if there ever was one."

He took from his kit some oiled rags and together with some old gunny sacking that he found in a corner, started to clean the machine. The mud with which it was caked made this a work of time, as well as a "labor of love," and two hours wore away before he had concluded. But it was a thorough job, and, by the time he was through, the "Blue Streak" was as bright and shining as when it faced the starter at noon on the day before.

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While he was at work, Bert at times seemed to hear something that sounded like the roar and dash of waves. But he dismissed this as absurd. It was probably the splashing of the water, as it ran down the gullies at the side of the road. He was far above the level of lake or pond, and there was nothing on his map to indicate the presence of any considerable body of water in that locality. Once he went to the door, a little uneasily. But in the pitch darkness, all he could see was the lights of a little town, far down the valley. He told himself that he was dreaming, and, after promising himself an early start on the following morning, he stretched himself out on the little bunk in the corner, and in a few minutes had fallen into a deep and refreshing sleep.

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## CHAPTER VI

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### THE BROKEN DAM

**H**ow long he slept he did not know, but, while the cabin was still shrouded in darkness, he woke suddenly and sat upright, as though in response to a voice that called.

He looked about him, unable at first to realize where he was. Then, as he reached out his hand, it came in contact with the motorcycle, which he had stood at the head of the bunk. His sleepy brain cleared, and the events of the day before—the storm—the deserted cabin—came back to him. He struck a match and glanced at his watch. It was a little after four, and, promising himself that he would not go to sleep again, he blew out the light and lay back in his bunk, planning out the ride for the day so near at hand.

But try as he would, he could not concentrate his mind on the subject in hand. Why had he awakened so suddenly? It was wholly apart from his ordinary habit. Usually he slept like a log, and, like a healthy animal, came slowly out of sleep. But this time it had been with a jump. He told himself that it was probably due to his unusual surroundings, and again tried to pin himself down to his schedule. But a vague sense of uneasiness would not vanish at his bidding. He felt as though some monstrous danger was threatening. Something direful and evil was in the air. In vain he called himself an "old woman," and laughed, a little uncertainly, at his fears. The subtle threat persisted.

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He had never had a strong premonition of danger that had not been justified. He was high strung and sensitively organized, and warnings that would leave unstirred a duller mind rang in his consciousness like an alarm bell. He recalled how, at Panama, not long ago, he had been impressed by the same feeling of coming peril, when the plot to destroy the canal was rapidly coming to a head. It had been justified then. Why should he not trust it now?

He hesitated no longer. He hastily threw aside the old tattered blanket, hurried himself into his clothes and went to the door of the cabin.

The rain had ceased, although the water was still running in streams in the ditches that lined the road. Darkness yet held sway, but, in the East, he could see the gray fingers of the dawn. In the dimness, he looked about him, and, as his eyes became accustomed to the surroundings, he saw, at a little distance, the outlines of a great structure that lay level with the plateau on which

the cabin stood.

With a few quick strides, he crossed the intervening space until he stood on the brink of a gigantic dam. Then he knew what was meant by the splashing and gurgling he had heard the night before. [67]

Stretched out in front of him was an angry waste of swirling waters. It was yellow and turbid from the clay brought down by the mountain torrents that acted as feeders to the lake. Great tree trunks, tossed in the boiling waters, had been jammed against the edge, increasing the pressure, already great. Over the brink a cataract was falling, that grew in volume with each passing moment. Through crevices in the lower part of the structure, other streams were trickling.

To Bert, as with whitening face he looked upon the scene, it was evident that the dam was in danger of collapse. There had been very heavy rains in the preceding May, and the lake had been filled to capacity. The storm of the night before had probably developed into a cloudburst farther up in the mountains, and the floods that came down in consequence were putting it to a strain that had not been counted upon when the dam was built. It was none too strong originally—Bert could see masses of rubble that had been inserted in the structure in place of solid stone—and now the innocent were in danger of paying a fearful price for the carelessness or criminality of the builders.

It had become much lighter now, and, as he looked down at the valley below, he could dimly make out the outlines of the houses in the town. Human beings were sleeping there, serene and confident, men, women and children, babes in their mothers' arms. And he alone knew of the terrible monster that at this moment was threatening to leap upon and destroy them. [68]

He turned again to the dam. The crevices were wider now. A perfect torrent was pouring over the brink. Even while he looked, there was a great bulge in the central part, and a deluge burst through. Two of the capstones yielded and fell, with a noise that was drowned by the still greater roar of the unleashed waters. There was no longer any doubt. The dam was giving way!

With a sickening fear at his heart, he turned and raced for the cabin. A louder roar behind him added wings to his feet. He burst open the door, dragged out the "Blue Streak," and in another moment was in the saddle and riding for dear life down the valley.

The mud was deep and at a curve of the road, his rear tire skidded and threw him, bruised and bleeding, a dozen feet in advance. But he felt nothing, thought of nothing but the unconscious sleepers who must be warned. Stumbling and shaken, he resumed his seat, and tore along the mountain road like the wind.

At the scattered farmhouses along the way, lights could be seen in the windows. Here and there, he passed farmers already at work in the fields. He blew his horn and yelled at these and pointed behind him. They cast one startled glance up the valley and then rushed to their houses. [69]

He did not dare to look behind him, but he could hear a sullen roar that momentarily grew louder. He knew that the monster had broken its bonds and was abroad seeking for prey. He let out the last ounce of power that he possessed as he raced on to the sleeping town. He had ridden fast before, but never as he was riding now.

As he neared the town, he pulled wide open the siren that he only used on extraordinary occasions. It wailed out in a wild, weird shriek that spoke of panic, danger, death. There was no mistaking the meaning of that call.

Now he was in the outskirts, and frightened faces appeared at the windows while half-dressed men ran out of the doors. He waved his hand, and shouted at the top of his lungs:

"The dam has broken. Run for your lives!"

The roar had now swelled into thunder. The flood was coming with fearful velocity. No more need of his siren. That hideous growl of the tumbling waters carried its own warning.

The path on which Bert had been riding wound along the side of the hill to the east of the town. Corresponding slopes lay on the other side. The dwellers on the sides of the hills were comparatively safe. It was unlikely that the water would reach them, or, at any rate, they could climb still higher up and escape, even if their houses were washed away. But there was no hope for the buildings in the valley itself. They were right in the path of the onrushing flood and would be swept away like so many houses of cards. Nothing could resist that pitiless torrent now less than a mile away. [70]

Bert leaped from his wheel and dragged it into a thicket at the side of the path. He cast a swift look up the valley. A great foaming wall of yellow water, forty feet high, bearing on its crest gigantic tree trunks and the debris of houses it had picked up in its path, was bearing down on the town with the swiftness of an avalanche.

The houses were emptying now and the streets were full of frantic people, fleeing for their lives. Bert heard the hoarse shouts of the men, the screams of the women, the wailing of little children roused suddenly from sleep. From every door they poured forth, making desperate efforts to reach the higher ground. The air resounded with the shrieks of those driven almost mad by sudden terror.

Into that pandemonium Bert plunged with the energy of despair. The time was fearfully short and the tumult of the coming flood was like the thunder of Niagara. He met a mother with a babe in her arms and two crying children holding to her skirts. He grabbed the little ones up and with a tousled little head under each arm placed them in safety. A crippled boy, hobbling painfully [71]

along on crutches, felt himself suddenly lifted from the ground and hurried to the hillside. He was here, there and everywhere, guiding, pointing, encouraging. And then, just as he was stooping to lift up a woman who had fainted, the flood was upon him!

It struck the doomed town with the force of a thunderbolt. Frame houses were picked up and carried along like straws. Brick structures were smashed into fragments. It was a weltering chaos of horror and destruction.

When that mountainous mass of water crashed down upon him, Bert for a moment lost consciousness. It was like the impact of a gigantic hammer. There was an interval of blackness, while the water first beat him down and then lifted him up. He had a horrible strangling sensation, and then, after what seemed ages of agony, he found himself on the surface, striking out blindly in that churning mass of water that carried him along as though in a mill race. He had never before realized the tremendous power of water. He was a mere chip tossed hither and thither upon the waves. His head was dizzy from the awful shock of the first impact, there was a ringing in his ears, and the spray dashing into his eyes obscured his sight. Almost mechanically, he moved his hands and feet enough to keep his head above the surface. Gradually his mind became clearer, and he could do some connected thinking.

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At any rate, he was alive. That was the main thing. Although sore and bruised, he did not think that any of his bones were broken. He was an expert swimmer, and knew that if he kept his senses he would not drown. His most imminent danger lay in being struck by a tree trunk or jammed between the houses that were grinding each other to pieces. If this should happen, his life would be snuffed out like a candle.

Even at that moment of frightful peril, one thing filled his heart with gladness. He felt sure that almost all the townspeople had escaped. Here and there, he could see some one struggling like himself in the yeasty surges, or clinging to some floating object. Once the body of a man was carried past within a few feet of him. His last conscious glance before the flood overwhelmed him had shown him a number who had not yet reached the higher ground. These had been caught up with him, and some no doubt had perished. But he thanked God that hundreds, through his warning, had found shelter on the hillsides. Their property had been swept away, but they had retained their most precious possession.

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The loss in animal life was heavy. Bert groaned, as he saw the bodies of cows and horses and dogs tossed about in the raging waters. Not far off, a horse was swimming and gallantly trying to keep his head above water. His fear-distended eyes fell on Bert, and he whinnied, as though asking for help. But just then a great log was driven against him, and with a scream that was almost human he went under.

And now Bert noted that the force of the flood was abating. It had reached the lowest part of the valley, and, ahead of him, the ground began to rise. With every foot of that ascent the torrent would lose its impetus, until finally it would reach its limit.

But there a new danger threatened. There would be a tremendous backwash as the current receded, and in the meeting of the two opposing forces a terrific whirlpool would be generated, in which nothing human could live. In some way he must reach the shore before the flood turned back.

There was not an instant to lose, and he acted with characteristic decision. The torrent was slackening, and he no longer felt so helpless in its grasp. He could not swim at right angles to it and thus approach the shore directly, but must try gradually to pull to the left, in a long diagonal sweep. Inch by inch, he drew away from the center of the stream and slowly neared the bank. Twice he had to dive, to avoid tree trunks that dashed over the spot where he had been a moment before. Once he barely escaped being caught between two houses. But his quick eye and quicker mind stood him in good stead, at this hour of his greatest need. His lungs were laboring ready to burst and his muscles were strained almost to the breaking point. But his long powerful strokes brought him steadily nearer to the eastern bank and he steered straight for a huge tree, that stood on the edge of the rushing waters. He missed it by a foot, but was just able to grasp a trailing branch as he was swept beneath it. A desperate clutch, a quick swing upward and the ravaging waters had been cheated of a victim. Slowly he made his way over the bough to the trunk of the tree, and fell, rather than dropped, to the ground. Utterly exhausted, he crumpled into a heap and lay there gasping.

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He had escaped death by the narrowest of margins. Even while he lay there, bereft of strength and worn out with struggle, the flood reached its limit, paused a moment and then rushed back. The receding current met the other still advancing. Like giant wrestlers, they locked in a fierce embrace, and the waves shot up for thirty feet. Great logs flew out of the waves and fell back with a resounding crash. Had Bert been in the center of that seething maelstrom, nothing could have saved him from instant death.

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But he was safe. He had gone into the very jaws of death and come out alive. Spent and wrenched and bruised he was, and weary beyond all telling. Each arm and leg felt as though it weighed a ton. But he had never incurred pain or danger in a worthier cause, and he rejoiced at the chance that had impelled him to take up his quarters in the deserted hut the night before. The rain had assuredly been a "blessing in disguise," bitterly as he had regretted it at the time.

A full hour elapsed before he was able to get on his feet. Had it not been for his splendid physical condition, he would have utterly collapsed under the strain. But soon his heart resumed its normal rhythm, the blood coursed more strongly through his veins, and he struggled up from his recumbent posture and began to take note of his surroundings.

How far he had been carried in that wild ride, he had no means of knowing. But he judged that he must be fully six miles from the site of the town. There had been several turnings in the valley and from where he stood looking back, he could not see more than a mile before a bend in the road cut off his view. But the stream itself was sufficient guide as he retraced his steps, and he knew that all too soon he would reach the sad and stricken crowd that would be camped on the banks, bewailing the calamity that had come upon them with the swiftness of a lightning stroke.

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He looked at his watch. It had stopped at ten minutes to five, probably just at the second that the mountain of water swooped down upon him. He threw a glance at the sun which was only a little above the horizon, and concluded that it was not much more than six o'clock. Scarcely more than an hour had passed, but it seemed to him as though ages had elapsed since the moment when he had been startled by that first premonition of danger.

How lucky that he had heeded it! Had he obeyed his first impulse and disregarded it, he would have been compelled to stand by, a helpless spectator, and see a whole community wiped out of existence. And the bitter memory of that neglected opportunity would have cast its shadow over him as long as he lived.

His thoughts went now to the gallant machine that had carried him so swiftly to the work of rescue. Good old "Blue Streak!" Once more it had proved a tried and trusty comrade, responding to every call he made upon it. How quickly the miles would fall away behind him if he only bestrode it now.

The wish had scarcely been formed before a substitute appeared. He heard the sound of wheels, and a team came up behind him. The man who was driving told Bert to jump in, and whipped up his horses as he hurried on to the scene of the disaster.

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Soon they came upon the homeless throng, huddled upon the slope that overlooked what had been home. Some were weeping and running about, half crazed with anguish. Others were dry-eyed and dumb, moving as though in a dream, their minds paralyzed by the shock. They needed everything, food and tents and medicines and doctors and nurses. The telegraph and telephone service was out of commission and the offices had been swept away. The outside world knew nothing, as yet, of the frightful visitation that had come to the little town, nestling in the West Virginia hills.

Bert's resolution was taken on the instant. There was nothing more that he could do here. Little, in fact, could be done until the flood subsided, and there were plenty of hands only too willing to dull their heartache in work that would keep them from brooding too much on the disaster. But no horse could get to the world without as quickly as he on his motorcycle. He waited only long enough to learn the shortest route to the next town of any size. Then he rushed to the thicket on the hillside where he had left his wheel, and was rejoiced to find it safe. Fortunately, it had been beyond the high water mark of the flood. He dragged it out, mounted, and, with one last look at the waters that had so nearly been his grave, threw in the clutch and started up the valley.

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The sun was much higher now and the roads, while still muddy, were rapidly drying out. He cleared the summit of the hills and could see far off the buildings and spires of the town he sought. Like a meteor, he shot down the slope, and in a few minutes was the center of an excited group in the telegraph office, to which he at once repaired. Soon the wires were humming, and within a short time the entire country, from Maine to California, was stirred to the depths by the news of the calamity. Doctors and supplies were rushed from the points nearest to the stricken town and from Washington the Federal Government sent a squad of Red Cross nurses and a detachment of troops to take charge of the work of rescue and reconstruction.

Only one thing was omitted from Bert's graphic recital of the story. He said not a word of his wild ride in the early dawn. Others, later on, when they had regained something of composure and could recall events preceding the catastrophe, remembered a rider rushing along the country roads and calling upon them to flee for their lives. They told of the siren, shrieking like a soul in pain, that had roused them from their sleep with its dreadful warning. The reporters, avid of sensation, listened eagerly, and embroidered upon the story some fanciful embellishments of their own. They did their utmost to discover the name of the rider who had come racing through the mists of that early morning, but failed. The only one who could tell the truth about it never did. Except to a few of his intimates, and that under the pledge of secrecy, Bert locked the story in his own breast and threw away the key. It was enough for him that he had been able at a critical juncture to do, and do successfully, the work that stood ready to his hand. The deed carried its own compensation, and he rejoiced that he was able to keep it from public view. But, somewhere in West Virginia, a crippled boy remembered him gratefully, and two little youngsters were taught to mention a nameless stranger in their prayers.

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And now that nothing was left to do in behalf of others, Bert's thoughts reverted to his own affairs. The day was still young, despite the events that had been crowded into it. Up to this moment he had not thought of food, but now he was conscious that he was ravenously hungry. As soon as he could shake himself loose from the crowd that had listened breathlessly to his story, he went to the hotel and ordered an abundant breakfast. When he had finished, he was once more his normal self. He replenished his gasoline supply, consulted his map, jumped into the saddle and was off. Before long he reached the road that he had been traveling the previous day; and, bending low over the handlebars, he called upon the "Blue Streak" to make up for lost time.

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The scenery flew past as in a panorama. Up hill and down he went at railroad speed, only slackened within the limits of a town. In this thinly settled country, these were few and far

between, and he chuckled as he saw his speedometer swiftly climbing. The roads were drying out, and, though still a little heavy, had lost their clinging quality. In a few hours, he flashed into Charleston, where his ears were greeted by the cries of the newsboys, calling out the extras issued on account of the flood. Staying only long enough to report his time and get a meal, he resumed his trip, and, before night, had left the worst part of the hills behind him and had crossed the border line into Kentucky, the land of swift horses and fair women, of Davy Crockett and Daniel Boone, the "dark and bloody ground" of the Revolution.

It was a tired rider who almost fell from his saddle that night, after having covered three hundred miles. A fierce determination had buoyed him up and the most daring kind of rough riding had carried him through. Now the reaction had set in. An immense weariness weighed him down and every separate muscle had its own distinctive ache. But his mind was at peace. He had fought a good fight. A supreme emergency had challenged him, and he had met it squarely. And no twinges of conscience for duty unperformed came to disturb the sleep of utter exhaustion into which he fell as soon as his head touched the pillow.

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## CHAPTER VII

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### A KENTUCKY FEUD

The following morning he arose early, his abounding vitality having enabled him to recuperate entirely from the exciting events of the day before. He was soon in the saddle, bowling along at a good clip through the "Blue Grass" State. He found widely varied road conditions confronting him. At times he would strike short stretches of "pike" that afforded fairly good going. As a rule, however, the roads were sandy, and consequently, very bad for motorcycle travel.

At times, the sand was so deep that he felt lucky if he averaged fifteen or twenty miles an hour. Often the only way he could get along at all was to ride in one of the ruts worn by the wheels of carriages and buggies. These were usually very deep, so deep, in fact, that with both wheels in them the footboards barely cleared the surface of the road. Of course, this made riding very dangerous, as the slightest turn of the front wheel meant a bad fall.

It was only by skilful balancing that Bert managed to make any progress at all. As every one knows, a bicycle or motorcycle is kept erect by moving the front wheel to one side or the other, thus maintaining the proper center of gravity. Riding in a rut, however, this method became impracticable, so Bert was forced to keep his equilibrium by swaying his body from side to side, as necessity dictated.

