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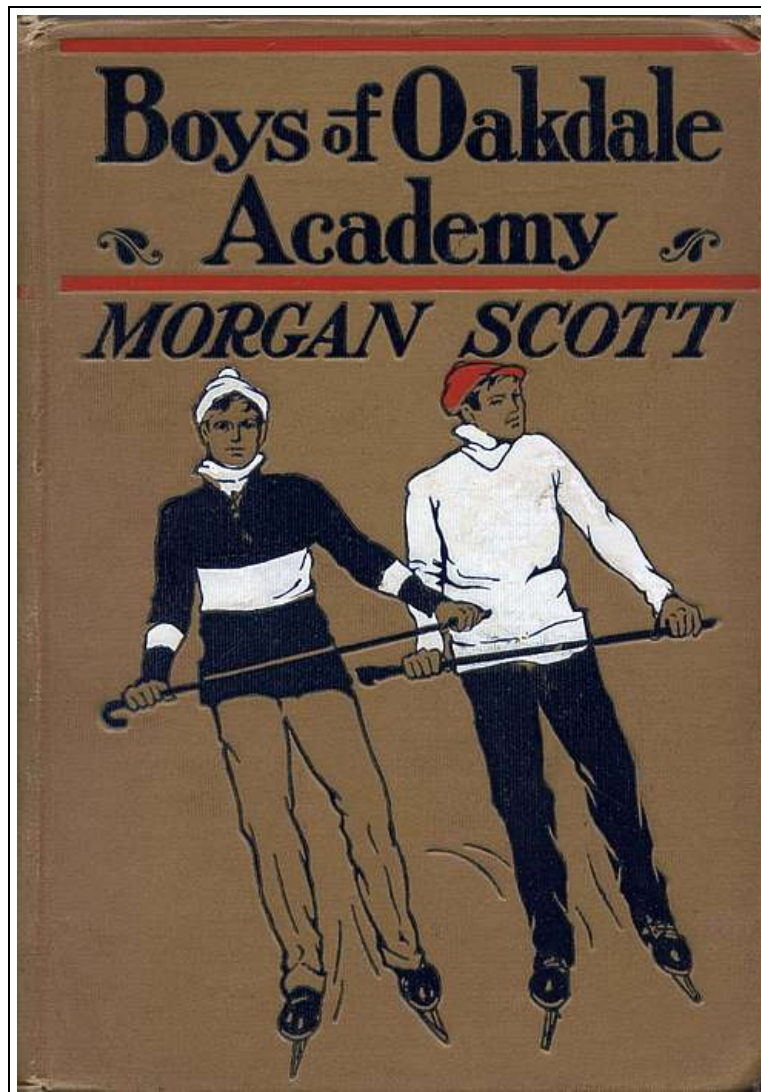
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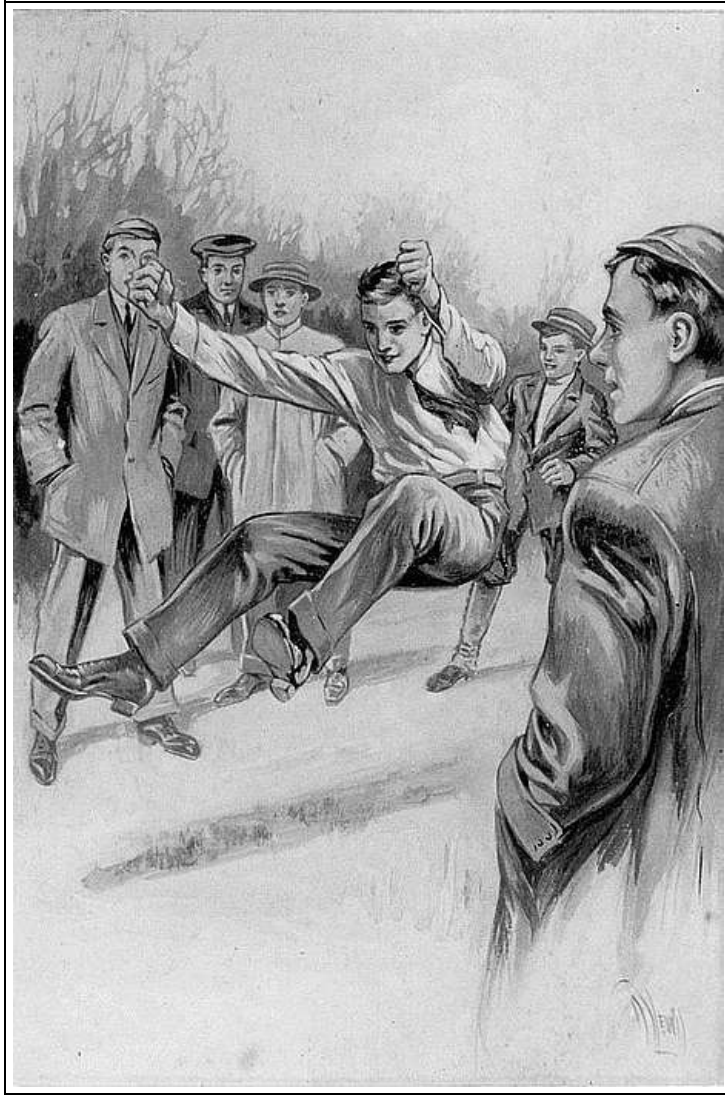
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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK BOYS OF OAKDALE ACADEMY ***



Book Cover



HE LANDED HIMSELF THROUGH THE AIR WITH A LONG GRACEFUL LEAP. —Page 31.

BOYS *of* OAKDALE
ACADEMY

BY
MORGAN SCOTT
AUTHOR OF "BEN STONE AT OAKDALE," ETC.

With Four Original Illustrations
By MARTIN LEWIS

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BOYS OF OAKDALE ACADEMY.

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CHAPTER I.

A BOY OF MYSTERY.

"He's a fake," declared Chipper Cooper positively, backing up against the steam radiator to warm himself on the other side. "I'll bet a hundred dollars he never was west of Scranton, Pennsylvania."

"A hundred dollars," drawled Sile Crane, grinning. "Why don't yeou bate something while you're abaout it? Nobody'd bother to take a measly little wager like that. Now I've kinder got an idee that the new feller really comes from Texas, jest as he says he does. I guess he ain't no fake."

"Oh, is that so!" retorted Cooper, a bit warmly. "Well, I'll talk business to you, Mr. Crane; I'll really bet you fifty cents Rodney Grant never saw the State of Texas in his life. Now put up or shut up."

"I don't want to bate on it," said Sile; "but I guess I've got a right to my opinion, and I cal'late Rod Grant ain't no fake Westerner."