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He found that the faster he traveled through these ruts the easier it was to keep his balance. Of course, if he had a tumble going at that speed he was much more apt to be badly hurt, but he had no time to think of that. If he didn't go fast, he couldn't win the race, and to him that was reason enough to "hit it up" regardless of possible consequences.

Sometimes he met a carriage, and then there was nothing for it but to dismount and wait for it to pass, that is, if he thought the driver had not seen him. But if he was on a long stretch of road and the driver had ample time to get out of the way,—well, there was no stopping then. The driver, seeing a blue streak approaching him at close to a mile a minute clip would hastily draw to one side of the road and then descend and hold his horse's head; and usually none too soon. There would come a rattle and roar, and Bert would be a speck in the distance, leaving a cloud of dust to settle slowly behind him.

The driver, after quieting his horse—all the horses in this part of the country were unused to motor vehicles of any kind—would resume his journey, muttering curses on them "pesky gasoline critters." But taken altogether, Bert found his first day in Kentucky one of the most strenuous he had ever experienced.

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Night found him in a rather unlooked for situation. He was a little ahead of his schedule, and he had reached the town at which he had planned to stay several hours short of sundown.

"No use losing three or four precious hours of daylight," he thought. "I might as well push forward and take a chance of getting shelter at some village along the way."

This he did, following directions given him in the town in which he had originally intended to stay. As usual, however, the directions proved to be wrong, and the village failed to materialize. To add to his troubles as darkness came on, he took a wrong fork in the road, and before long found himself in a road that was absolutely impassable on account of sand.

"Well," thought he, "it begins to look like a night in the open for me, and that won't be much fun. I want to get a good night's sleep to-night. Heaven knows I need it."

But when he had just about resigned himself to this, he was relieved to see a light spring up, some distance away. "That's good," he thought, "I'll see if all I've heard about Kentucky hospitality is fact or just mere talk."

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Accordingly he started the motor and threw in the clutch on low speed. He made no attempt to mount, however, but contented himself with walking beside the machine, guiding it through the deep sand.

He had no need to announce his arrival. The unmuffled exhaust did that for him. As he approached the cabin from which the light emanated, he could see the whole family grouped on the doorstep, peering into the night, for by now it was quite dark.

The head of the house was a little in advance of the others, and as Bert and the "Blue Streak" approached the door he stepped forward.

"Wall, stranger, what kind of a contraption do you-all reckon to have thar?" he drawled, gazing curiously at the palpitating motorcycle.

Bert shut off the motor before he replied.

"Why," he said, "that's my motorcycle, and it's one of the best friends I have. I took the wrong road a way back, I guess, and I was just going to camp out over night, when I saw the light from your window. If you can put me up for the night you'll be doing me a big favor."

"Not another word, son," replied the big mountaineer, "come right in an' set down. You look nigh dead beat."

"I am about all in," confessed Bert. "I'll leave my machine right here, I guess."

"Shore, shore," said the big Kentuckian, "I reckon thar ain't nobuddy within a hundred miles hereabouts that could make off with the blamed machine ef he had a mind to. Hosses is considerable more common in these parts. The pump's around the side of the house ef you 'low to wash up," he continued, as an afterthought.

"All right, thanks," replied Bert, "I'll be with you in no time." He disappeared in the direction indicated, and soon returned, much refreshed by a thorough sousing under the pump.

As he entered the cabin, a tired-looking but motherly woman bustled forward. "Jest you set over there to the right of paw," she said, indicating Bert's place at the table, "an' make yourself comfortable. We ain't got much to offer you, but sech as it is, you'r welcome."

There was not much variety to the viands, it must be confessed, but there was plenty of "corn pone" and bacon, and rich milk with which to wash it down. After his strenuous day in the open he ate ravenously. The mountaineer uttered hardly a word during the meal, and indeed none of the family seemed very talkative.

The children, of whom there were six, gazed round-eyed at the unexpected guest, and seemed, if one were to judge from their looks, to regard him as a being from another world.

After the meal was dispatched, the mountaineer produced a blackened old pipe, and, filling it from a shabby leather pouch, lit it. "Do you smoke, son?" he asked, holding the pouch out to Bert, "ef you do, help yourself."

"No, thanks," said Bert, declining the hospitable offer with a smile.

"Don't smoke, eh?" commented the other. "Wall, ye'd ought to. There's a heap of comfort in baccy, let me tell you."

"I don't doubt it," replied Bert, "but I've been in training so long for one thing or another that I've never had a chance to form the habit. Everybody that smokes seems to get a lot of fun out of it though, so I suppose it must be a great pleasure."

"It shore is," affirmed the big Kentuckian. "But it's hot in here. What do you say we light out and take a squint at that machine of yours? I ain't never got a good look at one close up. They're generally travelin' too fast to make out details," with a grin.

"Well, they're not the slowest things in the world, that's certain," laughed Bert, "but come ahead out and I'll be glad to explain it to you."

They went outside together, the Kentuckian carrying a lantern, and followed by the children, who gazed wide-eyed at the strange machine. Bert explained the simpler points of the mechanism to the mountaineer, who seemed much interested.

"I kin see it's a mighty neat contraption," he admitted, at length. "But I'd rether ride quietlike behind a good bit o' hoss flesh. You can't make me believe that thet machine has got the strength o' seven hosses in it, nohow. It ain't reasonable."

Bert saw that he might argue for a week, and still fail to shake the obstinacy of his host, so he wisely forbore to make the attempt. Instead he guided the conversation around to the conditions and pursuits of the surrounding country, and here the Kentuckian was on firm ground. He discoursed on local politics with considerable shrewdness and good sense, and proved himself well up on such topics.

They talked on this subject quite a while, and then the conversation in some way shifted to the feuds a few years back that had aroused such widespread criticism. "Although I haven't seen any sign of them since I've been in Kentucky," confessed Bert, with a smile.

"No," said his host, with a ruminative look in his eyes, "they're dyin' out, an' a good thing it is fer the country, too. They never did do the least mite o' good, an' they often did a sight o' harm."

"Why, it warn't such a long time back that the Judsons an' the Berkeleys were at it hammer an' tongs, right in this country roundabout. One was layin' fer 'tother all the time, an' the folks thet wasn't in the fracas was afraid to go huntin' even, fer fear o' bein' picked off by mistake. They wasn't none too particular about makin' sure o' their man, neither, before they pulled trigger. They'd shoot fust, an' ef they found they'd bagged the wrong man they might be peeved, but thet's all. More'n once I've had a close shave myself."

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"But what started the feud in the first place?" asked Bert. "It must have been a pretty big thing to have set people to shooting each other up like that, I should think."

"Not so's you could notice it," was the answer. "Blamed ef I rightly remember just what it was. Seems to me, now I come to think of it, that ole Seth Judson an' Adam Berkeley got mixed up in the fust place over cuttin' down a tree thet was smack on the line 'atween their farms. Ole Seth he swore he'd cut thet tree down, an' Adam he 'lowed as how it would be a mighty unhealthy thing fer any man as how even took a chip out of it."

"Wall, a couple o' days later Adam went to town on one errand or another, and when he got back the cussed ole tree had been cut down an' carted away. When Adam saw nothin' but the stump left, he never said a word, good or bad, but turned around and went back to his house an' got his gun. He tracks over to Seth Judson's house an' calls him by name. Seth, he walks out large as life, an' Adam pumps a bullet clean through his heart. Them two men had been friends off an' on fer over thirty year, an' I allow thet ef Adam hed took time to think an' cool off a little, he'd never a' done what he did."

"Howsomever, there's no bringin' the dead back to life, an' Adam tromps off home, leavin' Seth lyin' there on his front porch."

"'Twasn't more'n a week later, I reckon, when we all heard thet Seth's son, Jed, had up an' killed Adam, shootin' at him from behind a fence."

"Waal, thet's the way it started, an' it seemed as though it war never goin' to end. Young Adam, he 'lowed as how no man could shoot his daddy an' live, so he laid fer Jed as he was goin' to the village, an' shot him 'atween the eyes as neat as could be. Then the younger sons, thet were still not much more than boys, as you might say, they took to lyin' in wait fer each other in the woods an' behind fences. Pretty soon their relatives took to backin' them up, and jined in on their own account. O' course, most o' the folks hereabouts is related to one another in some way."

"I wasn't a native o' these parts myself, an' so managed to keep clear o' the trouble. It was a hard thing for me to set by an' see my neighbors killin' each other off like a passel o' mad dogs, though, an' all the more because I knew there wasn't any real call fer it in the first place."

"Howsomever, they've stopped fightin' now, an' it's none too soon, nuther. Another year, an' I reckon there wouldn't a been a Berkeley or a Judson left alive in the hull State."

The farmer stopped speaking, and gazed reflectively into the night.

"But what put an end to it finally," inquired Bert, who had listened to this narrative with absorbed interest.

"Waal, there was considerable romance consarned in it, as you might say," said his host. "Young Buck Judson, he met one o' ole Berkeley's daughters somewhere, an' those two young fools hed to go an' fall in love with each other. O' course, their families were dead sot agin' it, but nothin' would do the critters short o' gettin' hitched up, an' at last they talked their families into a peace meetin', as you might say. All the neighbors was invited, an' o' course we-all went. An', believe me, those people reminded me of a room full o' tom cats, all wantin' to start a shindy, but all hatin' to be the fust to begin."

"But all we-'uns thet wanted to stop such goin's on did our best to keep peace in the family. To make a long story short, everythin' went off quiet an' easy like, an' Buck an' his gal was hitched up all proper. The hard feelin' gradually calmed down, an' now the two families is tolerable good friends, considerin' everything. But that cost a heap of more or less valable lives while it lasted, I can tell you."

After a short pause, he continued, "But there was some turrrible strong feelin's on both sides while it lasted, son. Why, people was afraid to get 'atween a light an' a winder, for fear of a bullet comin' through and puttin' a sudden an' onpleasant end to them. Ole Sam Judson, as how always had a streak o' yaller in him at the best o' times, got so at last thet he wouldn't stir out o' the house without he toted his little gran'darter, Mary, along with him. O' course, he figured thet with the baby in his arms nobuddy'd take a chanst on wingin' him and mebbe killin' the kid, an' he was right. He never even got scratched the hull time. An' I could tell you a hundred other things o' the same kind, only you'd probably get tired listenin' to them."

"It certainly was a bad state of things," said Bert at last, after a thoughtful silence, "but couldn't the authorities do something to stop such wholesale killing?"

"Not much," replied the mountaineer, "it would 'a taken every constable in Kentucky to cover this part o' the country, an' even then I reckon there wouldn't 'a been anywhere near enough. They must 'a realized that," he added drily, "'cause they didn't try very hard, leastways, not as fur as I could see."

"I'm glad it's over now, at any rate," commented Bert. "A needless waste of life like that is a terrible thing."

"It shore is," agreed his host, and puffed meditatively at his pipe. At last he knocked the ashes from it and rose to his feet.

"It's gettin' late, son," he said, "an' I reckon you-all must be might tuckered out after a day on that there fire spoutin' motorbike o' yourn. The ole lady's got a bunk fixed up fer you, I reckon, an' you can turn in any time you feel like it."

"I am tired out, for a fact," acknowledged Bert, "and I don't care how soon I tumble in."

"Come along, then," said Anderson, as his host was named, "come on inside, an' we'll put you up."

So saying, he entered the cabin, followed by Bert.

Mrs. Anderson had fixed a bed for him in a little loft over the main room, reached by a ladder. After bidding his host and hostess good night, Bert climbed the rungs and ten minutes later was sleeping soundly.

When he was awakened by a call from the farmer, he jumped up much refreshed, and, dressing quickly, descended the ladder to the living room, where the entire family was already assembled. After exchanging greetings, he took his place at the table and made a substantial meal from plain but hearty fare. [94]

This over, he bade a cordial farewell to the kind farmer and his wife, who refused pointblank to accept the slightest payment for the hospitality they had extended him. Bert thanked them again and again, and then shook hands and left them, first being told of a short cut that would save him several miles and land him on a good road.

The good old "Blue Streak" was in fine shape, and after a few minor adjustments he started the motor. The whole family had followed him out, and were grouped in an interested semicircle about him. At last he was ready to start, and threw one leg over the saddle.

"Good-bye," he called, waving his hand, "and thanks once more."

"Good-bye, good luck," they cried in chorus, and Bert moved off slowly, on low gear.

At first the going was atrocious, and he was forced to pick his way with great caution. The road steadily improved, however, and in a short time a sudden turn brought him out on an exceptionally good turnpike, the one of which his host of the night before had told him.

"All right," he thought to himself, "here goes to make speed while the road lasts," and he grinned at this paraphrase of a well-worn saying. He opened up more and more, and his motor took up its familiar deep-toned road song. Mile after mile raced back from the spinning wheels. The indicator on the speedometer reached the fifty mark, and stayed there hour after hour. At times the road ran more to sand, but then he simply opened the throttle a trifle wider, and kept to the same speed. [95]

The air was like wine, and riding was a keen pleasure. The trees and bushes waving in the early morning breeze—the beautiful green country spread out on every side—the steady, exhilarating speed—all made life seem a very fine thing indeed, and Bert sang snatches of wild, meaningless songs as he flew along. For three hours he never slackened speed, and then only pulled up in a fair-sized town to replenish his oil and gasoline. Then he was off again. The road became worse after he had gone ten or fifteen miles, but still he contrived to make fair time, and about noon he rode into Louisville.

His arrival there was eagerly awaited, and he was warmly received at the local agency. While his machine was being cleaned and oiled, he took the opportunity of reporting to the proper authorities. Upon his return the "Blue Streak" was turned over to him, shining and polished, and he once more took the road. Several motorcyclists accompanied him to the outskirts of the city. He experienced varying road conditions, and was twice delayed by punctures. But the rattling work of the early morning made up for the afternoon's delays, and dusk found him two hundred and eighty miles nearer the goal of his ambition. [96]

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## CHAPTER VIII

### THE FORGED TELEGRAM

Bert's stay in Louisville was brief, and all the more so, because neither Tom nor Dick was there to meet him, as they had planned. Bert took it for granted that something out of the ordinary had happened, however, and bore his disappointment as philosophically as he could.

"No doubt they've been delayed," he thought, "and will meet me in the next town. That will be a spur to me to go faster so that I can see them sooner."

He had a refreshing sleep, and was up early, resolved to make a profitable day of it. After he had eaten breakfast, he paid his bill, and was just going out the door when the clerk stopped him. "Just a minute, sir," he said. "Here's a telegram for you. I almost forgot to give it to you."

"When did it come?" asked Bert, as he took the yellow envelope and prepared to open it.

"Oh, just about an hour ago," replied the clerk, "no bad news I hope?"

This question was occasioned no doubt by the expression of Bert's face. "Come quick," the telegram read, "Tom very sick; may die. We are in Maysville. Dick." [98]

Bert's voice shook as he addressed the hotel clerk. "One of my friends is very sick," he said. "He's in Maysville. How long will it take me to get there?"

"Well, it's a matter of close on two hundred miles," replied the clerk, in a sympathetic voice, "but the roads are fair, and you can make pretty fast time with that machine of yours."



Bert whipped out his map of Kentucky, and the clerk pointed out to him the little dot marked Maysville.

"All right, thanks," said Bert, briefly, "good-bye."

"Good-bye," said the other, "I hope your friend isn't as bad as you fear."

But before he finished speaking Bert was on the "Blue Streak," and was flying down the street. In a moment his mind had grasped every angle of the catastrophe. If he went to Tom, it would very likely mean the loss of the race, for a matter of four hundred miles out of his road would be a fearful handicap. But what was the race compared to dear old Tom, Tom, who at this very moment might be calling for him? Every other consideration wiped from his mind, Bert leaned over and fairly flew along the dusty road. Fences, trees, houses, streaked past him, and still he rode faster and faster, recklessly, taking chances that he would have shunned had he been bound on any other errand. He shot around sharp bends in the road at breakneck speed, sometimes escaping running into the ditch by a margin of an inch or so. Fast as the "Blue Streak" was, it was all too slow to keep pace with his feverish impatience, and Bert fumed at the long miles that lay between him and his friend. [99]

Now a steep hill loomed up in front of him, and he rushed it at breakneck speed. Slowly the motorcycle lost speed under the awful drag of the steep ascent, and at last Bert was forced to change to low gear. The "Blue Streak" toiled upward, and at last reached the top. A wonderful view lay spread out before him, but Bert had no eye just now for the beauties of nature. All he saw was a road that dipped and curved below him until it was lost in the green shades of a valley. Bert saw he would have no need of his motor in making that descent, so threw out the clutch and coasted. Faster and faster he flew, gaining speed with every revolution of the wheels. With the engine stopped, the motorcycle swept along in absolute silence, save for the slight hissing noise made by the contact of the tires with the road. The speed augmented until he was traveling almost with the speed of a cannon ball. At this speed, brakes were useless, even had he been inclined to use them, which he was not. Two-thirds of the way down he flashed past a wagon, that was negotiating the descent with one wheel chained, so steep was it. Had the slightest thing gone wrong then; had a nut worked loose, a tire punctured, a chain broken or jumped the sprockets, Bert would have been hurled through the air like a stone from a catapult. Fortunately for him, everything held, and now he was nearing the bottom of the hill. Ten seconds later, and he was sweeping up the opposite slope at a speed that it seemed could never slacken. But gradually gravitation slowed him down to a safer pace, and at last he slipped in the clutch and started the motor. In the wild descent his cap had flown off, but he hardly noticed it. [100]

"I'll soon be there at this rate," he thought, glancing at the speedometer. "I've come over a hundred and fifty miles now, so Maysville can't be much further." And, indeed, less than an hour's additional riding brought him to the town of that name.

He went immediately to the hotel at which his friends were supposed to be. But when he stated his object to the hotel clerk, the latter gazed at him blankly. "There are no parties of that name stopping here," he said. "I guess you have the wrong address, young man." Bert showed him the telegram, but the clerk only shook his head. "There's something wrong somewhere," he said; "suppose you see Bently, the telegrapher. He could probably give you a description of the person that sent the telegram, anyway." [101]

"Thanks, I will," said Bert, and hastened out. A dim idea of the true state of affairs was beginning to form in his brain, but it hardly seemed possible his suspicions could be true. He soon reached the telegraph office, and accosted the operator.

"Can you tell me," he asked, "who sent that telegram early this morning?"

The station agent glanced at the telegram, and replied: "Why, I can't give you a very good description of the man, for I didn't take special notice of him. He was a young man of medium build, though, with light hair, and now I come to think of it, he wore goggles. Seems to me I heard some one say he was riding a motorcycle in some cross country race, but that I can't vouch for."