6

"I knew you didn't have the sand to back your opinion," chuckled Chipper. "It's my idea that Grant is a fake and you're no better."

"Awful bad pun, Chipper," said Chub Tuttle, a roly-poly, round-faced chap who was munching peanuts. "I think you're right, though; I don't believe he's a Texan. Why, he hasn't a bit of brogue."

"Bub-brogue!" stuttered Phil Springer, who had a slight impediment in his speech. "Texans don't have a brogue; they have a dialect—they talk in the vernacular, you know."

"Talk in the ver—what?" cried Cooper. "Where did you get that word, Phil? I don't know what it means, but I do know Rod Grant talks through his hat sometimes. When he tells about living on a ranch and herding cattle and breaking bronchos and chasing rustlers and catching horse thieves, he gives me a cramp. He certainly can reel off some whoppers."

At this point up spoke Billy Piper, commonly known as "Sleuth" on account of his ambitions to emulate the great detectives of fiction.

7

"Of late," said Billy, "I've been shadowing this mysterious personage who came into our midst unannounced and unacclaimed and who has been the cause of extensive speculation and comment. My deduction is that the before-mentioned mysterious personage is a big case of bluff, and I must add that, like my astute comrade, Cooper, I gravely doubt if he has ever seen the wild and woolly West. His tales of cowboy life are extremely preposterous. All cowboys are bow-legged from excessive riding in the saddle; the legs of Rod Grant—I should say the before-mentioned mysterious personage—are as straight as my own. Westerners wear their hair long; Grant—the before-mentioned mysterious personage—has his hair cut like any civilized human being. Likewise and also, he does not talk as a true Westerner should. Why, nobody has ever heard him say 'galoot' or 'varmint' or any of those characteristic words all Westerners scatter promiscuously through their conversation. Therefore—mark me, comrades—I brand him as a double-dyed impostor."

8

"Speaking about Grant, I presume?" said Fred Sage, joining the group by the radiator. "I think you're right, Sleuth. Why, I told him only last night that no one around here believed him the real thing, because he didn't look like it, act like it or talk like it. What do you suppose he said? He claimed he had to keep on guard all the time to prevent himself from using cowboy lingo—said he was sort of ashamed of it and trying to get out of the habit."

Berlin Barker, a tall, cold-eyed chap who had been listening without comment to this conversation, now ventured to put in a word.

"Fellows like this Grant are more or less amusing," he observed. "I'm also inclined to think him a fraud, and I have good reasons. Didn't Captain Eliot try to get him out for football practice the very day he showed up here at Oakdale Academy? He looks stout and husky, and Roger thought he might work in as a substitute; but, after watching practice one night, he wouldn't even step onto the field. It's my opinion the game seemed too rough and rude for this wild and woolly cow-puncher. If anybody should ask me, I'd say that he has all the symptoms of a chap with a yellow streak in him. I don't believe he has an ounce of sand in his makeup."

9

"Somebody ought to be able to find out if he really does come from the West," said Tuttle. "Why don't we ask his aunt?"

"Go to the ant, thou sluggard," chuckled Cooper. "Nobody else wants to ask her. People around here know enough to keep away from Priscilla Kent."

"Oh, she's cracked," stated Piper. "She's lived here in Oakdale for the last twenty years, and nobody has ever been able to find out much of anything about her. Take a woman who lives alone with only

a pet parrot and a monkey for companions, and never associates with the neighbors, and talks like an asylum for the simple-minded, and you have a proposition too baffling for solution even by my trained and highly developed mind. My deduction is——”

“Here comes Roger!” exclaimed Fred Sage. “Let’s ask him what he thinks about the fellow.”

10

It was the hour of the noon intermission at Oakdale Academy, and, the season being early November, with the atmosphere biting cold, Roger Eliot stepped forward to warm his hands at the radiator, near which hovered the group who were discussing the new boy. Roger was a tall, well-built, somewhat grave-looking chap, whose sober face, however, was occasionally illumined by a rare smile. The son of Urian Eliot, one of the wealthiest and most influential men of the town, Roger, being a natural athlete, was the recognized leader among the academy boys.

“Hello, fellows,” was his pleasant greeting. “Talking football?”

“No,” answered Hayden; “we were discussing that fellow Rodney Grant. We were trying to size him up, and it seems to be practically the universal opinion that he’s a fraud. We doubt if he has ever been west of the Mississippi. What do you think about it?”

“Well,” confessed Roger slowly, “I’ll own up that I don’t know what to, think. Still, I don’t see any reason why he should lie about himself.”

11

“Some fellers had rather lie than eat,” observed Sile Crane.

“Why shouldn’t he lie about himself?” questioned Cooper. “He’s told some wallopers about everything else. I never heard a fellow who could bust the truth into smithereens the way he can.”

“Oh,” said Eliot, “I know what you mean. When he first struck Oakdale he didn’t have much of anything to say, and you fellows kept at him, asking questions, until I fancy he grew weary and took a notion to sling off a few big yarns for his own amusement.”

“Putting aside the question as to whether he came from the West or not,” said Barker, “I’ve decided that he’s a quitter—in short, a coward.”

“What makes you think so?” asked Roger.

“Why shouldn’t I think so? Didn’t you try to get him out for football practice? and didn’t he refuse after watching us work one night? It was too husky business for the gentleman who had punched cows and hunted cattle thieves. Why, even Hunk Rollins doesn’t take any stock in that chap, Eliot, and yesterday Hunk backed him down completely. Rollins had a chip on his shoulder and was looking for trouble. He picked out Grant and loaded him with jibes and insults. The cow-puncher swallowed them all. Any one with a particle of grit would have climbed all over Hunk.”

12

“Perhaps you may be right, boys,” admitted Roger; “but don’t forget that you made a blunder in sizing up Ben Stone when he came here. It is possible you’re just as far wrong about Rodney Grant. He——”

“Sh!” hissed Piper suddenly, as the door swung open and another boy entered the room. “Here he comes now!”

CHAPTER II.

PLAYING THE PART.

For a few moments they stared in dumfounded silence at the latest arrival. Sile Crane was the first to speak; a grin broke over his homely face, and in a suppressed tone he drawled:

"Great codfish! He's sartainly come to school this arfternoon all dressed up fit to kill."

"Oh, ginger!" snickered Chipper Cooper. "Here's the real wild and woolly article now. Just look at it!"

Chub Tuttle snorted, clapping a hand to his mouth to check the spray of half-munched peanuts which flew from his lips. "Scuse me," he entreated, as Barker fell back a step, frowning and producing a handkerchief to brush some of the peanut crumbs from his coat sleeve. "Couldn't help it. Did you ever see such a funny sight in all your life?"