"I think I know who he was, all right," said Bert, "and I'm much obliged to you."

"Don't mention it," returned the other, and turned again to his work.

Bert walked out of the station with clenched fists and blazing eyes. "It's Hayward who sent that telegram," he muttered, between clenched teeth. "I'd stake my soul on it. But I'll win this race in spite of that crook and his tricks. And anyway," he thought, with his eyes softening, "old Tom *isn't* sick after all, and that's almost enough to make me forgive Hayward. I feel as though I had just awakened from an awful nightmare." [102]

It was characteristic of Bert that his anger and chagrin at being tricked in this dastardly way were swallowed up in his relief at finding the report of his friend's illness false.

Bert consulted his map, and found that by taking a different route than that by which he had come he could save quite some distance, and started out again, after filling the "Blue Streak's" tanks with oil and gasoline, with the grim resolve to have revenge for the despicable trick that had been played on him, by snatching from Hayward the prize that he was willing to stoop to such depths to gain.

Up hill and down he flew, around curves, over bridges that shook and rattled at the impact of racing man and machine. Steadily the mileage indicator slipped around, as league after league rolled backward, and Bert exulted as he watched it. "We'll make it ahead of everybody else or die

in the attempt, won't we, old fellow?" he said, apostrophizing the "Blue Streak." "Nobody's going to play a trick like that on us and get away with it, are they?"

Only once on the return trip did he stop, and then only long enough to snatch a little food. Then he was off again like the wind, and as dusk began to fall rode into Louisville. As he entered the hotel, after leaving his machine in a garage, Dick and Tom swooped down upon him. "What's up?" they demanded, both in the same breath, "who sent that telegram, do you know?"

"I think I know," replied Bert. "I haven't a doubt in the world that it was sent by Hayward. You remember that we heard he was more or less crooked, and now we know it."

"I wish I could lay my hands on him," exclaimed Dick, with flashing eyes. "I'd make him regret the day he was born. Just you wait till the next time I come across him, that's all."

"If I see him first there won't be anything left for you," said Tom. "Of all the dirty, underhanded tricks I ever heard of, that is the limit."

"Well, I won't contradict you," said Bert, grimly, "but all he'll ever gain out of it will be a sound thrashing. Don't you believe for a minute that it's going to help him win this race. I'll ride day and night until I've made up for this lost time."

And ride he did, crowding three days' mileage into two, until at last he felt that he had recovered the time lost in answering the call of the forged telegram.

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## CHAPTER IX

### IN DEADLY PERIL

It was after he reached the Western deserts that Bert experienced the hardest going. The roads, if mere trails could be dignified by that name, were unspeakably bad, and time and again he was forced to ride on the railroad embankment, between the tracks. Of course, progress in this manner was necessarily slow, and again and again Bert had occasion to feel grateful for the wonderful springing system of his mount. Without some such aid, he felt his task would be well nigh hopeless.

As it was, he had to let a little air out of the tires, to reduce the shocks caused by contact with the rough ballast and uneven ties. In some places, where the roadbed was exceptionally well ballasted he was able to open up a little, but such stretches were few and far between. In places he was forced to dismount because of drainage culverts running under the tracks. When this happened he would lift the "Blue Streak" up on a rail and trundle it over. It was back-breaking work, and tested even his courage and endurance to the utmost.

His oil and gasoline supply ran low, but by great good fortune he was able to secure almost a gallon of gasoline from an agent at a lonely little station, and about a quart of very inferior lubricating oil. But he comforted himself with the thought that "half a loaf is better than none" and went on. After a while he noticed that a passable looking road skirted the railroad to the left, and he resolved to try it.

Accordingly, he scrambled down the steep embankment, the "Blue Streak" half rolling and half sliding down with him. He arrived safely at the bottom, and a minute later was on the road. It proved to be fairly good at first, but became more and more sandy, and at last Bert was brought to a standstill.

"I guess I'm through for to-day," he reflected, and gazed anxiously in every direction for any sign of human habitation. His searching gaze met nothing but empty sky and empty desert, however, and he drew a sigh of resignation. "I guess there's nothing for it but to camp out here and make the best of things," he thought, and set about unstrapping his impedimenta from the luggage carrier.

His preparations for the night were soon made. He smoothed out a patch of sand and spread his thick army blanket over it. "Now that that's done," he thought, "I'll just have a bite to eat, and turn in. This isn't half bad, after all. It's a lot better than some of the hotels I've put up at on this trip, and the ventilation is perfect."

He always carried a substantial lunch with him, to guard against emergencies, and of this he now partook heartily. When he had finished, he busied himself in cleaning and thoroughly inspecting his faithful mount, and found it in fine condition, even after such a strenuous day. "No need to worry about your not delivering the goods, is there, old boy?" he said, affectionately. "As long as you stick to the job, we'll pull through all right."

By the time he had completed his inspection and made some adjustments it was almost dark, and Bert rolled himself in his blanket and was soon sleeping soundly.

Meantime Tom and Dick were awaiting him at Boyd, a small town in Northern Texas. When he failed to arrive, they decided that some unforeseen event had delayed him, and were not much worried. Nevertheless, they were not quite easy about him, and Tom made a proposition that met with instant approbation from Dick.

"Why wouldn't it be a good idea," Tom proposed, "to hire an automobile early to-morrow morning and meet him outside the town on his way in? It will break up the trip a little for him,

and then, in case he's had a breakdown we can help him out."

"Fine!" agreed Dick, enthusiastically, "let's go out right now and make arrangements with the garage keeper so we'll be sure to get the machine in the morning. We might as well be on the safe side."

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They immediately sallied out to put this plan in execution. They experienced no difficulty in making the necessary arrangements. They paid the proprietor of the garage a deposit, and so secured the use of a fast, two-seated runabout for the following morning.

Before they left Dick asked the proprietor at what time the place was open. "Oh, it's always open," he replied, "come and get the car any time you want it. It's all the same to me, so long as it's paid for."

"All right, we'll take you at your word," they promised, and returned to the hotel.

"We'll get a good early start," planned Tom, "we ought to leave the garage before six o'clock if we expect to meet Bert in time."

"We'll do just that," agreed Dick, "and maybe I won't be glad to set eyes on the old reprobate again."

"I, too," said Tom, "he'll be a sight for sore eyes."

"That's what," agreed Dick, "but if we're going to get started at that unearthly hour, we'd better turn in early to-night."

This proposition being self-evident, it met with no opposition, and shortly afterward they retired, leaving an early call at the office.

They were awakened punctually the next morning, and tumbled hastily into their clothes. They did not even stop for breakfast, arguing "that there would be plenty of time for that later on." In a very short time they presented themselves at the garage, and the party in charge, following instructions left with him by the owner of the place, turned the automobile over to them.

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Dick took the wheel, and they were soon spinning rapidly through the quiet streets of the town. Once outside the limits, Dick "cracked on speed," and they went along at a fast clip. They passed right by the place where Bert had encamped at a distance of several miles, and before long came to a village, where they inquired if Bert had been through. No, the villagers said, he had not been through there, but they had heard that a motorcyclist had been seen riding on the railroad embankment, and there could be little doubt that the rider was Bert.

"You must have passed him somewhere," concluded one of their informants, an old native whose tanned and weather-beaten face was seamed by a thousand wrinkles. "P'raps he stuck to the railroad tracks clean through, an' is in Boyd by this time."

But Dick shook his head. "If he'd followed the tracks right along he'd probably have reached town last night," he said, with an anxious look in his eyes. "I'm afraid he's left the track for one reason or another, and lost his way."

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"Is there any road near the track that he might have used?" queried Tom.

"No, there ain't," replied the veteran, "leastways, nothin' except the old Holloway trail, and you can't rightly call that a road. It's most wiped out now, an' jest leads plumb to nowhere."

"Just the same," exclaimed Dick, excitedly, "that's just what has happened." He explained hurriedly the race and its object, and ended by entreating the old plainsman to guide them to the road he had spoken of.

"Waal, all right," exclaimed the old man, after a moment of hesitation, "I'll go ye. But whareabouts in that gasoline buggy o' yourn am I goin' to sit? Thar don't seem to be much room to spare."

"You sit here," exclaimed Tom, jumping out. "I'll sit on the floor and hold on somehow. Let her go, Dick."

Before the plainsman had fairly settled himself in the seat Dick had let in the clutch, and the car started away with a jerk, Dick steering according to directions given him by the old man as they went along. They plowed through the sand at a breakneck pace, Tom hanging on for dear life. Soon they came in sight of the railroad embankment, and Dick slowed down slightly. Their guide waved his arm to the right, and Dick wrenched the wheel around, causing the machine to skid wildly in the yielding sand. Their guide hung on desperately, but was heard to mutter something about "stickin' to hosses after this." Soon they reached the road that Bert had traversed the night before, and there, sure enough, were the marks of motorcycle tires. Their guide gave a whoop. "We're close on his trail now," he yelled, "give this tarnation machine a touch o' the spurs, young feller."

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Dick followed out the spirit of this admonition, at any rate, and after ten minutes of furious driving they caught sight of the "Blue Streak." A little further, and they could make out Bert's recumbent form, apparently asleep.

"Well," exclaimed Tom, heaving a sigh of relief as Dick reduced speed, "we've had all our worry for nothing, I guess."

But the old plainsman was peering out from under his horny palm. "It's almighty queer," he muttered under his breath. "That young chap must be an all-fired heavy sleeper to sleep in broad daylight like that. Let's get out an' walk the rest o' the way," he continued, aloud.

Dick looked at him curiously, but did as he proposed, and brought the car to a standstill. They all got out, and Tom and Dick were going to make a dash for the sleeper, but their guide held them back. "Easy boys, easy," he cautioned. "There's somethin' wrong here, an' I've an idee I know what it is, too."

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"That's whatever!" he exclaimed, when they had advanced cautiously a few steps further. "They's a bunch o' scorpions has crawled up on him durin' the night to keep warm, an' if he moves an eyelash they'll sting him, sure. An' ef they do——" he stopped significantly, and the two friends of the threatened man paled as they realized the full horror of the situation.

Here was their friend menaced by a hideous death, and they found themselves powerless to help him. They were within a hundred feet of him, but to all intents and purposes they might as well have been a hundred miles distant. The first attempt on their part to help him would only precipitate the very tragedy that they sought to avoid.

Bert lay in the shadow cast by the "Blue Streak," over which he had thrown a blanket to protect it from wind-blown sand. The hideous creatures would not leave him until the sun drove them into hiding, and Bert might wake at any moment. What to do they knew not. They racked their brains desperately for some plan of action, but could think of none.

It was the old frontiersman who came to their rescue. "Ef I only had a bit o' lookin' glass," he muttered, looking aimlessly about him, "I might do somethin'. But they probably ain't no sech thing nearer than ten miles."

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"If that would do any good I can get you one," exclaimed Tom, seized with an inspiration. He raced back to the auto, and, seizing a wrench, attacked the mirror attached to the dash for the purpose of reflecting objects coming in back of the car. He had it off in less time than it takes to tell, and ran back, waving it over his head. "Here you are!" he exclaimed, thrusting it into the hands of the guide. "But I don't see what good that will do."

"Never you mind, son," said the old man, snatching the mirror from him. "Jest you watch my smoke."

He took up a position on the other side of Bert, and manipulated the mirror so that a bright beam of sunlight fell on the recumbent form. Its effect was soon apparent. The poisonous insects stirred uneasily, trying to avoid the glare that they hated. Finding that there was no escaping it, they at last commenced to crawl down in search of a more shady resting place.

One by one they made off, the flashing ray of light hastening the departure of the laggards. Watching breathlessly, Dick and Tom waited for the last noxious insect to crawl sluggishly down onto the blanket and then off into the sand. Even after the last one had been dislodged, the prairieman played the reflected sunlight over Bert until there was no longer cause for apprehension.

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"All right, young fellers," he said at last. "I cal'late you can wake your friend up now without takin' any long chances."

Dick and Tom were about to avail themselves of this permission, but found that there was no need. As they started forward the "sleeper" sat up, and then scrambled to his feet.

His comrades uttered a simultaneous expression of surprise, and Dick exclaimed, "Of all the lucky old reprobates that ever lived, Bert, you're certainly the luckiest, without exception. If you had waked up ten minutes sooner, you would——"

"Waked up your grandmother," interrupted Bert. "Why, I've been awake over an hour. I was awake when you got here, but I was afraid to move for fear of having one of those things bite me—ugh!" and a great shudder of disgust passed over him, "that was a waking nightmare in earnest. I feel as weak as a rag. Look at that!" and he held out his hand. It was trembling like a leaf.

"Waal, I'll be jiggered," exclaimed the Westerner, in an admiring voice, "you've sure got nerve, young feller, and no mistake. It ain't everybody as could hold hisself the way you did with them blamed critters crawlin' all over him. It took nerve, it shore did."

"Probably you'd have done the same thing if you'd been in my place," observed Bert, with a friendly smile.

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"Waal, mebbe I would an' mebbe I wouldn't," replied the old man, evidently much gratified by this little compliment, "although I don't say as how I haven't had one or two close shaves in my time, mind ye."

"Well, at any rate, I guess I owe my life to you, and, of course, to my pals here," said Bert, "and all I can say is, that I'm more than grateful."

"That's all right, young feller," replied the plainsman, with a deprecatory wave of his hand, "you can thank me best by not sayin' a word about it. You'd have done the same fer me ef you'd had the chance."

Bert said no more, but shook hands all around, and then prepared to start on. "You fellows lead the way," he said, "and I'll follow. My appetite is beginning to come back with a rush."

"Ye'd better follow the road we come by back a piece," advised their guide, "ye'll soon come to the main road leadin' into Boyd, and you oughtn't to have any further trouble."

"That listens all right," observed Bert, and Dick and Tom were of the same mind. Accordingly, they lost no time in packing up Bert's luggage, and soon had it stored neatly on the carrier. Then

Dick pointed the nose of the automobile in the direction their guide had advised, Bert following at a little distance to give the dust raised by the passage of the automobile time to settle. In a short time they reached the road of which the guide had spoken, and they spun along merrily.

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They made a slight detour to set down the old frontiersman, who had rendered them such invaluable assistance. They parted from him with great regret and many expressions of gratitude. He stood in the sandy road waving his hat after them until his figure became indistinct in the distance.

"There was a friend in need, if there ever was one," said Tom, and Dick was of the same opinion.

After awhile the road broadened out somewhat, and Bert ranged up alongside the automobile. He closed the muffler of his machine, and as it glided along with scarcely a sound he and his friends conversed without the slightest difficulty. In this way the distance seemed nothing at all, and in due time they drew into Boyd.

Bert left the "Blue Streak" at the garage, and went with Tom and Dick to their hotel. They were all ravenously hungry, and the ravages they caused among the eatables filled the waiters with astonishment. At last they had finished, and then proceeded to discuss their future movements.

"I've managed to keep pretty well to schedule so far," he told them, "and some of the worst going is over. But, believe me, I wouldn't want to repeat some of the experiences I've had. Take this morning, for instance."

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"No, I shouldn't think you would," said Dick. "But tell us about a few. It won't do you any harm to rest up an hour or two now, and we're crazy to hear some of your adventures. Reel off a few, like a good fellow."

Bert gave them a brief review of his recent movements, and they listened with the greatest interest. Some of the incidents were very amusing, but they elicited less laughter than they usually would, for the nerves of all three had not yet fully recovered from the shock they had received that morning.

"Well," said Bert at last, rising, "I'm sorry, fellows, but I'm afraid I'll have to be moving. Get hold of that auto again, why don't you, and go with me a little way. You can do that all right, can't you?"

"Sure," exclaimed Dick. "Bet your sweet life we can," chimed in Tom, and so it was settled.

The three comrades proceeded directly to the garage, and had no difficulty in hiring the car that had already served them so well that morning. Bert ran the "Blue Streak" out onto the sunlit road, and, running beside it, shot on the spark. The motor started immediately, and he gave a flying leap into the saddle.

Dick and Tom were close behind, and tried to catch up with him. But Bert would not have it so. As soon as they began to get close he would shoot ahead, and although they had a speedy car, they realized that they stood no chance against such a motorcycle as the "Blue Streak."

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Laughingly they gave over the attempt, and Bert dropped back until they were abreast of him.

"No chance, fellows," he called gaily. "The old 'Blue Streak' and I don't take the dust of any mere automobile."

They exchanged jokes and friendly insults until they had gone much further than they realized, and were forced to turn back.

They stopped before parting and shook hands.

"So long, old fellow," said Dick. "We'll be waiting to meet you at Oklahoma."

"Good-bye," said Bert, wringing their hands, "see you later," and, leaping on the "Blue Streak," was soon lost to sight in a cloud of dust.

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## CHAPTER X

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### A DAY OF DISASTER

After he left his companions, Bert made good speed for a time, and hummed along smoothly. At first all went well, and Bert was congratulating himself on his good progress, when suddenly his engine commenced racing wildly. In an instant Bert had shut off power, and came to a stop as soon as possible. Then he dismounted, and commenced a hasty examination. The first thought that flashed across his mind was that the clutch had given way in some manner, thus allowing the motor to slip. The clutch proved to be in perfect condition, however, but a short further search revealed the cause of the trouble.

The nut that held the engine driving sprocket on the shaft had worked loose and dropped off. Of course, the key that prevented the sprocket from slipping on the shaft had dropped out soon afterward, thus allowing the shaft to revolve without transmitting the slightest power.

"Well," thought Bert, "I'm in a pretty fix now, for fair. Here I am thirty miles from the nearest town and provided with a permanent free engine. It rather looks as though I were up against it

for fair.”

He made a careful search among his spare parts, but met with only partial success. He found a nut that fitted the shaft fairly well, but nothing he could substitute for the key. [119]

“Perhaps if I walk back a way I’ll find it,” he thought, and accordingly he walked slowly back the way he had come, carefully scanning every foot of the path. He realized that the likelihood of finding it was very slim, but there was always the chance, so he hunted carefully. His efforts met with no success, and at last he was forced to admit to himself the hopelessness of the search.

“But I’ve got to do something,” he thought, “since I haven’t got the part, I’ll have to try and make one, that’s all.” He reflected a few moments, and then, seized with an idea, once more looked through the tool bag. He selected the smallest of his screwdrivers and a file, and began to file away at the screwdriver about half an inch from the end, intending to use it in place of the lost key. But the steel of which it was composed was very hard, and he found it a harder task than he had anticipated.

At last, by dint of patient filing until his fingers ached, he cut through the obstinate metal and finally held the precious bit of steel between his fingers.