Even Roger Eliot could not repress a smile as he gazed at the new boy in Oakdale who professed to come from the State of Texas; for never before had a person thus attired ventured to cross the threshold of the academy, and in a moment the eyes of nearly every boy and girl in the room were focused upon Rodney Grant. 14

Grant was a well-set-up youngster of sixteen, somewhat large for his age, and yet not large enough to be noticeably overgrown. He had clear, dark brown eyes, which were almost black; a strong, well-formed, prominent nose; a square, firm chin; and a mouth which, while in no way disagreeable, had something about it to give the impression that the boy could say "no" and stick to it. In his dark brown hair there was a glint of red. The short time he had spent as a student at Oakdale Academy had not yet begun to weaken perceptibly the deep tan of his cheek and neck.

Set a bit rakishly on the boy's shapely head was a battered, wide-brimmed old felt hat that looked as if it had seen any amount of wear. The crown was encircled by a buckled leather strap, and in front the brim had been turned up and fastened with a thong. Neither coat nor vest covered the loose woollen shirt, which had been left open a bit at the throat. A dark red handkerchief was knotted about the lad's neck. His legs were encased in shiny, soiled, calfskin chaps, fringed down the outer seams; and these likewise bore the tokens of much wear. Hanging loosely from the point of his left hip was a cartridge-looped belt that supported a pistol holster dangling low against the upper part of his right leg. On his feet were tight, thin-soled, high-heeled boots, to which were attached huge roweled spurs that clanked with every step he took. 15

Calm, serene, without the flicker of a smile on his face or a symptom of self-consciousness in his manner, Rod Grant glanced around and then walked toward the staring lads near the steam radiator. His high-heeled boots gave him a somewhat awkward gait.

"Howdy, gents," he saluted. "This yere weather is sure some nipping to-day. If it continues, it's right certain she'll freeze up tight before long. Out on the Canadian we'd get it this cold on the front edge of a no'ther." 16

Berlin Barker's lips curled scornfully as he openly took the measure of the speaker from head to feet. "On my word," he sneered, "you're a sight. You're all dressed up, aren't you?"

"Sure," was the cheerful answer. "Not knowing but that I might be invited out to afternoon tea or some sort of social function, I spent as much as five minutes adorning my person for the occasion. I own up I'm a heap more familiar with the social etiquette of the range, being generally accustomed to taking my grub from the tail end of the cook's wagon; but, when he sent me East, my old man he says to me, says he, 'Rod, when you're in Rome you must seek some to emulate the Romans.' Therefore, being plenty dutiful, I feel it incumbent to stand up and meet what's coming without shying or bucking."

"Oh, slush!" snickered Cooper. "Who said he didn't talk in the ver—what-do-you-call-it?"

"I presume," said Barker, "that he picked up that line of talk from some cheap Western novel." 17

"You've certain got two more guesses coming, partner," retorted Grant, still unruffled. "Since locating on this here section of the range, I've spent the greater part of my time in the right painful effort to talk pure Bostonese. What has been the result? You gents hereabouts have acquired the impression that I'm an impostor, and therefore all my trouble has gone for naught. I allow you'll admit that this must be a heap discouraging to a person with a naturally retiring and sensitive nature—that's me. I now give you notice that henceforth and hereafter I'm Rodney Grant of the Star D Ranch, Roberts County, Texas Panhandle, and any gent who doesn't approve of my style is at liberty to segregate himself from my society."

Roger Eliot laughed outright, which was unusual for him.

"That's plain enough," he said. "A great many people find it necessary to play the part in order to be accepted as the real thing."

Grant flashed him a look from those deep brown eyes; to his surprise, here was a fellow who seemed to understand. 18

Barker shrugged his shoulders. "My dear chap," he said patronizingly, "I'm afraid you were rather careless in letting us get onto your curves. Tell us, how much did that rig-out cost you? I presume you bought it from some fake cowboy in a dime museum."

"I've already noticed," returned Rodney, "that you're a presuming sort of a gent. Being of a forgiving nature, I'll overlook it and charge it up to your ignorance."

Barker flushed with anger. "Cut it out, you freak!" he exclaimed. "Why, you're a sight! Folks around here weren't born yesterday, and you can't fool anybody with your bluff. Next thing we know you'll be calling us tenderfeet; but we're not so tender we can't tell the difference between a fake and the genuine article."

"I pray thee, be not so harsh, Berlin," chuckled Cooper. "Why, we can all see by looking at his clothes that Mr. Grant is a real, genuine, *bona fide* cow-puncher from the Texas Panhandle, just as he claims to be. At least, he not only looks it, but he's slinging the lingo."

Sleuth Piper shook his head doubtfully. "He hasn't yet said 'whoop' or 'galoot' or 'varmint'," he muttered.

"Thanks, my friend," bowed Grant, beaming on Cooper. "It's sure a relief to know that at last I'm making an impression on one person, at least."

"Have a peanut," invited Chub Tuttle. "Can you shoot a pistol?"

"I'm a rip-roarer with a gun."

"Know how to throw a lasso?"

"Sure. I can rope and tie a wild steer in thirty-six seconds. The world's record is something like forty-one and a half. But that's because I've never competed in a public steer-roping contest."

"Bah!" sneered Barker. "Did you ever see a longhorn steer in your life?"

"At least," returned Grant, gazing fixedly at him, "I've seen a long-eared donkey."

"Score one for the gent from the Panhandle," snickered Cooper.

"You insolent puppy!" breathed Barker, in a low, savage voice. "You want to be careful of your language, or you'll have a fight on your hands. Somebody will—"

"I never fight with my fists."

"No, I don't suppose you ever fight with anything but your mouth. You showed the white feather when Hunk Rollins got after you. It's my opinion you're a big case of blow."

"Your opinions are of so little value that they don't disturb me any at all."

"Quit it, fellows!" interposed Eliot, stepping forward to keep them apart in case Barker should go at Grant. "You know what it means to have a scrap here, Berlin."

"Oh, don't worry, I won't touch him—here; but, if he isn't more civil, I'll catch him somewhere and teach him a lesson."

With which threat Berlin turned disdainfully and walked away, watched as he departed by the eyes of Grant, in which there shone a strange gleam of mingled anger and amusement.

"Yeou better not git that feller stirred up, Mr. Cow-puncher," advised Sile Crane. "He's a bad critter when he's mad. He never forgits a grudge."

"I ask you fair and square, gents," said Grant, "did I begin it? Didn't he start the rumpus by spurring me a plenty with slurs and insults? Never mind, I won't fight him anyhow, because, as I before stated, I don't fight."

"How about fighting cattle thieves and Injuns?" questioned Cooper.

"That's a heap different. Having a right violent temper of my own, I reckon it's best for me to keep it hobbled constant and regular. Gents, when I'm riled I'm bad—I sure am. I opine I've caused my old man no end of disturbance and worry. This yere is the first school I've never been expelled from—and there's enough time for that. Last school I attended, the master allowed it was his duty to give me a ferruling. It certain was the mistake of his life, for he got me going some, and I clean lost my head. As a result, I threw him, traddled him, and lifted his scalp."

"You wha-what?" gasped Phil Springer. "You don't mean that you actually sus-scalped a schoolmaster, do you?"

"Sure. I removed a portion of the gent's topknot with my trusty scalping knife. I opine it was a severe shock to his system, but he recovered in time, though he remained baldheaded in a spot as big as the palm of your hand."

"You must be dangerous," laughed Cooper. "I suppose you learned the scalping business that time you was captured by Injuns. You know you said you were captured once."

"Such was the fate which befell me."

"Tell us abaout it," urged Crane. "Haow did yeou escape?"

"By breaking the bonds with which the savages tied me. I am the possessor of sure enough amazing strength, which enabled me to accomplish the seeming impossible. There were three of the onery redskins. They caught me when I was sound asleep, and they were taking me to their tribe for the self-evident purpose of amusing themselves by burning me at the stake, or something like that. It was a journey of two days or more. The first night we camped in a dark and lonely valley. My

captors regaled themselves on roast beef cut from one of my father's steers which they had stolen, but not a morsel did they offer me, although I was mighty near starved to death. When they had eaten their fill they rolled themselves in their blankets and slept. There I was, tied hand and foot, and apparently helpless. I watched the campfire die down and the stars twinkle forth in the lonely sky. I knew it was up to me, and so when the aborigines were securely wrapped in the arms of Morpheus I proceeded to put forth my energies to burst my bonds, and finally succeeded."

"I s'pose yeou sneaked off and took to your heels then, didn't ye?" questioned Crane.

"No, indeed, not any. I knew they would awaken and follow me. I knew there was only one salvation for me: I must destroy all three of those red fiends."

"Did yeou kill 'em?"

"I confess that I did, but never in the history of the world have redskins died in such a manner. They laughed themselves to death."

"How was that?" asked Tuttle, so interested that he had forgotten to eat peanuts.

"As they slept I crept upon them, one by one, seized them, gagged them, bound them all. This I did to each one in turn, without arousing the others. Having them securely bound, I meditated on my future course. It sure seemed some inhuman to hike off and leave them trussed up to starve or to be eaten by coyotes. I shuddered a plenty at the thought of tomahawking or shooting them. It was a right long time before I finally hit upon a mode of execution. Finally I removed their moccasins—stripped their feet bare. Then from the topknot of the chief I plucked some feathers. With those very feathers I proceeded to tickle first one and then another of the redskins upon the soles of his feet. In about two jiffys I had all three laughing and squirming, and the more I tickled them the more they laughed. I kept it up, gents, until those redskins laughed themselves to death."

"Ge-gee!" exploded Phil Springer. "What a whopper!"

"Pretty fair," nodded Roger Eliot—"pretty fair."

Prof. Richardson entered. He paused a moment to peer over his spectacles, and his eyes fell on Rodney Grant. Slowly an expression of wonderment crept over the old man's face.

"What's this, young man—what's this?" he inquired, coming forward and removing his knit woollen gloves. "What are you doing here in such a rig?"

"I reckon you'll pardon me, Professor, but people around this neck of the woods seem to think I'm a fake Texan because I don't look it, and therefore I took a notion to wear my cowboy regalia this afternoon."

The professor shook his head disapprovingly. "Go home," he said—"go home at once and change those clothes for civilized garments. I certainly shall not approve of your wearing such a rig while you attend this school."

"Fate is against me," murmured Rodney Grant, as he turned toward the door.

CHAPTER III.

ROD'S WONDERFUL JUMP.

Prof. Richardson was giving his attention to the class in physiology when Rod Grant returned to the academy. The boy from Texas walked quietly down the center aisle and took his place in the class. In truth, as he now appeared, there was nothing about him, save possibly the deep tan of his cheeks, to give him an appearance different from that of any clean, healthy, manly-appearing Eastern youngster. He wore a well-fitting suit of dark blue serge, a negligée shirt, and a carelessly knotted crimson four-in-hand tie. On his feet were stout, serviceable, yet distinctly well made and stylish tan shoes.

Berlin Barker, who had been reciting, sat down. The principal surveyed Rod over his gold-rimmed spectacles, which perched precariously on the end of his nose, nodding his head slightly as if inwardly approving of the change in the new boy's appearance.

"Grant."

"Yes, sir?"

"You may recite."

Rodney stood up.

"How many bones are there in the entire skeleton of an adult?"

"Two hundred, sir."

"You may state the number and give the names of the various bones of the human arm and hand."

Grant did so without hesitation, speaking in a clear, well-modulated voice, his language having no touch of the vernacular which Phil Springer had asserted to be characteristic of a Westerner. His accent and inflection, it is true, differed slightly from that of Easterners in general, but this difference was not sufficient to attract the notice of a person who was not particularly observing.

"Very good, Grant," nodded the principal. "You may be seated. I have the pleasure of informing this class that I have been enabled, at considerable expense and after no end of trouble, to purchase a complete and perfect human skeleton, which arrived yesterday and is now stored in the laboratory. I obtained this skeleton for demonstrating purposes; but, not wishing to disturb those scholars who are naturally nervous or timid, I shall not display it before the school during the period of any regular session. To-morrow, however, such members of this class as may desire to remain after the last period will be given the privilege of seeing and examining the skeleton. I wish it understood, however, that no one is positively required to remain for that purpose, and I would suggest that the timid ones do not remain. Class dismissed."

"Jiminy!" whispered Cooper in Sleuth Piper's ear. "Where d'you s'pose he got his old skeleton?"

"My deduction is," answered Sleuth, "that he obtained it from a cemetery."

"What a grave thing to do," grinned Chipper. "On the dead, it gives me a shiver."

At intermission some of the boys gathered near the academy steps and talked about the skeleton.

"My eagle eye detected the long, gruesome-looking box in the express office yesterday," said Piper; "but on lifting one end of it, which I did, my deduction was that the box, being very light, could not possibly contain a subject for a funeral. Ever since then the mystery has preyed upon me, but at last the prof's statement has cleared it up to the satisfaction of all concerned."