“By Jove!” he exclaimed, mopping his streaming face, “that was an awful job, but the end justifies the means. I wouldn’t swap this little bit of steel now for ten times its weight in gold.” [120]

He tried it in the slot on the engine shaft, and found it a fairly tight fit. “Eureka!” he exclaimed aloud, “that’s bending circumstances to suit your will, or I don’t know what is.”

He quickly screwed on the holding nut, and once more was ready to start. “Come along now, old fellow,” he said, apostrophizing the “Blue Streak,” “we’ve got to do double work now to make up for this delay. Speed’s the word from now on.”

Misfortune after misfortune overtook him, however, and he was delayed again and again. It almost seemed as though fate repented of having saved him from a horrible death that morning, and was resolved to make up for her leniency by imposing unusual hardships on the devoted motorcyclist.

He had not gone more than ten miles from where he had made the new shaft key when the long driving chain snapped. Of course, he had extra links with him, and repaired it quickly, but even then much valuable time was lost. Then, he had hardly started again before a weak place in the front tire gave way with a report like that of a pistol shot, and he was forced to put in a new tube and a repair patch.

This done, he chugged on some time without further mishap, and was just beginning to believe that his troubles were over, when suddenly he was apprised by the hard jarring of the back wheel that the tire on it had gone flat. This meant another half hour’s delay, and Bert began to feel that he was “hoodooed” in earnest. [121]

“I wonder what will happen next,” he thought, as he started off, after remedying the last misfortune. “Hard luck seems to be keeping me company, and that isn’t the best kind of a road companion to have.”

But for the present his fears remained unrealized, and as the road continued fairly good he raced along, mounting up the miles on his speedometer in a very satisfactory fashion. He made good time, and only stopped when the pangs of hunger warned him that it was lunch time.

Tom and Dick had taken care to see that he was provided with plenty of wholesome “grub,” and had personally supervised the putting up of the lunch by the good-natured hotel chef.

“They certainly made a good job of it,” thought he appreciatively, as he partook of delicious fried chicken sandwiches and crisp brown crullers. He washed down the meal with a long pull from his canteen, and then, after allowing himself a few minutes of hard-earned rest, was off again toward the goal that now began to seem less distant than it had before.

But the “jinx” had not yet deserted him, as he was soon to discover. As he was bowling along at a pace well over thirty miles an hour, he suddenly turned a sharp bend in the road and ran squarely into a deep bed of sand. Before he could slow down appreciably, he was in it—and, a second later, was in it literally. All his skill and strength could not keep the machine from skidding, and he experienced a bone-racking fall. [122]

In a second he had picked himself up, and ran to where the “Blue Streak” was lying, its motor still plugging away and the rear wheel sending showers of sand into the air. Bert shut off the power and proceeded to take stock of damages. The footboard on the right had struck through the sand to the hard gravel below and had broken one of its supports. This weakened it so much that Bert found it would not bear his weight.

There was nothing for him to do but repair the damage as best he could, and at length he managed to make a temporary repair with a spool of copper wire and a pair of pliers.

“This is getting serious,” thought Bert ruefully, as he finished the job. “I’ll never get anywhere if this keeps up long. But perhaps it’s better to have everything come at once and get it over with. I might as well look at the bright side of it, anyway.”

He started off finally, and now it seemed that at last he was to go forward without interruption. But unfortunately, he was to find that this view of the case was altogether too sanguine. The road grew continually worse, and it became impossible to make even average speed. In places it was very sandy, too, and this hindered him a good deal. [123]

His trusty mount stood the bumping and wrenching it received without the slightest sign of weakening, and Bert was grateful indeed for the staunch construction that made its present satisfactory performance possible.

The road was deeply rutted, and it was only by the most careful managing that he steered clear of the depressions. But nothing could stop him, and he plugged doggedly on. The "Blue Streak" slipped and skidded, and tried to "lie down and roll over," as he described it afterward, and the strain on his wrists and arms was tremendous. If the handlebars had once gotten out of his control they would have zigzagged wildly and the result would have been a bad fall. This Bert did his best to avoid, as he was already bruised by the spills he had been through.

At times he was forced to stop and rest a few minutes, and he always made use of these breathing spells to let the old oil out of his motor and pump in a fresh supply. Then when he resumed his journey the motor would be like a different piece of mechanism. It almost seemed as though it, too, became weary at times and benefited by a brief rest. Probably every experienced motorist has noticed this, and many theories have been advanced in explanation, but none of them seem very satisfactory. Bert by this time was beginning to feel the effects of the strain he had endured all through the day. He plowed slowly through the clinging sand, traveling most of the time on low gear. This was not the best thing in the world for his engine, and every once in a while he was forced to stop and let it cool. With the engine turning over so fast he had to use an excessive supply of oil, and at length was warned, by the sucking sound of the oil pump, that the tank was empty.

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Fortunately, however, before he left Boyd he had secured an extra half gallon can of lubricating oil, which he had strapped on the luggage carrier. "And it's a mighty lucky thing I did, too," he thought, "otherwise I'd be stalled for good, with the prospect of a long tramp to the nearest town. But now I can still beat the game."

He unstrapped the can, and emptied its contents into the oil tank. "That ought to last me until I reach some place where I can get more," he thought, throwing the empty can away. "Here goes to buck this sand like a rotary plow going through a snow bank."

He gave the motor a couple of pump fulls of oil, and started it going. Slipping in the clutch, he moved forward with the grim resolve to take long chances for the sake of gaining ground. Gradually he opened the throttle, and when he had attained a good speed, changed to high gear. The "Blue Streak" gained momentum and charged ahead, throwing showers of sand into the air. Every muscle tense, Bert held the motorcycle on the trail, despite the strong inclination it evinced to go off on little exploring expeditions of its own. He reeled off mile after mile at a good clip, and began to feel better.

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"This might be a lot worse," thought Bert, "if nothing happens now, I'll have made pretty fair progress by supper time." Consulting his speedometer he found that he had covered something over a hundred and twenty miles so far, which, considering all the delays he had been subjected to, and the bad roads, was very fair progress.

But even as this thought was passing through his mind, the front wheel caught in a hollow, the handlebars were wrenched from his hands with a force that almost broke his wrists, and he was flying through the air. He landed with a crash, and for a few moments, dazzling lights glittered before his eyes. Gradually these cleared away, and he sat up, feeling very dizzy and sick.

As his head cleared, he staggered to his feet, and looked around for his motorcycle. There it lay, at some distance, half buried in the sand. He went over to it, and, after scooping some of the sand away, succeeded by a great effort in pulling it upright.

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"I guess my part of the race is finished right here," he thought, with a sinking heart. "Something *must* have been badly broken in a fall like that. It's a wonder I wasn't killed myself."

He set the "Blue Streak" up on its stand, and cranked the engine. It gave a few spasmodic explosions, but then stopped. "I knew it," he exclaimed aloud, with a feeling nearly akin to despair. But his indomitable spirit was not yet ready to give up hope, and he commenced a careful examination of his mount.

The handlebars were slewed around until they stood at right angles to the machine. But this was a minor thing, and with the aid of a wrench he soon set matters right. The main thing was to locate the cause of the motor refusing to run, and he set himself to solve the problem, as he had so many others in the course of this most eventful and unlucky day.

He tested the magneto spark by kicking the motor over energetically, and holding the conduction cable a quarter of an inch or so from the cylinders. A hot blue spark jumped snapping across the gap, and Bert drew a sigh of relief. Provided the magneto were all right, he felt that he might get started again after all.

"The trouble must be in the carburetor," he concluded, and forthwith proceeded to dissect that highly important part of his equipment. His suspicions proved well founded. The carburetor was packed with sand, which had worked up into the spray plug and completely blocked the fine grooves cut in it.

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"That's easy," thought Bert. "I'll just wash this out in a little less than no time, and then I hope everything will be all right."

He washed gasoline through the carburetor, and cleaned the spray plug till not a vestige of sand remained. He then quickly assembled the instrument and connected it up with the induction pipes. Flooding the carburetor with gasoline, he gave the engine a quick turn over. Immediately

it started off with a roar, and Bert threw the wrench he had been using into the air, and deftly caught it again.

“Hurrah!” he cried, “now, old boy, we’ll try it again.”

He still felt rather dizzy, but the sun was getting low, and he knew he would have to “go some” to reach the next town before dark. He hastily put his tools away, and in a short time was speeding along again, nothing daunted by the accident. Presently the road improved, a sure sign that he was approaching a settlement. Soon he could make out the low houses of the little prairie town before him and he increased his speed, “splitting the air” like a comet.

He reached the village without further trouble, and was soon solacing himself for the strenuous day he had gone through with the best dinner the resources of the town could provide. [128]

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## CHAPTER XI [129]

### THE FLAMING FOREST

Early on the morning of the eighth day of the trip, Bert crossed the line into Oklahoma. He found little difference in the roads he encountered, most of them being of a very poor description. But by this time he was used to all sorts of going, and could listen without laughing, when one of the natives, in a fit of enthusiasm, would speak of some atrocious path as a “highway.”

Of course, in isolated instances some village or town had inaugurated a “good roads” movement, and then Bert found nothing to complain of. But as a rule the roads were inferior, and he found fast travel practically impossible.

He rode steadily, however, and by noon had made fairly good progress. He now found himself in a thickly wooded country, and rode mile after mile in a deep shade that was very grateful after some of the blistering hours in the open he had been forced to undergo. There was a brisk breeze blowing, and the leaves rustled pleasantly, allowing slender shafts of sunlight to flicker through them as they swayed and whispered.

Bert drew in great breaths of the fragrant air, redolent of a thousand woody odors, and wished that the whole of his journey lay through such pleasant places. After a while he came to a beautiful little glen through which ran a sparkling brook. [130]

“Just the place to eat lunch,” thought Bert, and quickly brought the “Blue Streak” to a standstill. Dismounting, he unpacked his lunch box, and, sitting down on a broad, flat-topped rock at the edge of the stream, ate contentedly.

“This place is a regular little Garden of Eden,” he mused. “There must be fish in that stream. If I only had a hook and line along, I’ll wager I’d get some sport out of it.” Then another thought struck him. “By Jove!” he exclaimed aloud, “a swim would feel mighty good now, and there must be a place deep enough for one somewhere around here. I’m going on an exploring expedition, anyway.”

Sure enough, around a slight bend in the stream he discovered a pool that almost looked as though it had been made to order. A gigantic tree had fallen across the stream, forming a natural dam. The clear water ran over and under it with a tinkling, splashing sound, and Bert gave a shout of joy.

“Here goes for a glorious swim,” he cried, and, undressing hastily, plunged in. The water was icy cold, and for a moment the shock of it took away his breath and made his heart stand still. But in a few seconds the reaction came, and he splashed around, and even managed to swim a few strokes in the deepest part. [131]

“This is great,” he thought. “I wouldn’t have missed it for worlds. It’s too bad the old ‘Blue Streak’ can’t enjoy it with me.” He smiled as this absurd thought crossed his mind, but little knew how much of prophecy there was in it.

When he felt thoroughly refreshed, he climbed out to the bank, and quickly slipped into his clothes. “I can dry out as I go along,” he thought, with a grin. “Somebody evidently forgot to hang bath towels on these trees. Very careless of them, I think.”

He hurried back to where he had left the motorcycle, and soon was once more purring along the woodland track. He had traveled something less than an hour, when he began to notice a thin blue haze in the air, and at the same time to smell a pungent smoke. His first thought was that he was near some settler’s cabin, but as he rode on he could see no sign of human habitation, and the green forest stretched away on both sides of the road without any break that might denote a trail.

But the smoke kept getting heavier every second, and suddenly the truth smote him like a blow in the face. “A forest fire,” he thought, “a forest fire! and here I am, in the heart of these woods, with absolutely no way of escape, that I can see.” Even as these thoughts flashed through his mind, a rabbit dashed out onto the road, so mad with terror that it almost ran under the wheels of the motorcycle. [132]

Bert brought his machine to a standstill with a jerk, the back tire skidding as he jammed on his



brake. A thousand plans raced through his head, only to be rejected as soon as formed. Of them all only one offered the slightest hope of escape.

"The brook," he thought, "if I can only get back there I'll have a chance to pull through. If the fire beats me to it—well, there will be one less contestant in this race, that's all."

He lifted the motorcycle bodily from the ground, in his excitement and dire need, handling it as easily as he would a bicycle, pointing it back the way he had so lately come. Then, with a shove and a leap he was off on a wild ride, with life itself as the prize.

He flew swiftly along the narrow trail, careless of ruts and obstructions that he had avoided with the greatest care but a short time before. The smoke grew thick and choking, reddening his eyes, irritating his lungs. It was only by the greatest good fortune that he avoided a collision with the panic-stricken animals that dashed across the road in great numbers, disappearing among the underbrush on the other side. Now he could hear a distant roaring and crackling, and great waves of heat billowed down upon him. He clenched his teeth, and opened the throttle to the utmost. The woods streaked away on both sides, and soon he saw that he was nearing his goal. [133]

But the fire was traveling fast as well as he, and he could see it leaping through the tops of the trees at no great distance. The heat scorched and burned him, and the motorcycle felt hot to the touch. But, after what seemed an interminable time, he reached the brook, which now offered the last chance of safety.

Scarcely checking his speed, Bert swung off the road. His machine skidded wildly, but the tires gripped in time, and Bert steered for the deep pool in which he had bathed less than two hours ago. The "Blue Streak" crashed through the underbrush, beating down all opposition by its terrific momentum, the powerful motor forcing it forward like a battering ram. Bert gripped the tank with his knees, and held on grimly, checking his mount at last at the brink of the pool.

By now, the heat was almost intolerable, but there was still something left for him to do before he could plunge into the cool water. Way back in his camping days he had learned the best way of fighting a forest fire, and now he put his knowledge to account. He applied a light to the grass and underbrush bordering the pool, and a thin line of flame began creeping to meet the furious conflagration dashing through the trees. This would leave a narrow belt of charred land around the pool that would hold the fire at a little distance, at least. [134]

This done, Bert seized the handlebars of his motorcycle, and hauled it into the pool after him, until it was partly immersed.

"That's the best I can do for you, old friend," he said. "I guess the fire can't reach you there, at any rate."

Then he waded in until he reached the deepest part of the pool, and waited for the advance of the devouring element.

He had plenty of company, as rabbits, foxes, and numerous other wild creatures continually plunged into the water, their eyes wide with terror, and all thoughts of age-old enmities wiped from their minds.

The heat grew more intense every moment, and Bert felt the skin on his face blistering. He took a long breath, and ducked his head completely under water. He kept it there until it seemed as though his lungs would burst for lack of air, and then lifted it to take another breath. In those few seconds the fire had made tremendous strides, and now met the backfire that Bert had started. He had only time to take a hasty glimpse of all this, and then was forced to duck under again. Every breath he drew was hot as the blast of a furnace, and seemed fairly to scorch his lungs.

The fire burned for a few minutes with no appreciable lessening of its fury, but then, deprived of fuel, gradually passed by on each side of the pool. Its terrific roaring slowly died away in the distance, and the unbearable heat abated somewhat, although smoke still hung in a heavy pall over the blackened ground. [135]

At last Bert found he could venture from the water with safety, and accordingly did so. At the same time the wild creatures who had sought refuge in the same place bethought themselves of engagements elsewhere, and scampered off.

Bert hauled the "Blue Streak" out of the water, and found it practically unharmed. Some of the enamel had blistered, but Bert paid little attention to this, so long as the machine was still in running order. He had taken care not to let the water touch the magneto, and so was able to start immediately.

As he rode over the blackened trail, Bert could not help comparing the scene of desolation that now met his eye with the beautiful appearance the woods had presented so short a time before. In places the ground still smoked and smouldered, and in others trees burned like giant torches.

But Bert realized that he had had a narrow escape from death, and this thought kept him from dwelling too long on the devastated landscape. After two or three hours' riding, he passed the fire belt, and once more entered a flourishing forest. He made steady progress, and before nightfall reached a fair-sized town. Most of the able-bodied men had not returned from fighting the fire, and at first the few who were left would hardly believe Bert's account of his escape. But a look at the blistered enamel on the motorcycle convinced them, and they united in congratulating him on his good fortune. As one grizzled old fellow remarked, "Thar ain't many folks as can say they've come through a forest fire as easy as you did, son. Thar generally ain't much o' them left to tell the story." [136]

## CHAPTER XII

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### RACING AN AIRSHIP

It was a hot, oppressive day when Bert set out from Ralston. But he had had a restful sleep, and felt in fine trim for anything. He had eaten a hearty breakfast, and this no doubt added to his feeling of buoyancy and satisfaction with life in general. In addition, his mount was acting beautifully, purring along with the deep-throated exhaust that tells its own story of fine adjustments and perfect carburetion.

The country through which he traveled was very flat, and for mile after mile he glided easily along, encountering no obstructions worthy of the name. The road was smooth, and, contrary to the general run of roads in this section, comparatively free from sand and dust. The fresh, invigorating air added to his feeling of exhilaration, and he was tempted to "open 'er up" and do a little speeding.

He had about decided to do so, when suddenly he became conscious of hearing some noise not proceeding from his machine.

At first he thought it must be an automobile coming up back of him, but, as he glanced over his shoulder, he could see no sign of one, although the road stretched out for miles without a break.

Instantly his mind grasped the significance of the sound.

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"It must be an aeroplane," he thought, and, glancing upward, was not much surprised to see one outlined against the clear blue of the sky.

"Well, well," thought Bert, "this is an unexpected pleasure. I didn't know there was an aeroplane within two hundred miles of here."

The aeroplane, which proved to be of the biplane type, was evidently descending. At first, Bert had stopped to get a good look at it, but then, feeling that he had no time to lose, had remounted and resumed his journey.

But as he went along, he knew that the 'plane was still descending because of the increasing noise of its exhaust. In the same way he could tell that the machine was overtaking him, but at first the thought of trying to beat it never entered his head. Even in all his varied and exciting adventures he had never had a brush with such an adversary.

In an incredibly short time, however, the aeroplane was directly over his head, and he glanced upward. As he did so, the aviator leaned forward slightly, and waved his gloved hand. Bert waved in reply, and then the airman made a gesture which Bert interpreted, and rightly, as being a challenge.

Needless to say, our hero was not one to decline such an invitation, and accordingly he opened his throttle a little. Instantly his exhaust changed from its deep grumble to a harsh bark, and his machine leaped forward.

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In answer to this, the aviator fed more gas to *his* motor, and his graceful machine soared forward in advance of Bert and the "Blue Streak."