"Be yeou goin' to see the old thing to-morrer?" questioned Crane.

"I shall take pleasure in doing so."

"Pleasure! Great scissors! I don't see no fun in lookin' at a skeleton. The prof is a crank about such things; everybody says so."

"I sure can't see the necessity of exhibiting a genuine skeleton before the class," said Rod Grant. "If we were medical students, it would be different; but, as far as I'm concerned, I can acquire all the knowledge I desire about the bones of the human body without examining such human framework at short range."

"It can't be possible," said Chub Tuttle, "that a fellow who has scalped schoolmasters and tickled Injuns to death is afraid of a harmless skeleton."

"I don't admit any that I'm afraid of the thing," returned Grant; "but I simply say, what's the use?"

Standing near, Berlin Barker shrugged his shoulders and laughed an unspoken sneer, which caused the warm blood to glow through the tan of Rod's cheeks. Turning on his heel, Barker joined some fellows who were jumping at the corner of the academy. Grant's gaze followed him. In a moment or two, urged to do so, Barker, who prided himself on his ability as a jumper, stripped off his coat and entered into competition with Jack Nelson.

Rod drew near and looked on.

"That's pretty fair," he observed, when Berlin, doing his level best, had beaten Nelson by a good six inches.

Barker turned on him. "Pretty fair, you lead-heeled gas bag! Perhaps you think you can beat it?"

"Maybe so," nodded Rod.

"I'll bet ten dollars you can't come within a foot of my mark."

"Keep your money in your clothes, partner; you may need it some."

"You've been blowing around lately about what you can do, but nobody has ever seen you do anything. I'm not from Missouri, but you've got to show me, and there are various other fellows who feel the same way."

"I'm out of practice," said Grant, slowly removing his coat and dropping it to the ground; "but, as long as you've put it up to me that fashion, I opine I'll have to show you a stunt."

Eagerly the boys gathered around to watch the fellow from Texas, who stepped forward with a calm, confident air and toed the mark. Backward and forward at his sides Grant swung his clenched fists, stooping a little, while the muscles in his body grew tense. Suddenly he launched himself through the air with a long, graceful leap, flinging his feet forward beneath him at the proper moment and planting his heels firmly and fairly in the turf, coming upright without a falter or a struggle.

The spectators shouted.

"Jerusalem!" cried Sile Crane. "He's beat Berlin, ding my boots if he hain't!"

Measurement with a tape showed that the lad from Texas had outjumped Barker by fully four inches.

"Great work, Grant," said Roger Eliot approvingly; but Berlin, choking with chagrin and wrath, turned away without a word.

"Oh, that was right easy," beamed Rod, accepting his coat from Crane, who had hastened to get it. "Sometime when I'm feeling plenty like it I'll show you a real jump."

"What's the longest jump you ever made?" asked Piper.

"I hold the world's record," replied Rod unblushingly.

"Oh, say! what are you giving us?" cried Jack Nelson.

"Cold facts, my friend. In dire peril of my life, I once made a jump only equaled by the original owner of the seven league boots."

"Tell us about it," urged Crane, scenting a story. "How fur did yeou jump?"

"Twenty miles."

"Wha-what?" gulped Phil Springer. "Oh, say! Now that sus-spoils the whole story."

"Yes," sighed Crane, "that spiles it. If yeou had only stretched her a little bit—just within the bounds of reason!"

"I was well aware, gents," said Grant, smoothing a wrinkle in his coat sleeve, "that you would think me prevaricating. I presume it's right natural that you should. Nevertheless, I'll tell the tale. I learned the art of jumping from grasshoppers; you know they are great jumpers. Occasionally these pests come down in millions upon the Panhandle country. They have been known to eat every blade of grass clean to the roots on a section as big as the State of Rhode Island. They have even invaded houses and chewed up muslin window curtains, carpets, rugs, and similar articles. Two years ago we had the greatest grasshopper season ever known in Roberts County. The pests came down on us suddenly in swarms which darkened the sky and blotted out the light of the sun. I was out riding the range at the time the advance guard of the varmints appeared."

"Oh, jinks!" hissed Piper. "He said *varmint*!"

"Some of our boys over on Bitter Crick had sent me with a message to the ranch, and I started out at an early hour. The ranch house is located on the south bank of the Canadian River. We were some thirty miles or more to the north of the river. Shortly after sunrise I perceived what I took to be a cloud in the sky. It drew nearer with great rapidity, and I was looking for a dry gully or some shelter to protect me from what I took to be a sure enough tornado when the first sprinkling of grasshoppers settled around me. It didn't take me long after that to make out what that cloud was—nothing but grasshoppers. They kept on coming thicker and thicker, until the air was literally full of them and the ground was covered to a depth of several inches. The sunshine was blotted so that it was almost as dark as twilight on a late autumn day. The blamed things got in my nose, my ears, my eyes, and they crawled down my neck and filled my hair. It sure was some unpleasant. All I could do was ride along, letting my horse pick his way; for, not having a compass nor being able to see the sky or the surrounding country, I had no idea where the river lay."

"Yeou sartain was in a scrape, wasn't ye?" grinned Crane.

"Wait, my friend—wait. I have not begun to tell you the full extent of my horrible dilemma. Once or twice I fancied I smelled something like smoke, but I paid no heed to this until a sort of dull reddish glow penetrated that mass of flying insects. Finally, looking back, I perceived behind me, spreading out on both sides, a gleam like fire. It was fire. The dry prairie grass was burning, and the wind was sweeping the flames down on me with the speed of an express train. In a measure that accounted for the tremendous number of grasshoppers now swarming about me and beating against me in

their flight. They were being driven ahead of the flames, and as the fire advanced their numbers became greater and greater, until I could scarcely breathe without my nostrils being plugged by grasshoppers."

"Horrible!" snickered Cooper.

"It was horrible," said Grant solemnly. "When I realized my peril from that onrushing conflagration I put spurs to my horse in a hopeless effort to keep ahead of it. It was like galloping through the darkness of night. The beating and rustling of grasshoppers' wings, which had sounded faint at first, had gradually risen until it was like the roaring of a gale. The pressure of insects against my back helped in a measure to carry me onward. Finally, however, my horse plunged into a gopher hole and broke its leg. Poor beast!

"But think of me, gents—think of me some! There I was dismounted in the path of that fearful prairie fire. Desperately I succeeded in rising, and madly I stumbled on knee deep amid squirming grasshoppers. The gloom was penetrated in a way by the light of the flames, and I could feel the scorching heat upon the back of my neck. Suddenly right ahead of me I beheld a deep fissure in the plain. The bottom of the fissure was packed with layers of grasshoppers many feet in depth. For a moment I hesitated, and then, as the fire rushed upon me, I launched myself in a desperate spring for the opposite side of the fissure.

"At that very moment, apparently aroused, despite their weariness, by the close approach and searing heat of the flames, the grasshoppers in that gully rose in a solid mass. They actually lifted me and bore me upward for a few moments. True, I was nearer smothered than ever before in all my life. Like a drowning person, I sought to rise higher by paddling with my hands and treading with my feet.

"I rose, gents—I sure did. I kept on rising, too, until I opined I was, pretty near the top of that tremendous mass of grasshoppers, which was sweeping along the surface of the earth ahead of the fire. I soon discovered that by paddling gently with feet and hands I could keep myself up, and to my unbounded relief I perceived that the flying grasshoppers were bearing me along with such speed that the flames could not gain upon me.

"I don't know just how long I was in the air, but I do know that at least twenty good miles of Texas territory was passed over before that mass of flying grasshoppers became so thinned that I finally sank slowly and gently, like a feather, to the ground. Believe it or not, I landed on the south side of the Canadian River, and thus my life was saved; for when the flames reached the river they could go no farther.

"That, gents, is, I reckon, beyond the shadow of dispute, the longest jump on record. If any one has ever beaten it, I'd like to meet up with the party and yield him the palm."

The bell clanged; intermission was over.

"Oh, suffering misery!" groaned Chipper Cooper, staggering toward the academy door. "Somebody support me. I'm weak and exhausted. That's what I call a real w-hopper!"

CHAPTER IV.

THE FELLOW WHO REFUSED.

Coached by Dash Winton, a former Dartmouth College player, the Oakdale Academy football team thus far had not lost a game for the season, and there was now but one more game to be played, which, however, was the one the boys especially desired to win; for, could they defeat Wyndham, the school that during the past three years had held the county championship, they would themselves win the title of champions.

As usual, Wyndham had a strong eleven; so strong, indeed, that in almost every respect it had wholly outclassed its opponents, thus far not having been once scored against; therefore, having won some of her contests by the narrowest possible margin and succeeded only once in blanking the enemy, it was no more than natural that Oakdale should feel more or less apprehension over that deciding battle so soon to be fought. Another reason for apprehension lay in the fact that Oakdale's battered rush line contained several cripples; but it was likely that only the coach and Eliot, the captain, had detected certain alarming indications that the players were "going stale," a calamity which they had privately discussed. In his heart Winton feared he had driven the youngsters too hard, when better judgment should have held them somewhat in restraint for the great battle of the season.

The autumn days had grown so short that there was little time to practice between the closing of the afternoon session at the academy and the coming of nightfall. As soon as possible, on being let out, the boys rushed from the academy to the gymnasium, jumped into harness and hurried onto the field, where they invariably found the coach waiting. Night after night they put in a brief practice game against the scrub, which contained a number of grammar school boys and was strengthened by the regular substitutes and, usually, by Winton himself.

But even this work had ceased to be properly beneficial, especially in developing defensive tactics; for the time had passed when the scrub could force them to exert themselves to the utmost. Indeed, the only substitutes obtainable were few in numbers and sadly deficient in real football qualifications, so that even the least astute knew that disqualifying injuries to two or three regular players, occurring in the game with Wyndham, would be almost certain to weaken the team hopelessly.

The great desire for reliable substitutes had led Roger Eliot to ask, almost to beg, Rodney Grant to come out for practice. For even though Grant might know little about the game, there was a chance for him to acquire some rudimentary knowledge, and, being a strong, lithe, athletic fellow, there was a possibility that he could be used to fill a gap at a time of extreme emergency. Eliot's entreaties, however, had proved unavailing, the Texan flatly declining to practice, without giving his reasons for the refusal.

This new boy, entering Oakdale in the midst of the autumn term, where he appeared unannounced and unacclaimed, had at first seemed to be quiet and retiring to the verge of modesty. Of late, however, beset, almost pestered, by his schoolmates, his manner had undergone a decisive change, and it was not at all remarkable that various lads besides Berlin Barker had come to regard him as a braggart.

In the midst of practice on the afternoon of Grant's feat as a jumper, Hunk Rollins, filling the position of right guard for the regulars, gave his right knee, injured in the last game, a twist that sent him hobbling off the field. There was a pause, in which Eliot consulted Winton concerning a substitute.

"No use to try Springer or Hooker," said the coach in a low tone. "Neither is fitted for the place. In fact, we haven't a man."

Ben Stone, the left guard, an uncomely chap who, nevertheless, had become amazingly popular with the boys, chanced to overhear these words. In a moment he joined them.

"Why don't you ask Grant again, captain?" he suggested. "I don't know why it is, but I have a notion that he can play the game."

"Grant?" said Roger in surprise. "I've asked him once, and he refused. Where is he?"

"Sitting alone over yonder on the seats," answered Ben, with a movement of his head. "I saw him come in shortly after we commenced work."

"Oh, yes," muttered Roger, perceiving the solitary figure of Rod Grant. "There he is. Confound him! why doesn't he come forward like a man and get into it? I did my best to induce him."

"Let me talk to him," said Winton, starting quickly toward the young Texan.

Barker, observant, strolled over in the wake of the coach.

Reaching the lower tier of seats, Winton shot a sudden question at Rodney Grant:

"Do you know anything about football?"

"Mighty little," was the surprised answer.

"But you do know something? You've played the game, haven't you?"

"Not much."

"That's an admission that you've played it some. We need you to fill a hole in the line—just for this practice game, you understand. Come on."

"I reckon you'll have to excuse me, sir," said Grant. "I don't believe I'll play football."

"This isn't a regular game; it's practice. You've got a little patriotism, haven't you? You've got some interest in your school and your school team, I hope? It won't hurt you to practice. Come, we haven't any time to lose before it gets dark."

But the boy on the seats shook his head. "I thank you for the invite, but I allow I'd better keep out of it. You'll certain have to get some one else."

Barker's cold, irritating laugh sounded at Winton's shoulder. "He's afraid! He hasn't even got sand enough to take part in a practice game."

"You're a——"

Rod Grant cut himself short with the third word trembling on his lips. Involuntarily he had started up and was coming down over the seats.

"Say it—say it if you dare!" cried Barker, springing past Winton. "I wish you would."

The young Texan faltered on the lowest seat. "Never mind," he said slowly. "I judge maybe I'd better keep my tongue between my teeth."