"Oho!" thought Bert, "this will never do," and he gave his powerful machine more throttle, at the same time advancing the spark to the limit. That last fraction of an inch of spark sent his machine surging ahead like some wild thing let loose, and he leaned far down to escape the terrific resistance caused by the wind. The road streamed away behind him, and he had a thrill of exultation as he felt his machine leap forward in response to the slightest touch of the throttle.

His adversary in the air was not to be easily outdistanced, however, and he kept up with Bert, refusing to be shaken off.

Bert felt that now was the time to take the lead, if possible, and accordingly he opened the throttle almost to the limit, although he still held something in reserve.

The powerful motor responded nobly, and the machine skimmed over the sun-baked road at a terrific pace. The bird-man did his best to squeeze a little more speed out of his whirling motor, but was unable to cope with the rushing, roaring little speck down below him. At last he was forced to a realization of this, and abruptly cut down his speed.

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Bert continued his headlong flight for a short time, but finding that the aeroplane did not pass him, concluded that it must have fallen behind. Accordingly, he slackened his own speed, but very gradually, for he was too wise to risk disaster by slowing down too suddenly.

Soon his speed had abated sufficiently to allow the use of the brakes, and he brought his machine to a standstill. Lifting it onto its stand, he pushed his goggles up on his forehead, and looked around for his late rival.

He made out the aeroplane at no great distance, and could see that it was making preparations to land. When the aviator reached a point almost over Bert's head, he shut off his engine entirely, and, describing a great spiral, landed gently on the ground not a hundred yards from where Bert and the "Blue Streak" were standing.

Bert immediately ran toward him, and the aviator stepped stiffly from his seat and held out his hand.

"You've got a mighty fast machine there, comrade," he said, with a grin, as Bert shook hands with him. "I thought my 'plane was pretty good, but I guess your motor bike is better."

"Well, it isn't so bad, perhaps," replied Bert, unable no matter how hard he tried, to keep a little note of pride out of his voice. "I manage to get a little action out of it once in a while."

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"I should say you did," agreed his late rival, "but what are you doing way out here a thousand miles from nowhere, more or less?"

"I might ask the same question of you," replied Bert, with a smile, "but as you beat me to it, I'll answer yours first."

Bert then proceeded to outline briefly the contest in which he was engaged, but, before he had gone far, his companion interrupted him.

"Oh, I know all about that!" he exclaimed. "And so you're one of the chaps in the transcontinental race, are you? Well, you haven't got so much further to go, considering the distance you've covered already."

"No, I guess the worst of it is over," agreed Bert, "although I've been told that there are some very bad roads ahead of me."

"You're right, there are," replied the aviator, "and that's where I have an advantage over you. I don't have to worry over road conditions."

Bert saw that he was a little chagrined over his defeat, and so forebore to argue the merits of motorcycle versus airship.

"Just the same," he thought to himself, "I'm a whole lot more likely to get where I want to go than he is."

Then he and his new-found companion fell into a discussion regarding various types of motors, and inspected each other's machines with interest. By the time this was over it was high noon, and Bert proposed that they eat lunch together.

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The aviator agreed heartily to this, and accordingly they unpacked their lunches and, sitting in the shade of one of the aeroplane wings, made a hearty meal.

When the last crumb had been disposed of, they shook hands with expressions of mutual regard, and the aviator was very cordial in wishing Bert all kinds of success in the contest. Then they said good-bye, and resumed their respective journeys. Bert watched the airship ascend in great spirals, until it was a mere speck in the distance, winging rapidly eastward.

Before starting, Bert looked over his machine carefully, in order to assure himself that nothing had been loosened by the vibration caused by the high speed. Everything seemed in perfect shape, and in less time than it takes to tell he was "eating up space" in a fashion that promised to land him speedily at his destination.

But before he had gone many miles, he found the road, which up to now had been exceptionally good, becoming more and more sandy, and he was forced to go slowly and pick his way very carefully. As the sand grew deeper his machine evinced a very decided tendency to skid, and he was forced to exert all his strength to keep the front wheel pointed straight ahead.

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Soon he shifted to low gear, and crawled forward at a pace little faster than a brisk walk. He now had reason, as indeed he had a score of times so far, to bless the foresight that had led him to purchase a two-speed machine. Without this, he felt that the accomplishment of his task would be well-nigh hopeless.

The heat became more and more oppressive, and the alkali dust on his face smarted and blistered. At intervals he would dismount, take a drink from his canteen, and give his motor a chance to cool off.

Then he would start on again, resolved to reach the next town before nightfall. What with the many interruptions and the slow pace, however, darkness overtook him while yet he was more than ten miles from his destination.

Dismounting, he lighted his lamp, and once more took up the forward flight. The air, from being excessively hot, now became quite the opposite, and he felt chilled to the bone. He kept doggedly on, nevertheless, and at last his perseverance was rewarded by his catching a glimpse of the lights of the town for which he was bound. At the same time the road became much better, and he covered the intervening mile or two at good speed.

The town was not a large one, but it could afford a square meal and a good bed, and that was all that Bert asked for. He had a hard time to tear himself away from the other guests, who were very much interested in his adventures, and plied him with innumerable questions.

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At last he managed to say good-night, and fifteen minutes afterward was sunk in the deep, dreamless sleep of utter but healthy exhaustion.

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## CHAPTER XIII

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### AN UNSEEN LISTENER

Bert was lost. There was no use blinking the fact. For two hours past this feeling had been growing stronger, and now it had deepened into a conviction.

It was an unusual and disconcerting experience for him. His sense of location was very keen and acute, and, even without a compass, he had been able almost instinctively to distinguish the cardinal points. But just now he was deprived of the help of that trusty counselor. He had been compelled to dismount, a little while since, to make some trifling adjustment. Some time later, when the sun had disappeared under a cloud, he felt in the pocket where he usually carried his compass, and was dismayed to find it empty. He must have lost it in bending over the machine. He could replace it when he reached the next large town, but just at present he missed it sorely. For an hour now, the sun had been invisible, and although he felt confident he was traveling due West, he would have given a good deal for absolute assurance of that fact.

If he had been following some broad highway, he would not so much have cared, as he would have been sure before long to reach some settlement where he could again get his bearings. But there had been a number of trails, none of them well-defined, and he had chosen one that grew fainter and fainter as he progressed until it had faded away into the mass of the prairie. In bright sunlight, he might have still been able to trace it, but, in the dun haze and gathering dusk, it was no longer visible. [146]

Although the country was mostly a level plain, it was interspersed here and there with bits of woodland and rocky buttes, rising in places to a height of two hundred feet. One of these Bert descried in the distance, and, putting on more power, he neared it rapidly. If he had to spend the night in the open, which seemed very probable now, he wanted to have the cheer and comfort of a fire, and there was no material for that in the treeless plain. At the edge of the wood he could get boughs and branches. By the aid of the spirit lamp that he carried in his kit, he could make a pot of coffee to supplement the sandwiches he had with him.

By the time he had reached the woods it had grown wholly dark. He jumped from the saddle, leaned the "Blue Streak" against a tree, and commenced to gather twigs and branches. He soon had enough for his purpose, and was just about to apply a match, when he caught the twinkle of a light, farther up the wooded slope. He looked closely and could see the outlines of a cabin from which the light was streaming. [147]

The discovery was both a surprise and a delight. Here was human companionship, and an opportunity to know just where he was and how he could best reach the nearest town. He thought it was probably the hut of some shepherd or cattleman, and he had no doubt of a warm welcome. Apart from the hospitality that is proverbial on the Western plains, the occupant of that lonely cabin would be just as glad as himself to have a companion for the night. He thrust his matchbox back in its waterproof pouch, and, taking his machine by the handlebars, began to trundle it up the slope.

His first impulse was to blow the horn of his motorcycle, as a cheery announcement that a stranger was coming. But as he reached out his hand, some unseen power seemed to hold him back. There seemed to be no reason for the caution, but that subtle "sixth sense," that experience had taught Bert to rely upon, asserted itself. On such occasions he had learned not to argue, but to obey. He did so now, and, instead of going directly to the cabin as he had planned at first, made a wide circle and came up behind. He left the motorcycle fifty feet away, and then with infinite care drew near the cabin. [148]

It was a rude structure of logs, and mud had been used to close up the chinks. There was no window on that side, but in several places the dried mud had fallen away, and the light shone through the crevices. Bert glued his eye to the largest of these openings and looked in.

A smoky lamp stood on a rough pine table, before which a man was seated on a nail keg. His face was partly turned away, and, at the moment Bert saw him, he was applying his lips to a half-filled whiskey bottle. He took an enormous dram and then slammed the bottle down on the table and drew his sleeve across his mouth.

Around his waist was a cartridge belt, and two ugly-looking revolvers peeped from his holsters. A bowie knife lay on the table beside the lamp. The outlook was not reassuring, and Bert blessed the caution that had impelled him to "hasten slowly" in approaching the cabin.

He blessed it again when the man with an oath and a snarl picked up a handbill that had dropped on the floor. In doing so, he exposed his full face to view, and Bert thought that he had seldom seen one so wholly villainous.

The ferret-like eyes, set close together, as they looked out from beneath bushy brows, glinted with ferocity. Although comparatively young, dissipation and reckless living had stamped their impress on every feature. His outthrust jaw bespoke a bulldog courage and determination. Brute was written largely all over him. An ugly scar across his temple told of the zip of a bullet or the crease of a knife. It was the face of a desperado who would stop at nothing, however murderous or cruel, to gain his ends. [149]

As the light fell upon the paper, Bert saw that it was headed by the word "REWARD" in staring capitals. Then came a picture that corresponded closely to the face of the man who was reading. Large print followed, of which Bert could see enough to grasp the meaning. It was an offer of five thousand dollars reward for the capture, alive or dead, of "Billy the Kid," who had held up a stage at Valley Gulch two weeks before, and, after killing the driver and one of the passengers who had resisted, had made his escape with the contents of the express company's pouch.

Billy the Kid! The newspapers had been full of the robbery at the time it was committed, and

columns had been published narrating his exploits. He was wanted for thefts and murders covering a series of years. Posses were out for him in all directions, but he seemed to bear a charmed life and had successfully evaded capture. An almost superstitious fear attached to his name, and he was cited as an illustrious example of the "Devil taking care of his own."

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"Dead or alive," muttered the outlaw with an ugly sneer. "It will have to be dead, then. They'll never get me alive."

Bert was in a ticklish situation. The slightest move on his part might betray his presence to this sullen bandit, to whom human life was nothing. He slipped his hand behind him and was comforted by the feel of his revolver. It was a Colt .45, fully loaded, and he knew how to use it. In that fight with the pirates off the Chinese coast it had done good service. He knew that, at need, he could rely upon it now. He took it from his hip pocket and put it in his breast, with the handle protruding so that he could grasp it instantly.

Just then the gallop of horses smote upon his ears. The outlaw heard it, too, and jumped to his feet. He blew out the light and snatched up his weapons. The hoof beats drew nearer and a halloo rang out that was evidently a preconcerted signal. With an oath of relief the desperado relighted the lamp and went to the door.

"It's time you came," he ripped out savagely. "What kept you so long?"

"Couldn't help it, Cap," protested a man who entered the cabin, closely followed by four others. "Manuel had to hang around the telegraph office till the message came from Red Pete. The minute it came, we beat it lickety split and almost killed our hosses getting here."

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The leader snatched the held out telegram and read it eagerly while the five men, of the same desperate type as their captain, stood around ready to jump at his bidding. It was clear that they feared and cringed to him. His brute force and superior cunning combined with his evil reputation held them in complete subjection.

The telegram was brief and seemingly innocent:

"Mary leaves at ten. Meet her with carriage. Pleasant visit."

He drew from his pocket a scrap of paper, evidently containing a key to the message. He compared it with the telegram, and a light of unholy glee came into his eyes.

"It's all right, boys," he said, his fierce demeanor softening somewhat. "The Overland Limited will be at the water tank near Dorsey at three o'clock. There'll be forty thousand in the express messenger's safe. It's up to us to make a rich haul and a quick getaway. Now listen to me," and with the swift decision that marks the born leader and that went far to explain his ascendancy over his men, he sketched out the plan of the coming robbery.

"You, Mike and Manuel, will attend to the engineer and fireman. First get their hands up over their heads. Then keep them covered and make them uncouple the engine and express car from the rest of the train and run up the track a half a mile or so. I'll see to the express messenger myself. He'll open that safe or I'll blow his head off and then break open the safe with dynamite. Joe and Bob and Ed will stay by the train and keep shooting off their guns, to cow the passengers and trainmen while we get in our work. We won't have time to go through the cars, as it will be too near daylight, and we'll have to do some hard riding while it's dark. I hate to let the passengers' coin and jewelry go, but we'll get enough from the express car to make up for that. Let your horses rest till twelve and then we'll saddle up and get to the water tank by two. Now you fellows know what you've got to do, and God help the man who makes a bad break. He'll have to reckon with me," and he laid his hand significantly on the handle of his knife.

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There was an uneasy grin on the part of the men, and then they fell to discussing the details of the plan, while the bottle passed freely from hand to hand.

Bert, who had listened breathlessly to the daring plot, was doing some rapid thinking. He had not the slightest idea where the water tank was located. It might be east, west, north or south, as far as he knew. But what he did know was that it behooved him to get away from that dangerous locality at the earliest possible moment. His life would not have been worth much if he had been discovered before they had discussed the robbery. Now that he was in possession of the details, it would be worth absolutely nothing. A killing more or less made no difference to these abandoned outlaws, and they would have shot him with as little concern as they would a prairie dog.

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Then, too, the alarm ought to be given at once. By riding into the night, he would have a chance of reaching some town and getting into touch with the railroad authorities, by wire or phone. Or he might run across some one familiar with the country who could guide him. Anything was better than inaction. Theft and murder were in the air, and every passing moment made them more probable. He might break his neck, collide with a rock or a tree, ride over a precipice in the dark. But he had to take a chance. Danger had never yet turned him from the path of duty. It should not daunt him now.

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## CHAPTER XIV

### THE OUTLAW PLOT

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Slowly, carefully, hardly venturing to breathe, he backed away from the cabin. He got outside the zone of light and felt for his motorcycle. With the utmost caution not to touch the horn or siren, he guided it in a wide semicircle down the slope. One of the horses whinnied as he passed and an outlaw appeared at the door. After listening for a moment, while Bert stood like a stone image in his track, the man, evidently satisfied, turned and went inside.

Then Bert moved on again by inches until he reached the edge of the woods. From there he knew that the faint click made by the valves in starting could not possibly be heard from above. He drew a long breath and for the first time turned his gaze toward the sky. He was rejoiced to find that the clouds had vanished and that the deep blue was sown with stars. He needed no compass now. There was the gleaming Polar Star by which he had often guided his course as unerringly as by the sun. He paused a moment to get a direction due west. Then he leaped into the saddle and was off.

Not until he was sure that he was beyond the sight of any possible watcher from the cabin, did he dismount and light his lamp. Then with the confidence that came from the light streaming far ahead of him, he threw in the clutch and let his machine out to the limit. [155]

He had ridden perhaps twenty miles, looking anxiously about for the lights of a town, when at some distance he saw the flames from a campfire in the lee of a bluff far away to his right. He could see a group of men, some moving about, others stretched out near the fire apparently asleep. Mindful of his previous experience, he put out his light and glided toward them like a shrouded ghost.

Stopping outside the circle of light, where he could study the scene at his leisure, he counted a dozen men. They were strapping fellows, rough in dress and appearance, but with honest, fearless faces. One of them wore a badge that stamped him as an official of some kind, and he was evidently in command of the party. Bert hesitated no longer, but, mounting, rode slowly into the firelight.

There was a gasp of wonder at his appearance, and the men who were still awake sprang to their feet with their hands on their pistol butts. A second glance, however, as Bert waved his hand in friendly fashion, disarmed them and they came hastily forward. [156]

"Well, stranger," said the man with the badge, "you came in on us rather sudden like and we was plumb surprised for a minute. You seem to be all right though, and that machine of yours is certainly some beaut. We're more used to riding four-legged things, though. We don't ask anything about a man's business out here unless we happen to have some particular business with him," and he touched his star. "So you can tell us nothing or as much as you like. As to me I ain't got any secrets as to whom I am. I'm the sheriff of Wentworth County and this here is my posse."

"Just the man I'd rather see at this minute than any one else in the world," exclaimed Bert, delightedly. And then, in words that tumbled over one another in their haste, he told them who he was, how he had been lost on the prairie and of his adventure near the cabin of "Billy the Kid."

At the mention of that notorious name the sheriff fairly jumped. "What!" he shouted. "Billy the Kid and his gang? They're the fellows we're out for now. Here, boys," he yelled, "get busy. We're on a fresh trail and we'll bag the hull bunch before daylight."

Instantly the camp was alive with excitement. Horses were untethered and saddled, and within five minutes the posse was ready to start. Bert had given hurriedly the details of the plot and the sheriff's campaign was quickly planned. He knew every foot of the surrounding country and he headed his troop straight as the crow flies for Dorsey, the little town, beyond which lay the tank where the Limited would slow down to take water. His line of march was shorter than that of the outlaws, and besides, they had not planned to leave the cabin before midnight. He could count on getting there first and having time to make his dispositions for the round-up of the gang. [157]

"Well, son," he said, with a warm grip of the hand, when they were ready to start, "I sure owe you a lot for this tip. This country's going to sleep a heap sight better when they know these fellows have dangled from the end of a rope. But how about you, now? I'll send one of my men along with you to Lonsdale, if you like. That's fifteen mile west of here and on the line of road you're traveling."

"No, thanks," replied Bert promptly, "I'm going with you, if you'll have me."

"Going with us," echoed the sheriff in surprise. "Of course, I'm glad to have you. But that gang is 'bad medicine' and there's goin' to be some shooting. You ain't got no call to mix in, 'cept of your own free will."

"Sure, I know," said Bert. "I'm going along."

"Son," exclaimed the sheriff, extending his hand, "put her thar. I'm proud to know you. You're the real stuff, all wool and a yard wide. Come along." [158]

A word of command and they clattered off, Bert keeping alongside of the leader. He was thrilling with excitement. The primitive emotions had him in their grip. A little while before, he had been in the conventional world of law and order and civilization. Now, he was seeing life "in the raw." A battle was imminent, and here he was riding to the battlefield over the prairies at midnight under the silent stars. The blood coursed violently through his veins and his heart beat high with passion for the fight. That he himself was running the risk of wounding and death was only an added stimulus. For the moment he was a "cave man," like his ancestors in the morning of the world, stealing forth from their lair for a raid against their enemies. Later on, when cooler,

he would analyze and wonder at these emotions. But now, he yielded to them, and the time seemed long before the little cavalcade swept through the sleeping town of Dorsey, and then, at a more slow and careful pace, made their way to the water tank below the station.