"You're right, you had," Barker flung back, his aggressiveness and insolence increasing, if possible, with the hesitation of the other. "What are you here for, anyhow? If you haven't got sand enough even to practice, why do you come out here and sit around watching the rest of us? You'd better get off the field before some one runs you off."

Grant stepped down to the ground. "I sure hope nobody will try it," he muttered.

By this time Winton had Barker by the shoulder.

"Why are you butting in here?" he exclaimed warmly. "If you would let him alone, perhaps I'd get him to——"

"Don't you believe yourself, Mr. Winton. You couldn't get him to do anything but talk and blow. I've been up against this same chap once before to-day, and he knows what I think of him. He's a white-livered coward, that's what's the matter with him."

Again it seemed that the boy from Texas would be taunted beyond endurance, and for a moment he crouched slightly, as if on the verge of springing at his insulter.

"Come on," invited Barker. "You know how many bones there are in the human hand, even if you are afraid to examine a skeleton at short range. Come on, and I'll let you feel the bones in my fists."

These loud words had brought the boys flocking to the spot. Not a few of them believed for a moment or two, at least, that the impending fight between Barker and Grant must take place then and there, and, boylike, they welcomed it as a test of the stranger's courage. Imagine their disappointment when Rod Grant dropped his half lifted hands by his sides and turned away.

"I'll get off the field," he muttered huskily. "I'm going, and I hope Mr. Barker will let me alone in future. He'd sure better."

They watched him depart in the direction of the gate.

"That proves what he is," said Berlin.

"By jinks, I guess yeou're right," acknowledged Sile Crane. "He is a coward."

"Fellows," said Ben Stone, "I may be wrong, but I don't believe he refused to fight because he was afraid."

"Perhaps not," said Winton, shrugging his shoulders; "but I'd like to know why he refused to practice. Come on, boys, we'll put some one in Rollins' place and go ahead."

It was quite dark when Stone, having shed his football togs, left the gymnasium and strode down the street toward the cottage of the Widow Jones, where he roomed. As he was passing through the front yard gate some one called to him, and he saw a figure hurrying toward him. It was Grant, who came up and stopped with his hand on the fence.

"Stone," said the Texan, "I heard what you said as I was leaving the field to-night, and I want to thank you. It's mighty agreeable to know that one fellow, at least, was inclined to stand up for me."

"Look here, Grant," said Ben, "I wish you'd tell me why you swallowed Barker's insults. There must have been a reason."

"There was; but I can't tell you—not now, anyhow."

"Why didn't you fight him?"

"I—I didn't want to," faltered Rod.

"You weren't afraid, were you?"

There was a moment of silence.

"Yes," answered Grant in a low tone, "I was afraid."

"I didn't think that," muttered Ben in disappointment.

"I can't explain it now," Grant hastened to say. "Sometime I will—perhaps. I won't forget that you stood up for me. I can hear some of the fellows coming. Good night." He turned sharply, and a moment later his figure melted into the darkness down the street.

Puzzled and wondering, Stone reached the door of the cottage and stopped there, listening involuntarily to the voices of several fellows he could see approaching. They were nearly opposite the house when he heard Chipper Cooper laugh loudly and say something about frightening the Texan into fits.

"If we can make it work it will be better than a circus," said the voice of Fred Sage. "Are you sure you can get the old thing, Sleuth?"

"I've a skeleton key that will admit us," replied Billy Piper.

"Oh, a skeleton key!" chuckled Chipper Cooper, as they passed on. "That's the kind of a key for this job. Eh, Barker?"

Barker was with them. He said something, but Stone could not understand his words.

With his hand on the doorknob, Ben stood there speculating. "They're putting up some sort of a job on Grant," he murmured. "I wonder what they mean to do?"

CHAPTER V.

AMBUSHED.

Priscilla Kent, spinster, sharp-visaged, old and eccentric, sat knitting by lamplight before the open Franklin stove at which she warmed her slippered toes. In its hanging cage an old green parrot slept fitfully, occasionally waking to roll a red eye at its mistress or to mutter fretfully like one disturbed by unpleasant dreams. Behind her back a small monkey had silently enlarged a rent in the haircloth covering of an old spring couch and was industriously extracting and curiously inspecting the packing with which the couch was stuffed. The hands of the old-fashioned clock upon the mantel pointed to eight thirty-five.

"Goodness!" said Miss Priscilla, after peering at the clock. "It's goin' on to nine, and Rod ain't back yet. He said he was just goin' down to the village to mail a letter. I'm afeared he's gittin' into the habit of keepin' late hours. He takes his natteral reckless disposition from his father's side, but I do hope the terrible misfortune that befell Oscar will be a lesson to him and teach him to shun bad company and curb his violent temper. If he don't come purty soon I shall get real worried."

Now Miss Priscilla, living as she did on the outskirts of the village in a small house reached only by a footpath from the main highway, might have worried indeed had she known that the darkness and the bushes bordering that path hid a trio of armed and desperate-looking savages who were lying in ambush. The faintest sort of a moon or even a few stars might have shed light sufficient to show that the ambuscaders were attired in fringed khaki garments and moccasins, and wore upon their heads bonnets adorned with feathers plucked from the tails of more than one unfortunate rooster. Even such a dim light would also have revealed that the papier-mache masks which hid their faces added in a degree to their make-up as Indians, while the red paint which stained the edges of their wooden tomahawks and scalping knives was certainly sufficient to produce a shudder. In the parade of "horribles," on last Independence Day, these warriors had appeared for the amusement of the admiring populace of Oakdale, and now their carefully preserved disguises were again being put to use.

Even though they lurked in concealment so near the exposed and defenseless home of Miss Priscilla, the savages had no murderous designs upon the spinster. They were, however, as their guarded conversation indicated, lying in wait for some one whom they expected soon to return along that footpath, and protracted lingering in ambush upon a nipping November night was proving far from pleasant, as their chattering teeth and occasional fretful remarks plainly indicated.

"Ugh!" grunted one, whose voice sounded amazingly like that of Phil Springer. "I wonder why the hated pup-paleface does not appear?"

"Peace, noble Osceola," said another, with a shivery chuckle that might have come from the lips of Chipper Cooper. "The hated enemy of our people will surely return in time to his wigwam. If he don't I'll be froze stiff; for, with only this feather headdress as protection, I can't keep my own wig warm to-night."

"Oh, say, King Philip," drawled the third, "don't increase our sufferin's by any such cracks as that."

"Enjoy you not my persiflage, Tecumpseh?" asked the one who had been addressed as the war chief of the Narragansetts. "'Tis thus by light and airy jesting we aid the leaden hours to pass on fleeting wings."

"Heap bub-bad Injun lingo, King Philip," criticized Osceola. "A real aborigine such as you impersonate wouldn't talk about leaden hours. Cuc-cut it out."