As they came nearer, they dismounted and led their horses to a clump of trees on the eastern side of the tank and a half a mile away. Two men were left in charge, with orders to strap the horses' jaws together, so that they could not neigh and thus betray their masters. It was figured that the outlaws would approach from the west, and the members of the posse disposed themselves in a wide semicircle, so that, at a given signal, they could surround and overpower the robbers. If possible, they were to capture them alive so that they could answer to justice for their crimes. But, alive or dead, they were to "get" them. And as Bert looked on the stern, determined faces of his companions, he had no doubt of the outcome of the struggle. [159]

After they had taken their places, lying flat on the ground with such shelter as a bush or cactus plant afforded, there was a considerable wait that was more trying to the nerves than actual fighting. Bert and the sheriff were close together, but, except for an occasional whisper, neither spoke. They were busy with their thoughts and intent on the approaching fray.

Perhaps an hour had elapsed before they heard the distant tramp of horses. Soon they could see half a dozen men approaching, their figures dimly outlined in the starlight. The grip of the watchers tightened on their pistol butts as they strained their eyes to get a better view of their quarry.

Then silence fell again. A half hour went by. Suddenly a faint whistle was heard in the distance, the ground began to tremble and a great headlight swung into view, far up the track. It was the road's crack train, the Overland Limited. The moment was at hand. [160]

With a terrific rumbling and clanking and ringing of bells, the ponderous train slowed down at the tank. The fireman was already on the tender, ready to slew over the pipe that would bring a cataract of water down into the reservoir. Just as he reached for it, there was a fusillade of shots. Two masked men covered the startled engineer and fireman with their revolvers and ordered them to hold up their hands. Another hammered at the door of the express car and commanded the messenger to open, on pain of instant death. Farther down the train other shots rang out and windows were shattered by bullets to warn passengers to stay inside.

But just then came a diversion. With a yell and a rush the sheriff and his men swept down upon the astonished outlaws, firing as they came. The bandits were caught like rats in a trap. They were the center of a ring of flame, but they fought back savagely. There were cries and curses, as men emptied their revolvers and then clinched in deadly struggle. The bandit leader, leaving the express car, plunged headlong into the fight, battling like a fiend. When his revolver was empty he flung it into the sheriff's face and made a break for his horse. But Bert was too quick for him, and tackled him, just as he had put one foot in the stirrup and was swinging the other over his mount. With a mighty wrench he dragged him from the saddle. The "Kid" uttered a fearful oath and reached for his knife. Bert's hands closed around his throat and they went to the ground rolling over and over like two panthers. [161]

At gun or knife play the outlaw would have been the victor. But in this hand-to-hand struggle, Bert was easily his master. His tremendous strength, reinforced by clean living and athletic training, soon triumphed over the rum-soaked body of the "Kid." But the latter's ferocity was appalling, and Bert had to choke him almost into unconsciousness, before his muscles relaxed and he lay there limp and gasping.

As Bert rose, breathless but victorious, he saw that the fight was over. Two of the outlaws were dead and another fatally wounded. The other two were in the hands of their captors, and the sheriff coming up, snapped handcuffs on the "Kid" and jerked him to his feet.

Passengers and trainmen came pouring from the cars, and there was a Babel of excited questionings. The conductor, full of relief and gratitude at his train's escape from looting, offered to carry the party to the next town on the line. But the sheriff elected to take his prisoners across country to the county seat, and after another exchange of congratulations, the train moved on. [162]

Then the triumphant posse, with one of its members severely, another slightly wounded, took up their homeward trip. They had made one of the most important captures in the history of the State, and the next day the country would be ringing with their praises. They were naturally jubilant, and the sheriff urged Bert earnestly to come with them as the real hero of the roundup. But he stoutly refused and the only favor he would accept was the loan of a guide to take him over to Lonsdale.

"Well," said the sheriff at last reluctantly, "I suppose you know your own business best, but I shore am sorry to say good-bye. You've made an awful hit with me, son. That was a lovely scrap you put up with the 'Kid,' and I've never seen a prettier bit of rough housing. I hope you win your race and I believe you will. Anybody that can put one over on 'Billy the Kid' can pretty near get anything he goes after. If ever you're looking for work," he joked, "come out to Wentworth County and I'll make you assistant sheriff. Perhaps, though, you'd better not," and his eyes twinkled, "cause it wouldn't be long before you'd have my job."

Bert was having his first glimpse of the sea since he started on his trip. He was weary of the land which he had traversed so swiftly and steadily for two weeks past. The impression stamped upon his brain was that of an endless ribbon of road, between whose edges his motorcycle had sped along, until he seemed like a living embodiment of perpetual motion. That ribbon had commenced to unwind at the eastern end of the continent, and there were still a good many miles to be reeled off before the race was ended. But now, as he sat on the veranda of the beach hotel facing the sea whose surf broke on the sands a hundred feet away, he could feel his weariness dropping away like a cast-off garment. The tang of the ocean was a tonic that filled him with new life, and his nostrils dilated as they drew in great draughts of the salt air.

"Ponce de Leon was wrong when he looked for the elixir of life in a fountain," he thought to himself. "He should have sought for it in the sea."

Before him stretched the mighty Pacific, its crested waves glittering in the sun. Fishing vessels and coasting craft flashed their white sails near the shore, while, far out on the horizon, he could see the trail of smoke that followed in the wake of a liner. Great billows burst into spray on the beach, and the diapason of the surf reverberated in his ears like rich organ music. He drank it all in thirstily, as though storing up inspiration for the completion of his task. [164]

A man sitting near by looked at him with a quizzical smile, frankly interested by Bert's absorption in the scene before him. With easy good-fellowship, he remarked:

"You seem to be getting a lot of pleasure out of the view."

"I am," replied Bert promptly; "I can't get enough of it."

"There are plenty of people who have got enough of it," he observed drily, "your humble servant among the number."

Bert scented a story, but repressed any sign of curiosity.

"It's the infinite variety that appeals to me," he said. "The sea is full of wonders."

"And tragedies," supplemented the other.

He settled back in his chair and lighted a fresh cigar. As he struck the match, Bert noticed that his right hand was horribly scarred and disfigured. It looked as though it had been drawn through a harrow whose teeth had bitten deep. Great livid weals crossed each other on the back, and two of the fingers were gone. And Bert noted that, although his face and frame indicated that he was not more than thirty years old, his hair was snowy white. [165]

"Of course, that's true," said Bert, reverting to the stranger's last remark; "storms and shipwrecks and typhoons and tidal waves are things that have to be reckoned with."

"Yes," was the reply, "but I wasn't thinking especially of these. They're common enough and terrible enough. What I had in mind was the individual tragedies that are happening all the time, and of which not one in a hundred ever hears."

"Do you see this hair of mine?" he asked, removing his hat. "One day at noon it was as dark as yours. At three o'clock on that same day it was like this."

He paused a moment, as though battling with some fearful recollection.

"I don't know how familiar you may be with the Pacific," he resumed, "but on this coast there is every variety of monster that you can find in any other ocean, and usually of a fiercer and larger type. Nowhere do you find such man-eating sharks or such malignant devil-fish. The sharks don't come near enough to the shore to bother us much. But it's safe to say that within half a mile from here, there are gigantic squids, with tentacles from twelve to twenty feet long. More than one luckless swimmer, venturing out too far, has been dragged down by them, and there are instances where they have picked a man out of a fishing boat. If those tentacles ever get you in their murderous grip, it's all over with you. [166]

"Then, too, we have what is called the 'smotherer,' something like a monstrous ray, that spreads itself out over its prey and forces it down in the mud at the bottom, until it is smothered to death. It's a terror to divers, and they fear it more than they do the shark.

"But these perils are well known and can be guarded against. If I'd got into any trouble with them, it would probably have been largely my own fault. But it is the 'unexpected that happens,' and the thing that marked me for life was something not much bigger than my fist.

"Have you ever seen an abalone? No? Well, it's a kind of shellfish that's common on this coast. It has one shell and that a very beautiful one, so that it is in considerable demand. The inside of it is like mother of pearl and there are little swellings on it called 'blisters,' that gleam with all the colors of the rainbow. It's a favorite sport here to get up 'abalone parties,' just as you fellows in the East go crabbing. Only, instead of getting after them with a net, we use a crowbar. Queer kind of fishing, isn't it?"

"I should say it was," smiled Bert.

"Well, you see, it's this way. The body of the abalone is a mass of muscle that has tremendous strength. It is so powerful, that the natives of the South Sea Islands use the abalones to catch sharks with. Fact. They fasten a chain to the abalone, and it swims out and attaches itself to the under side of a shark. Then they pull it in, and no matter how hard the shark struggles and threshes about, it has to come. The abalone would be torn to pieces before it would let go. It's the [167]



bulldog of the shellfish tribe, and a harpoon wouldn't hold the shark more securely.

"On the coast, here, they fasten themselves to the rocks, and as these are usually covered at high tide, you have to hunt them when the tide is low. You wade out among the rocks until you catch sight of an abalone. Then you insert the crowbar between the shell and the rock. Only the enormous leverage this gives enables you to pry it off. The strongest man on earth couldn't pull it away with his bare hands.

"Usually, we went in parties, and there was a good deal of rivalry as to who would get the largest and finest shells. I forgot to say that, besides the shells themselves, once in a while you can find a pearl of considerable value and great beauty. This occurs so seldom, however, that it is always a red-letter day when you have such a bit of luck.

"One day, a friend had arranged to go abalone hunting with me, but just as we were getting ready to start out, a telegram called him away from town, on important business. It would have been the luckiest thing that ever happened to me if I had got a telegram too. We were both much disappointed, as on that day we were going to try a new place, where we had a 'hunch' that we would make a good haul. [168]

"The weather was so fine and I had my mind so set upon the trip, that I determined to go it alone. The tide that day would be at low water mark at about twelve o'clock. I threw a lunch together, got out my bag and crowbar and started.

"A tramp of a couple of miles down the beach brought me to the place we had in mind. It was a desolate stretch of shore, with no houses in sight except an occasional fisherman's shack, and the crowds that frequented the other beaches had left this severely alone. It was this, added to the fact that an unusual number of rocks was visible at low tide, that had made us fix on it as a promising location.

"The day was bright and clear and the sea had never appeared so beautiful. Looked to me, I imagine, a good deal as it did to you just now. It has never seemed beautiful to me since.

"The tide was on the ebb, but had not yet run out fully, and I had to wait perhaps half an hour before the rocks were uncovered enough to permit me to see the abalones in their hiding places. I spent the time lying lazily on the sand with half shut eyelids, and basking in the inexpressible charm of sea and sky. I never dreamed of the horror the scene would inspire in me a little later on. There was a long swell but little surf that day, and there was nothing cruel in the way the waves danced in the sunlight and came gliding up, with an air that was almost caressing, to where I lay stretched out at perfect peace with myself and the world. [169]

"Soon the ebb had reached its limit and there was that momentary hesitation before the tide, as though it had forgotten something and were coming back for it, began to flow in. Now was the time, if I wanted to fill the sack that I had brought along with me to hold my spoil. I remember chuckling to myself, as I looked around and saw that there was not a soul in sight. If this should prove the rich hunting ground I believed it to be, I would have first choice of the finest specimens.

"I slung the bag over my shoulder and holding the crowbar in my left hand, began to make my way out to the rocks. I had stripped off my outer clothing, and was in the swimming suit that I wore underneath. The water was deliciously refreshing, after the sun bath I had been enjoying, and I went leisurely along until I came to where the rocks were thickest. The slope was very gradual, and, by the time I got among them, I was some distance from the shore. Then I became alert and alive, and buckled down to my work. [170]

"My friend and I had made no mistake. The rocks were full of abalones and my bag was soon filling rapidly. I exulted in the thought of the virgin field that we too would exploit together.

"But, although the shells were numerous and unusually fine in their markings, I could not find any that contained a pearl. That was the one thing necessary to make my day a perfect success. I began to hustle now, as the tide was beginning to come in strongly, and before long the rising waters would cover the rocks.

"Suddenly, I saw under the green surface a large abalone with its shell gaping widely. And my heart gave a jubilant leap as I saw a large pearl just within the edge of the shell. How I came to do such a fool thing I don't know, but, with a shout, I reached out my hand to grasp it. I slipped as I did so, and, in trying to steady myself, the crowbar flew out of my left hand and fell several feet away. And just then the shell began to tighten. I tried to withdraw my hand, but it was too late. That closing shell held it against the rock as though in an iron clamp.

"A sweat broke out all over me and icy chills chased themselves up and down my spine. I pulled with all my might, but the shell, as though in mockery, closed tighter. The feeling of that clammy mass of gristle and muscle against the flesh filled me with a sick loathing that, for the moment, overbore the pain of my crushed hand. So, I imagine, a man might feel in the slimy folds of a boa constrictor. [171]

"Instinctively, I raised my other hand, as if to insert the crowbar. Then I realized that it had fallen from my hand. I could see where it lay between two rocks, not six feet away. Six feet! It might as well have been six miles.

"I was trapped. The full horror of my situation burst upon me. I was alone, held fast by that powerful shell that recognized me as an enemy and would never relax of its own accord. *And the tide was coming in.*

"In a fury of rage and terror, I struck at the abalone with my left hand while with all my

strength I tried to tear away my right. But I could have as soon succeeded in pulling it from beneath a triphammer. There were gaping rents in the flesh opened by my struggles and I could see my blood mingling with the green water.

"You have heard of bears and lynxes caught in traps who have chewed at their imprisoned leg until they left it behind them and hobbled away, maimed and bleeding, but free. I swear to you that I would have done the same with that hand of mine, if I had been able.

"I thought of a woodsman whom I knew, who had been caught by a falling tree that had crushed his foot. He knew that if he stayed there that night, the wolves would get him. His axe was within reach and he deliberately chopped off his foot. I didn't have even that chance. I was in my bathing suit and my knife was in the clothes left on the shore.

"And all this time the cruel, treacherous sea was coming in and the tide was mounting higher and higher. It purred about me softly, gently, like a cat playing with a mouse. I beat at it angrily with my left hand and it seemed to laugh. It felt sure of me and could afford to be indulgent. It was already above my waist and my knowledge of the coast told me that when it reached the flood it would be ten feet deep at the place where I stood.

"I looked wildly around, in the hope of seeing some one on the shore. But it was absolutely deserted. A little while before, I had been gloating over the fact that I was alone and could have a monopoly of the hunting. Now I would have given all I had in the world for the sight of a human face. I shouted until I was hoarse, but no one came. Far out at sea, I could glimpse dimly the sails of a vessel. I waved my free hand desperately, but I knew at the time that it was futile. I was a mere speck to any one on board, and even if they trained strong glasses on me they would have thought it nothing but the frolicsome antics of a bather.

"Now the water was up to my armpits. The thought came to me that if I should keep perfectly quiet, the abalone might think his danger gone and loosen his grip. But, though I nearly went crazy with the terrible strain of keeping still, when every impulse was to leap and yell, the cunning creature never relaxed that murderous clutch.

"Then I lost all control of myself. It wasn't the thought of death itself. I could, I think, have steeled myself to that. But it was the horrible mode of death. To be young and strong and twenty, and to die there, slowly and inexorably, while six feet away was a certain means of rescue!

"The water had reached my neck. My overstrung nerves gave way. I tugged wildly at my bleeding hand. I raved and wept. I think I must have grown delirious. I dimly remember babbling to the iron bar that I could see lying there so serenely in the transparent water. I coaxed it, wheedled it, cajoled it, begged it to come to me, and, when it refused, I cursed it. The waves were breaking over me and I was choking. The spray was in my eyes and ears. I thought I heard a shouting, the sound of oars. Then a great blackness settled down upon me and I knew nothing more.

"When next I came to consciousness, I was in a hospital, where I had been for two months with brain fever. They had had to take off two fingers, and barely saved the rest of the hand. They wouldn't let me see a mirror until they had prepared me for the change in my appearance.

"I learned then the story of my rescue. A party had come around a bend of the shore when I was at my last gasp. They caught sight of my hand just above the water. They made for me at once and tried to pull me into the boat. Then they saw my plight, and, with a marlinspike, pried the abalone loose. They tell me that my bleeding fingers had stiffened around the pearl, and they could scarcely get it away from me. They asked me afterward if I cared to see it, but I hated it so bitterly that I refused to look at it. It had been bought at too high a price.

"And now," he concluded, "do you wonder that I dread that sleek and crawling monster that I call the sea?"

Bert drew a long breath.

"No," he said, and there was a world of sympathy and understanding in his tone, "I don't."

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## CHAPTER XVI

### DESPERATE CHANCES

Bert's stay at the pleasant seaside hotel was limited to a few hours only, but he gained incalculable refreshment from the short rest. It was with regret that he could not spend more time there that he took leave of the proprietor, and repaired to the motorcycle store where he had left the "Blue Streak" to have some very necessary work done on it. The engine had not been overhauled since starting from New York, and the cylinders were badly incrusting with carbon. He had left directions for this to be scraped out, and when he reached the shop expected to find his machine waiting for him in first-class condition. What was his chagrin therefore, when, on entering the place, the first thing he saw was the "Blue Streak" in a dismantled condition, parts of it strewn all over the floor.

He hunted up the proprietor, and indignantly asked him why the machine was not ready according to promise.

"I'm very sorry," the man told him, "but as one of the mechanics was scraping the front cylinder it dropped on the floor, and when he picked it up he found it was split. So we can't do anything with the machine until we get a new cylinder."

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"But haven't you got a machine in the place you could take a cylinder from, and put it on my machine?" asked Bert. "I can't afford to be held up here for a day while you send away for a new part."

"There isn't a machine in the place that would have a cylinder to fit yours," said the proprietor; "if it had been a rear cylinder, it would have been easy enough to give you another, because we could take one off a one-cylinder machine that would fit. But, as it happens, I haven't a twin cylinder machine in the place."

"But how long will it take to get the new one here?" asked Bert.

"About half a day, I should say," replied the other.

"Half a day!" echoed Bert, and his heart sank. "Why, if I lose that much time here it probably means that I'll lose the race. Do you realize that?"

"I don't see what we can do about it," replied the proprietor, shrugging his shoulders. "I'll get the cylinder for you the first minute I can, but that's the best I can do."

Bert saw that there was no use arguing the matter. He walked out of the place without another word, but with a great bitterness in his heart. All his days of heartbreaking riding—the hardships he had undergone—the obstacles he had faced and overcome—all these things were in a fair way of being set at naught because of the carelessness of a stupid mechanic. The thought almost drove him frantic, and he hurried along the pavement, scarcely noticing where he was going. At last he collected his thoughts somewhat and pulled himself together. Looking about him, he saw that he was not far from the postoffice, and it occurred to him that there might be a letter for him from Tom or Dick.

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With this thought in mind he entered the postoffice, in one corner of which there was also a telegraph station.

Walking up to the window, he inquired if there was any mail for Bert Wilson.

"No," said the functionary behind the grating, "but there's a telegram just come in for a party of that name. Bill!" he called, to the telegraph operator, "here's Mr. Wilson now, him that you just got the telegram for."

"Oh, all right," replied the operator, "here you are, sir. I was just going to send it up to your hotel."

"Much obliged," said Bert, and tore open the yellow envelope.

"Ride fast," it read, "have just heard Hayward is within three hundred miles of San Francisco. Hurry."

The slip of yellow paper dropped from Bert's nerveless fingers. Three hundred miles away. Why, Bert was as far from San Francisco as that himself, with mountainous roads still before him, and his machine out of commission!

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If he could only do something, anything, that would be a relief. But he was absolutely helpless in the grasp of an unforeseen calamity, and all he could do was to pray desperately for the speedy arrival of the new cylinder.

He hastened back to the repair shop, and found that in his absence everything, with, of course, the exception of the front cylinder, had been put together. "We've done all we can," the proprietor assured him. "A few minutes ago I called up the agents in Clyde and they said that their man was on the way with it. So it ought to get here early this afternoon."

"Well," declared Bert grimly, "I'm not going to stir out of this place till it does come, let me tell you."

He waited with what patience he could muster, and at last, a little before two o'clock, the long-awaited cylinder arrived. With feverish haste Bert fastened it to the motor base himself, too impatient to let anybody else do it. Besides, he was resolved to take no chances of having *this* cylinder damaged. Ten minutes later the last nut had been tightened, and the "Blue Streak" was wheeled out into the street. Now that the heartbreaking waiting was over, Bert felt capable of anything. As he vaulted into the saddle, he made a compact with himself. "If my machine holds out," he resolved, "I will not sleep again until I reach San Francisco;" and when Bert made a resolution, he kept it.

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He scorched through the streets of the town regardless, for the time being, of local speed ordinances. In a few minutes he was out on the open road, and then,—well, the "Blue Streak" justified all the encomiums he had ever heaped upon it. Up hill and down he sped, riding low over the handlebars, man and machine one flying, space-devouring unit. The day drew into dusk, dusk changed to darkness, and Bert dismounted long enough to light his lamp and was off again, streaking over the smooth road like a flying comet. At times he slowed down as he approached curves, but was off again like the wind when he had rounded them. Sometimes steep hills confronted him, but the speeding motorcycle took them by storm, and topped their summits almost before gravity could act to slacken his headlong speed. Then the descent on the other side would be a wild, dizzy rush, when at time the speedometer needle reached the ninety mark.

But the country became more mountainous after a while, and Bert encountered hills that even

the "Blue Streak" was forced to negotiate on low speed. This ate up gasoline, and about midnight Bert, on stopping a moment to examine his fuel supply, found that it was almost exhausted. Fortunately, however, about a mile further on he reached a wayside garage. He knocked repeatedly, but received no answer.

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"Just the same, I've got to have gasoline," thought Bert, and acted accordingly. With a screwdriver he pried open a window, and, filling a can from a barrel, returned to his machine and filled the tank. Then he replaced the can, and left the price of the gasoline in a prominent place.

"Needs must when the devil drives," he thought, "and I simply had to have that juice."

And now he was once more flying through the night, the brilliant rays from his lamp dancing and flickering on the road ahead, and at times striking prismatic colors from rocky walls as the road passed through some cut. Mile after mile passed back under the flying rider and machine, but still they kept on with no sign of slackening. Gradually dawn broke, misty and gray at first, but then brightening and expanding until the glorious light of full day bathed the hills in splendor. And then, as Bert looked up and around, slowing down so that he could the better drink in the glorious scene, he beheld, at a great distance, the roofs and towers of a great city, and knew that it was San Francisco, the golden city of the West. Sixteen days since he left New York and the goal toward which he had struggled so bravely was at hand!

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But even now there was no time to be lost. At this moment, Hayward might also be approaching the city, and Bert was too wise to risk failure now with the prize so nearly within his grasp. He started on again, his mind in a whirl, and all thought of fatigue and exhaustion banished. The road was bordered by signs indicating the right direction, and in less than an hour Bert was riding through the suburbs of San Francisco.

Bert's entrance into the city was signaled by a display of the wildest enthusiasm on the part of a big crowd that had turned out to meet the winner. The details of the thrilling transcontinental race in which he had been engaged had received their due share of space in the big dailies, and his adventures and those of the other contestants had been closely followed by every one possessing a drop of red blood in his veins.

Bert was totally unprepared for such a reception, however, and it took him by surprise. He had been through many adventures and had encountered many obstacles, but had pulled through by dint of indomitable will and pluck. But, as he afterward confessed to Tom and Dick, he now felt for the first time like running away. But he soon abandoned this idea, and chugged slowly along until at last he was forced by the press of people about him to stop.

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When he dismounted he was deluged by a flood of congratulations and good wishes, and was besieged by a small army of newspaper men, each anxious to get Bert's own account of the race. It was some time before he could proceed, but at last he started on, surrounded by a contingent of motorcycles, ridden by members of local clubs. They went slowly along, until in due time they reached the city hall. Bert was ushered into the presence of the mayor, who received him with great cordiality, and after a few words read the letters Bert handed him.

"Well, Mr. Wilson," he said, when he had mastered their contents, "I am certainly glad to know you, and I only wish you were a native of this State. We need a few more young men of your sort."

"I'm much obliged for your good opinion, your Honor, I'm sure," replied Bert, and after answering many questions regarding his trip, took his departure.

Returning to the street, he mounted his machine, and, still accompanied by the friendly motorcyclists, proceeded to the hotel at which he had arranged to stop during his stay in San Francisco. Of course, Tom and Dick were there to meet him, and hearty were the greetings the three comrades exchanged.

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"It hardly seems possible that I've won at last," said Bert. "I wasn't sure that Hayward hadn't beaten me in, until I heard the crowds cheering."

"Oh, you won, all right," Dick assured him, "but you didn't have much time to spare. I just heard somebody say that Hayward got in not five minutes ago. I'll bet he nearly went crazy when he heard that you'd beaten him in spite of his crooked work."

"Well, when I learned what kind of a fellow he was, I just *had* to beat him," said Bert, with a smile.

Dick and Tom took charge of his machine, and stored it safely in the local agency, where it was immediately hoisted into the show window and excited much attention.

By the time they returned to the hotel, Bert had answered the questions of a number of newspaper men, taken a much-needed bath, and dressed.

In his well-fitting clothes, that set off his manly figure, he looked a very different person from the dusty, travel-stained young fellow he had been but a short time before, and he was delighted to feel that for a little while he was "out of uniform."

But Tom and Dick immediately collared him, and, as he professed himself "fresh as a daisy," took him out to see some of the town. They had not gone far before they were recognized by one of the riders who had formed Bert's "Bodyguard" during his ride to the mayor's office. He introduced himself as John Meyers. Nothing less than their immediately paying a visit to his club would satisfy him, they found, so at last they gave in and told him to "lead on."

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The other laughingly complied. "It isn't far from here," he assured them, "and if you like our

looks we'll be glad to have you stay to dinner. After that, if you're not too fagged, a few of us will be glad to take you around and show you the sights. We're all proud of it, and we want visitors to see it."

"That programme listens good," replied Bert, "and we're 'on,' as far as the dinner goes. After that, though, I think I'll be about ready to turn in. I was riding all last night, and I feel like sleeping without interruption for the next week."

"Well, that's just as you say," agreed Meyers, "but here we are now. Pretty nifty building, don't you think?"

It was indeed a handsome house into which he presently ushered them, and they soon saw that its interior did not belie its outward appearance. The rooms were large, and furnished comfortably and in good taste.

In the front room several fine looking young fellows were engaged in a laughing conversation. They broke off when they caught sight of Meyers and the three strangers with him. Introductions were soon made, and the three comrades found themselves made thoroughly at home. [185]

Of course, the chief topic of conversation was Bert's journey, and he answered questions until he was tired.

"Here, fellows," said Meyers, perceiving this, "I think we've cross-examined Wilson enough for the present. Anyway, dinner's ready, and we'll see if you can eat as well as you can ride."

"Lead me to it," exclaimed Bert, "I'm as hungry as a wolf."

They were soon seated around a table on which was set forth a substantial meal, and it is almost needless to say that they all did it ample justice.

During the meal the chief topic of discussion, next to Bert's record-breaking feat, was the forthcoming race at the big saucer track, in which riders from all over the world were to compete.

Bert listened with great attention, for it was of the most vital importance to him to know as much as possible of the track on which he was scheduled to pit his skill and courage against the best and most experienced motorcyclists of the globe. Of course, he would be given ample time to practice and learn the tricks of the big saucer for himself, but his experience of life so far had taught him not to neglect even the slightest bit of knowledge that might make for success. [186]

In due course of time the meal was despatched, and they returned to the lounging room. A couple of pleasant hours were spent in conversation and joking, and swapping tales of eventful rides under every conceivable condition of sunshine and storm.

At last Bert rose, and said, "Well, boys, I've certainly enjoyed my visit, but I'm afraid I'll have to make a break"—consulting his watch. "I've had a mighty hard time of it lately, and I'm about all in."

He shook hands all around, and with many expressions of friendship from the club members and amid hearty invitations to call again, Bert and his companions took their departure.

"I suppose you'll begin practicing at the track pretty soon now, won't you, Bert?" asked Tom, as they turned their steps toward the hotel.

"You suppose right, old timer," said Bert, slapping him affectionately on the shoulder, "tomorrow, or maybe the day after, I'll get down to business. I want to know that track as well as I know the back yard at home before the day of the race."

"You can't know too much about it, that's certain," said Dick, soberly. "You haven't had much practice in that sort of racing, Bert, and I'm almost afraid to have you try it."

"Nonsense," laughed Bert, "why, I'll be safer there than I would be dodging autos on Broadway, back in little old New York. Don't worry about me. I'll put the jody sign on all of them, provided, of course, that my machine doesn't take it into its head,—or into its gasoline tank—to blow up, or something else along the same line." [187]

"Heaven forbid," ejaculated Dick, piously, "but I guess we'd better change the subject. It isn't a very cheerful one at best."

"You're right, it isn't," agreed Bert, "but those club fellows gave me some good tips regarding the track. They seem to know what they're talking about."

"They're a great crowd," said Tom, enthusiastically, "and they know how to do things up right, too. They certainly gave us a fine dinner."

"No doubt about it," concurred Bert, "but it's made me feel mighty sleepy. I haven't slept in so long that I'm afraid I've forgotten how."

"Well, here we are at the hotel, anyway," laughed Dick, "so you'll soon have the chance to find out."

After a little more conversation they parted and went to their rooms.

The last thing Bert heard as he dropped off to sleep was the strident cry of a newsboy. "Wuxtra! Wuxtra! All about Wilson winning the transcontinental race. Wuxtra! Wuxtra!"

## THE WONDERFUL CITY

“And now for the Exposition,” cried Bert, as after a solid sleep and an equally solid breakfast they reached their rooms and looked out over the city glittering in the morning sun.

“For your Exposition,” corrected Tom. “Yes,” he went on, as he noted Bert’s look of surprise, “that’s exactly what I mean. For if it hadn’t been for you, when you discovered the plot to blow up the Panama Canal, there would have been no Exposition at all, or, at any rate, a very different one from this. The bands would have been playing the ‘Dead March in Saul,’ instead of ‘Hail Columbia’ and the ‘Star-Spangled Banner.’”

Nor was Tom far from the truth. Before the minds of the boys came up that night in Panama, when Bert, crouching low beneath the window of the Japanese conspirators, had overheard the plot to destroy the great Canal. They saw again the struggle in the library; the fight for life in the sinking boat in the Caribbean Sea; the rescue by the submarine and the cutting of the wires that led to the mined gate of the Gatun Locks. Had it not been for Bert’s quick wit and audacity, the carefully-planned plot of the Japanese Government to keep the larger part of the American fleet on the Atlantic side, while they themselves made a dash for the Pacific slope, might easily have succeeded, and, at the very moment the boys were speaking, the whole country west of the Rocky Mountains might have been fast in the grip of the Japanese armies. But the discovery of the plot had been its undoing. The matter had been hushed up for official reasons, and only a very few knew how nearly the two nations had been locked in a life and death struggle for the control of the Western ocean. [189]

And now the peril was over. Never again would the United States be caught napping. War indeed might come—it probably would, some time—but America’s control of the coast was assured. At Colon on the Atlantic side and Panama at the Pacific end, impregnable forts and artillery bade defiance to all the fleets of East or West. Great navies on either side would be kept in easy reach in case of attack, and the combined land and sea forces would be invincible against any combination likely to be brought against them.

And it was this great achievement of American enterprise—the opening of the Canal—that the Exposition, now in full swing, was intended to celebrate. Its official designation was the “Panama-Pacific International Exposition.” And it was fitting that it should be held at San Francisco, the Queen City of the West, because it was of preëminent importance to the Pacific slope. [190]

For this silver strip of water, fifty miles long, that stretched between the Atlantic and Pacific, brought the West nine thousand miles nearer to Europe by water than it had been before. The long journey round the Horn, fraught with danger and taking months of time, would henceforth be unnecessary. It gave an all-water route that saved enormously in freights, and enabled shipments to be made without breaking bulk. It diverted a vast amount of traffic that had hitherto gone through the Suez Canal. It gave a tremendous impetus to the American merchant marine and challenged the right of Great Britain longer to “rule the waves.” And, by enabling the entire naval strength of the country to be assembled quickly in case of need, it assured the West against the “yellow peril” that loomed up on the other side of the sea.

But, above and apart from the local interests involved, was the patriotic rejoicing in which all the nation shared. The American Eagle felt that it had a right to scream over the great achievement. For great it certainly was—one of the most marvelous in the history of the world. The dream of four hundred years had become a realized fact. Others had tried and failed. France with her scientific genius and unlimited resources had thrown up her hands in despair. Then America had taken it up and carried it through to a glorious conclusion. Four hundred millions of dollars had been expended on the colossal work. But this was not the most important item. What the country was proud of was the pluck, the ingenuity, the determination, that in the face of all kinds of dangers—dangers of flood, of pestilence, of earthquakes, of avalanche—had met them all in a way to win the plaudits of mankind. [191]

In the case of the boys, this pride was, of course, intensified by the fact that they had visited the country and seen its wonders at first hand. From Colon to Panama, from the Gatun Dam to the Miraflores Locks, they had gone over every foot of ground and water. Its gates, its cuts, its spillways, its tractions—all of these had grown familiar by actual inspection. Add to this the exulting consciousness that they had been concerned in its salvation, when threatened by their country’s foes, and it can readily be imagined how eager they were to see all the wonders of the Exposition that was to celebrate its completion.

“It’s got to be a pretty big thing to satisfy my expectations,” said Dick, as they neared the grounds.

“Well,” remarked Bert, “I’ve never seen a world’s fair, but, from what I’ve heard, this goes ahead of all of them. Even the Chicago Fair, they say, can’t hold a candle to it. A fellow was telling me—”

But just then, as they turned a curve, they came in full view of the grounds, and stopped short with a gasp of admiration. [192]

It was a magnificent picture—a splendid gem, with the California land and sky as its setting.

A glorious city had sprung up as though by the waving of an enchanter’s wand. On every side rose towers, spires, minarets and golden domes. The prosaic, every-day world had vanished, and,

in its place had come a dream city such as might have been inspired by the pages of the "Arabian Nights." It almost seemed as though a caravan laden with silks and spices of the East might be expected at any moment to thread the courts and colonnades, or a regiment of Janissaries, with folded fez and waving scimitars, spur their horses along the road. The very names of the buildings were redolent of romance. There was the "Court of the Four Seasons," the "Court of the Sun and Stars," the "Tower of Jewels" and the "Hall of Abundance." And the illusion was heightened by the glorious sunshine and balmy air that makes San Francisco the Paradise of the Western Continent.

The Exposition grounds, covering a vast extent of space, had been chosen with marvelous taste and judgment and a keen eye for the picturesque. The finest talent to be found anywhere had been expended on the location, the approaches and the grouping of the buildings, so as to form a harmonious combination of grace and fitness and beauty. It was a triumph of architecture and landscape gardening. Nature and art had been wedded and the result was bewildering and overpowering. It had never been approached by any Exposition in the world's history. [193]

The site was a level space surrounded on east, west and south by sloping hills. Standing on these heights, one looked down as upon a vast amphitheater. On the north it faced the waters of San Francisco Bay, the waves gleaming in the sun and the sea lions playing about the rocks of the Golden Gate. Across the Bay could be seen towering mountains, their summits alternately shrouded in a tenuous haze and glistening in golden glory.

On the harbor side was an esplanade, eighteen hundred feet long and three hundred feet wide, adorned with marble statues and gorgeous foliage and plashing fountains. Opening directly from this was the main group of palaces—fitly so called—devoted to the more important objects of the Fair. These were clustered about the great Court of the Sun and Stars. Around the Court stood over one hundred pillars, each surmounted by a colossal figure representing some particular star. Upon a huge column stood a globe, symbol of the Sun, and about the column itself was a spiral ascent, typifying the climbing hopes and aspirations of the human race. Nearby rose the splendid Tower of Jewels, four hundred and fifty feet in height, its blazing dome reflecting back the rays of the sun, while jewels set in the walls—agate, beryl, garnet and chrysolite—bathed the interior in luminous splendor. [194]

The Court of the Four Seasons was designed to show the conquest of man over the forces of nature. The Hall of Abundance overflowed with the rich products brought from the four corners of the earth. The East and West were typified by two groups, one showing the customs of the Orient and the other exhibiting the progress made by Western civilization. Between them stood a prairie schooner, emblem of the resistless tide of immigration toward the setting sun.

"Westward the course of empire takes its way,  
The first four acts already past;  
A fifth shall close the drama and the day,  
Time's noblest offspring is its last,"

murmured Dick, yielding to his chronic habit of quotation.

Besides the central group of palaces devoted to machinery, invention, transportation and the fine arts, there were two other sections. One held the buildings of the various States and the official headquarters of foreign nations. The other was given over to the amusement concessions, consisting of hundreds of pavilions that catered to the pleasures of the visitors. Then, too, there was a great arena for open air sports and competitions. Scattered everywhere were sunken lakes and rippling cascades and verdant terraces, so arranged that at every turn the eye was charmed by some new delight. [195]

But the transcendent beauty of the Fair when viewed by day yielded the palm to the glory of the night. As the dusk fell, thousands upon thousands of lights, like so many twinkling jewels, sprang into being. The splendor flashed on tree and building, spire and minaret, arch and dome, until the whole vast Exposition became a crystal dream. Great searchlights from the bay played on jets of steam rising high in the sky, in a perfect riot of changing color. The lagoons and fountains and cascades sent back the shimmering reflections multiplied a thousand fold. And beneath the witchery of those changing lights, one might well imagine himself transported to some realm of mystery and romance a thousand leagues from the Western Hemisphere and the twentieth century.

But, although the boys felt and yielded to the potent spell that the Exposition cast on those that came within its gates, they none the less devoted themselves to the wonders shown in the great buildings set apart for machinery and inventions. All of them were planning their life work on scientific and engineering lines, and they were keen for the new discoveries and appliances that were seen on every hand in almost endless profusion. Wireless telegraphy, aeroplanes, submarine and motor engines—these were the magnets that drew them irresistibly. Although they had prided themselves on keeping pretty well up to date along these lines, they were astonished to see how many things came to them now with the force of a revelation. [196]

Before the models of the submarines they stood for a long time, as they took in every detail of the plan and construction. And with Bert's admiration was mingled a sense of gratitude. One of these it was that had picked him up when he was battling with the waves and hope had almost vanished. Even now, he could see the saucy little vessel as it poked its nose into the entrance of the Canal and darted here and there like a ferret, sniffing the danger that it came just in time to prevent. He remembered the fascination of that memorable trip, as he stood at the porthole and

saw the wonders of the sea, illumined by its powerful searchlight. But that had simply whetted his appetite, and he was hungry for further experiences. Somewhere among his ancestors there must have been Viking blood, and the haunting mystery of the sea had always called to him.

"Some day, perhaps"—he thought to himself, and then as he saw the amused expression on his companions' faces, he realized that he had spoken out loud. [197]

"What's the matter, Alexander?" chaffed Tom. "Weeping for more worlds to conquer?"

"He isn't satisfied with the victories won on the earth," mocked Dick. "He wants the sea, too. You're a glutton for adventure, Bert."

"Yes," laughed Tom, "he won't be happy till he gets it."

"Oh, cut it out," retorted Bert, a little sheepishly. "Since when did you fellows set up to be mind readers?"

But they *were* mind readers and prophets, too, though none of them knew it at the time.

"There's still one other field to be explored," went on Dick, teasingly, "and that's the air."

"Well," remarked Tom, "if Bert's going to try that, too, he'd better get busy pretty soon. They're going ahead so fast there, that before long there won't be anything new left to do. When fellows can turn somersaults in the air and fly along on their backs, like that Frenchman, Peguod, they're certainly getting a strangle hold on old mother Nature. The way things are moving now, a man will soon be as safe in an airship as a baby in his cradle. Look at this Bleriot monoplane;" and they were soon plunged deep in the study of the various types of flying craft.

In another department, one thing gave Bert unlimited satisfaction. Among all the motorcycles, native and foreign, before which he lingered longer than anywhere else, he saw nothing that excelled his own. His heart swelled with pride and confidence, as he realized that none of his competitors in the coming struggle would have a better machine beneath him than the "Blue Streak." He could drop any worry on that score. If he failed to come in first, he himself must shoulder the blame. [198]

And when at last, tired but happy, they turned their backs on the dazzling scene and were on their way back to the hotel, their talk naturally fell on the topic that was uppermost in their minds.

"How are you feeling, Bert?" asked Tom. "Are you fit?"

"I feel like a two-year-old," was the answer. "I'm hard as nails and right at the top of my form. I'll have no excuses to offer."

"You won't need any," said Dick confidently. "Leave those to the losers."

"One never can tell," mused Bert. "There are some crack riders in that bunch. But I'm going to do my level best, not only for my own sake, but so that the foreigners can't crow over us. I'd hate to see America lose."

"She can't," asserted Tom. "Not on the Fourth of July!"

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## CHAPTER XVIII

### A WINNING FIGHT

The big motordome was gayly decorated with flags and bunting, in honor of the Fourth, and there was just enough breeze stirring to give them motion. A big military band played patriotic and popular airs, and, as the spectators filed into their seats in a never-ending procession, they felt already the first stirrings of an excitement that was to make of this a night to be remembered throughout a lifetime.

An hour before the time scheduled for the race to begin every seat in grandstand and bleachers was taken, and people were fighting for a place in the grassy infield. Very soon, even that was packed with as many spectators as the managers felt could be disposed of with safety. They were kept within bounds by a stout rope fence stretched between posts. At last every available foot of space was occupied, and the gates were closed. Thousands were turned away even then, although there were over sixty thousand souls within the stadium.

The motordome had been constructed to hold an immense crowd, but its designers had never anticipated anything like this. So great was the interest in the event, that most of those who could not gain admittance camped down near the gates to get bulletins of the progress of the race, as soon as possible. [200]

It was an ideal night for such an event. The air was soft and charged with a thousand balmy odors. The band crashed out its stirring music, and made the blood of the most sluggish leap and glow. Suddenly the arc lights suspended at short intervals over the track blazed out, making the whole place as light as day.

Then, as every detail of the track was plainly revealed, thousands drew a deep breath and shuddered. The track was banked at an angle of approximately thirty-eight degrees, with three laps to the mile. It seemed impossible to many that anything on wheels could cling to the



precipitous slope, that appeared to offer insecure footing even for a fly.

Near the bottom, a white band was painted around the entire circumference, marking the actual one-third of a mile. At the bottom of the track there was a level stretch, perhaps four feet wide, and beyond that the smooth turf, bordered at a little distance by a dense mass of spectators confined within the rope fence. Above the track tier after tier of seats arose.

Opposite the finish line, the starter's and judge's pavilion was built. Here all the riders and machines that were to take part were assembled, and it presented a scene of the utmost bustle and activity. Tom and Dick were there, anxiously waiting for Bert to emerge from his dressing room, and meanwhile inspecting every nut and bolt on the "Blue Streak." Despite the recent changes made in it, the faithful motorcycle was still the same staunch, dependable machine it had always been, but with even greater speed capabilities than it had possessed before. [201]

Of course, there were many who claimed that Bert could never have a chance of winning without a specially built racer, and he had been urged a score of times to use such a mount. But he had refused without the slightest hesitation.

"Why," he always said, "I know what the old 'Blue Streak' will do, just as well as I know what I am capable of. I know every whim and humor of it, and just how to get the last ounce of power out of it. I've tested it a thousand times. I know it will stand up to any work I put it to, and I'd no more think of changing machines now than I would of trying a new system of training two days before I was to enter a running race. No, thanks, I guess I'll stick to the old 'Blue Streak.'" [202]

Dick and Tom were still busy with oil can and wrench when Bert emerged from his dressing-room. He was dressed in a blue jersey, with an American flag embroidered on breast and back. His head was encased in a thick leather helmet, and a pair of heavy-glassed goggles were pushed up on his forehead. [202]

He strode quickly over to where his chums were working on his mount, and they shook hands heartily. "Well!" he exclaimed gaily, "how is the old 'bus' to-night? Everything O.K., I hope?"

"It sure is," replied Dick. "Tom and I have gone over every inch of it, and it seems in apple-pie order. We filled your oil tank up with oil that we tested ourselves, and we know that it's all right. We're not taking any chances."

"That's fine," exclaimed Bert, "there's nothing more important than good oil. We don't want any frozen bearings to-night, of all nights."

"Not much!" agreed Tom, "but it must be pretty nearly time for the start. It's after eight now."

Even as he spoke, a gong tapped, and a deep silence descended on the stadium. Excitement, tense and breathless, gripped every heart.

A burly figure carrying a megaphone mounted a small platform erected in the center of the field, and in stentorian tones announced the conditions of the race.

Seven riders, representing America, France, England, Italy, and Belgium, were to compete for a distance of one hundred miles. The race was to begin from a flying start, which was to be announced by the report of a pistol. The time of each race was to be shown by an illuminated clock near the judge's stand. [203]

The man with the megaphone had hardly ceased speaking when the roar of several motorcycle exhausts broke forth from the starting platform and the band crashed into a stirring march.

Then a motorcycle appeared, towing a racer. Slowly it gathered headway, and at last the rider of the racing machine threw in the spark. The motor coughed once or twice, and then took hold. With a mighty roar his machine shot ahead, gathering speed with every revolution, and passing the towing motorcycle as though it were standing still.

In quick succession now, machine after machine appeared. It was Bert's turn to start, and, pulling his goggles down over his eyes, he leaped astride the waiting "Blue Streak."

"Go it, old man!" shouted Dick and Tom, each giving him a resounding buffet on the shoulder, "show 'em what you're made of."

"Leave it to me," yelled Bert, for already the towing motorcycle was towing him and the "Blue Streak" out onto the track. They went at a snail's pace at first, but quickly gathered momentum.

As he came into view of the gathered multitude, a shout went up that made the concrete structure tremble. This was repeated twice and then the spectators settled back, waiting for the start.

When he felt he was going fast enough, Bert, by a twist of the right grip, lowered the exhaust valves, and the next second he felt the old "Blue Streak" surge forward as though discharged from a cannon. It required a speed of fifty miles an hour even to mount the embankment, but before he had gone two hundred yards he had attained it. He turned the front wheel to the slope, and his machine mounted it like a bird. [204]

Never had he sensed such gigantic power under him, and he felt exalted to the skies. He forgot everything in the mad delirium of speed; tremendous, maddening speed. Every time he opened the throttle a trifle more he could feel it increase. Eagerly, resistlessly, his mount tore and raged forward, whistling through the air with the speed of an arrow. In a few seconds he was abreast of the riders who had started first, and who were jockeying for a good position. There was little time for manoeuvring, however, for now the riders were fairly well bunched, and the starter's pistol cracked. The race had started!

And now Bert found himself competing with the crack racers of the world. Each was mounted on the best machine the genius of his countrymen could produce, and each was grimly resolved to win. The "Blue Streak" and its rider were indeed in fast company, and were destined to be put to a test such as seldom occurs in even such strenuous racing as this.

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Bert was riding high on the track at the start, and he resolved to make use of this position to gain the lead. He opened the throttle wide, and the "Blue Streak" responded nobly. So great was the force of the forward spurt that his hands were almost wrenched from the handlebars. He held on, however, and at the end of the second lap was even with the leader, a Frenchman.

Bert turned his front wheel down the slope, and swooped toward the bottom of the track with a sickening lurch. A vast sigh of horror went up from the closely packed stands. But at the last second, when within a foot of the bottom of the incline, Bert started up again, and with a speed increased by the downward rush shot up to the white band.

He hugged this closely, and reeled off mile after mile at a speed of close to a hundred miles an hour. Leaning down until his body touched the top frame bar, he coaxed ever a little more speed from the fire-spitting mechanism beneath him.

But the Frenchman hung on doggedly, not ten feet behind, and a few feet further back the English entrant tore along. In this order they passed the fifty-mile mark, and the spectators were standing now, yelling and shouting. The rest of the field had been unable to hold the terrific pace, and had dropped behind. The Belgian entrant had been forced to drop out altogether, on account of engine trouble.

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The leaders swept on and gradually drew up on the three lagging riders. A quarter of a lap—half a lap—three-quarters of a lap—and amid a deafening roar of shouting from the spectators Bert swept past them. He had gained a lap on them!

The English and French entries were still close up, however, both hanging on within three yards of Bert's rear wheel. They reeled off mile after mile, hardly changing their positions by a foot. Suddenly there was a loud report that sounded even above the roar of the exhausts, and a second later Bert fell to the rear. His front tire had punctured, and it was only by the exercise of all his skill and strength that he had averted a horrible accident.

"It's all over. It's all over," groaned Tom. "He's out of the race now. He hasn't got a chance."

Dick said nothing, but his face was the color of chalk. He dashed for the supply tent, and emerged carrying a front wheel with an inflated tire already on it, just as Bert pulled up in front of them and leaped from his mount. His eyes were sunken, with dark rings under them, but his mouth was set and stern as death.

"On with it, Dick, on with it," he said, in a low, suppressed voice. "Let's have that wrench, Tom. Hold up the front fork, will you?"

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He worked frantically, and in less than forty seconds had substituted the new wheel carrying the inflated tire in place of the old.

Flinging down the wrench, he sprang into the saddle, and with willing strength Dick and Tom rushed him and his machine out onto the track, pushing with all the might of their sinewy young bodies. At the first possible moment Bert shot on the power, and the engine, still hot, started instantly. In a second he was off in wild pursuit of the flying leaders.

As he mounted the track, he was seen to lean down and fumble with the air shutter on the carburetor. Apparently this had little effect, but to Bert it made all the difference in the world. The motor had had tremendous strength before, but now it seemed almost doubled. The whole machine quivered and shook under the mighty impact of the pistons, and the hum of the flywheels rose to a high whine. Violet flames shot from the exhaust in an endless stream.

The track streamed back from the whirling wheels like a rushing river. It seemed to be leaping eagerly to meet him. The lights and shadows flickered away from him, and the grotesque shadow cast by his machine weaved rapidly back and forth as he passed under the sizzling arc lights.

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The spectators were a yelling mob of temporary maniacs by this time. The Frenchman and Englishman had passed the eighty-mile mark, and Bert was still a lap and a half behind. He was riding like a fiend, coaxing, nursing his machine, manipulating the controls so as to wring the last ounce of energy from the tortured mass of metal he bestrode.

Slowly, but with deadly persistence, he closed the gap between him and the leaders. Amidst a veritable pandemonium from the crazed spectators he passed them, but still had one lap to make up in fifteen miles. Shortly after passing them, he was close on the three remaining competitors, who were hanging on in the desperate hope of winning should some accident befall the leaders.

Suddenly, without any warning, something—nobody ever learned what—went wrong. They became a confused, tangled mass of blazing machine and crumpled humanity. Bert was not twenty feet behind them, and men turned white and sick and women fainted. It seemed inevitable that he would plow into them traveling at that terrific pace, and add one more life to the toll of the disaster.

Bert's mind acted like a flash. He was far down on the track, and could not possibly gain a position above the wreckage, and so skirt it in that way. Nor did he have time to pass beneath it, for men and machines were sliding diagonally down the steep embankment.

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With a muttered prayer, he accepted the last chance fate had seen fit to leave him. He shot off the track completely, and whirled his machine onto the turf skirting it.

The grass was smooth, but, at Bert's tremendous speed, small obstacles seemed like mountains. The "Blue Streak" quivered and bounded, at times leaping clear off the ground, as it struck some uneven place. For what seemed an age, but was in reality only a few seconds, Bert kept on this, and then steered for the track again. If his machine mounted the little ridge formed by the beginning of the track proper, all might yet be well, if not—well, he refused to even think of that.

The front wheel hit the obstruction, and, a fraction of a second later, the rear wheel struck. The machine leaped clear into the air, sideways. Bert stiffened the muscles of his wrists until they were as hard as steel, to withstand the shock of landing. The handlebars were almost wrenched from his control, but not quite, and once more he was tearing around with scarcely diminished speed.

By great good fortune, the riders involved in the accident had not been hurt seriously, although their machines were total wrecks, and they hobbled painfully toward the hospital tent, assisted by spectators who had rushed to their aid. [210]

Bert was now less than half a lap behind the flying leaders, but he had only four miles in which to make it up. At intervals now he leaned down and pumped extra oil into the engine. This added a trifle of extra power, and as he rushed madly along the "Blue Streak" lived up to its name nobly. At the beginning of the last mile he was only about three lengths behind. The vast crowd was on its feet now, shouting, yelling, tossing hats, gesticulating. They were worked up to a pitch of frenzy absolutely indescribable.

As Bert crept grimly up, nearer and nearer, the place became a veritable Bedlam. Now the racers had entered the last lap; only a third of a mile to go, and Bert was still a length behind. The exhaust of the racing motorcycles united in one hoarse, bellowing roar, that seemed to shake the very earth.

Then—Bert reached down, and with the finish line but a short hundred yards ahead, opened wide the air shutter on the carburetor. His machine seemed to almost leave the track, and then, tearing forward, passed the Frenchman, who was leading. As he crossed the finish line, Bert was ahead by the length of a wheel!

The uproar that burst forth then defied all description. As Bert, after making a circuit of the track, finally brought the "Blue Streak" to a standstill, a seething mob rushed toward him, waving hats and flags, and shouting frantically and joyfully. [211]

Bert had no mind to get in their well-meaning clutches, however, so he and his two friends made a rush for his dressing room, and reached it safely. The crowd, being unable to locate its hero, and too excited to make a methodical search for him, worked off its exuberance by much shouting and shaking of hands between perfect strangers, and gradually dispersed.

Meanwhile Tom and Dick, with strong emotion that they made no effort to conceal, wrung his hand again and again.

"You rode the greatest motorcycle race this old world ever saw, old friend," said Dick at last, "but Tom and I are never going to let you go in another. The world would be too empty for us without you."

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In the sheaf of telegrams of congratulations handed to Bert next morning was one from Reddy. It was characteristic:

"Shamrock. Glory be. I knew you'd put it over. Keep in good shape for football."

"He talks as if I were already on the team," commented Bert; "I may not make it, after all."

"Swell chance of your missing it," scoffed Tom.

"Everybody knows you're slated for full-back."

To another message, Drake's name was signed:

"Hurrah for the blue. Be back for football in the Fall."

"A decided football flavor in your telegrams to-day," grinned Dick.

"Well," said Bert, "win or lose, I'll be there with both feet."

"You'd better have both of them with you, for a fact," drawled Tom. "You couldn't do much without them."

And when a few months later, the football season opened, Bert's promise was fulfilled. How swift those feet of his proved to be in getting down the field, how mighty in kicking a goal, how powerful in every stirring feature of the glorious game, will be told in

"BERT WILSON ON THE GRIDIRON."

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## Transcriber's Note:

Punctuation and spelling inaccuracies were corrected without comment.

Variations of Blue Streak were made consistent ('Blue Streak' within quoted speech and "Blue Streak" in all other cases).

Archaic and variable spelling has been preserved.

Variations in hyphenation and compound words have been preserved.

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\*\*\* END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK BERT WILSON'S TWIN CYLINDER RACER \*\*\*

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