"Your slang, Osceola, is somewhat too modern. You don't s'pose that sucker got onto our game and fooled us by sneaking back to his teepee by some other road, do you?"

"If he has," growled Tecumpseh, "he'll sartainly have the laugh on us. But, in that case, why hain't we been informed by Girty, the renegade, who's trailin' him?"

"Sh!" hissed King Philip suddenly. "I hear a signal. Muffle the chin-music and listen."

A smothered, suppressed sound, like the faint-hearted hooting of an owl, drifted up the dark path, and instantly the three savages were palpitant with eagerness.

"It's Hunk—I mean Girty," spluttered Cooper, rising on his hands and knees. "Where's the blanket? Get the blanket ready, fellows. Now don't bungle this job."

A sound of running feet grew more distinct, and a panting lad came hurrying up the path.

"Hey, Hunk—hey!" called Tecumpseh softly. "Here we be. Is he comin'?"

"Oh, here you are!" gasped the new arrival, as he plunged into the shelter of the pathside thicket and joined them. "Yep, he's coming. I watched him till I saw him start, then I made a short cut by the footpath past Tige Fletcher's, and got here first. He'll be right along. I guess the fellers are getting the other end of the game fixed up all right, for I see Sleuth buying phosphorus at the drug store. Oh, say! we'll scare that bragging coward to death to-night. After we catch him we've got to keep him till they get ready to work the rescue racket."



OUT FROM COVER LEAPED THE QUARTET, FLINGING THEMSELVES ON THE PALEFACE. —Page 55.

“Oh, we’ll keep him all right if we catch him, and we’ll make it warm for him, too,” said King Philip. “Come on, Hunk—I mean Girty,—we’ll take the other side of the path, you and I. Osceola and Tecumpseh, have the blanket ready. Everybody jump at him all together; get him before he can scoot. Come on.”

55

Followed by the one called Girty, who was disguised in rough, loose fitting clothes, a slouch hat and a hideous white-face mask, King Philip hustled across the path and ensconced himself close beside a low clump of cedars. Silence followed, broken presently by the faint, clear sound of a whistled tune, becoming more and more distinct as the whistler drew near. Their muscles taut, their nerves strung high, the three redskins and the renegade crouched for the attack upon their chosen victim, who, wholly unsuspecting, sauntered heedlessly into the trap.

Out from cover leaped the quartet, flinging themselves upon the paleface, whose whistled tune was actually cut short by the muffling folds of the blanket cast over his head and twisted tight. Nevertheless, although his feet were kicked from beneath him and all four united in the effort to subdue him, the boy from Texas, squirming, twisting, kicking, fighting desperately to fling off the blanket, gave them a lively time of it for several minutes. At last, however, smothered and crushed, he began to weaken, and presently his hands were twisted round behind his back and tied there with a stout piece of rope produced from a pocket of King Philip’s khaki war-suit.

56

“Got him now!” grated Girty viciously, as he gave the captive a punch in the ribs. “Confound him! he kicked me one in the breadbasket that near knocked the wind out of me.”

“Stop that!” commanded King Philip authoritatively. “He will pay the bitter penalty when we put him to the torture. Come on, let’s hit the high places.”

Still keeping the blanket wrapped about the head and shoulders of the victim, they lifted him to his feet, held him fast, plunged through the bushes, and struck out across a rough open field in the direction of Turkey Hill. The captive staggered as he was forced along, but their firm hands sustained him, and they paid no heed to the muffled gasping and groaning which came from beneath the blanket. Over a fence and across a stone wall he was pushed and dragged, and finally the woods at the eastern base of Turkey Hill were reached. A short distance into the blackest of the night-shrouded timber they penetrated, halting at last in a small glade near a bubbling spring.

57

“This is the place,” whispered King Philip. “We agreed to have him here at the spring. We’ll have some fun with him while we’re waiting for the other fellers to come.”

"I guess we'd better give him a chance to git a breath," observed Tecumpseh, who was supporting the captive with both arms. "He's limp as a dish-rag. I cal-late he's purty near done up."

In truth, Rodney Grant was nearly smothered, and when the blanket was removed he lay gasping painfully upon the cold ground.

"Guard the paleface dog, Osceola," commanded King Philip. "If he attempts to escape, crack his skull with your trusty tomahawk and lift his topknot with your gory scalping knife. Girty, build a fire, and fear not; for neither Daniel Boone nor Simon Kenton are nearer to-night than the Dark and Bloody Ground."

58

Girty promptly gathered some sticks of wood, scraped together a mass of dry fallen leaves, and applied a lighted match. A blaze sprang up at once, illuminating the whole glade.

"My brothers," said King Philip, "we will now hold a council of war to decide the fate of this wretched paleface captive. As the war chief of the Narragansetts, hunted in the swamps like a wild beast, my spirit cries out for vengeance. The most frightful torture we can inflict upon this wretch will but poorly atone for the suffering he has caused our people; for has he not with his own lips boasted that he tortured three noble warriors to death by tickling them on the bottoms of their bare feet with feathers? What torture can we devise that will serve as sufficient retaliation? I would listen to the wisdom from the lips of the great Seminole, Osceola."

"It is my idea," said Osceola, "that we ought to soak it to him heap much. I'm in favor of skinning him alive."

59

"What do you propose, Tecumpseh?"

"I would hang him by the heels over a slow fire. I guess that would warm him up some."

"Simon Girty, even though your skin is the color of the despised paleface, you have renounced your people and become one of us. You are even more bloodthirsty and cruel than the bloodiest warrior that roams the primeval forest. What say you? Spit it out."

"Burn him to the stake," growled Girty.

"Good! It shall be done. Lift him and tie him, standing, with his back to a stout sapling. Here's another hunk of rope."

The captive, although somewhat recovered, made resistance when they raised him from the ground and dragged him to the sapling.

"Go ahead with your funny business, you onery coyotes!" he exclaimed. "I opine I know you all, in spite of your rigs; and when I promise to get even a plenty I certain mean it."

Scoffing at him, they tied him fast, and then piled in a circle about his feet a mass of dry leaves and broken branches, taking care, however, that this combustible material did not touch him by a foot or more.

60

"We'll toast him gently at first," chuckled King Philip. "When a victim is too quickly burned at the stake it is a sad *mistake*, for it ends our fiendish joys all too soon. Apply the torch."

Girty seized a burning stick of wood and touched it to the leaves near the prisoner's feet. The fire blazed up and began creeping round the circle of combustible material. The heat of the flames reached the helpless boy's face and hands, while the smoke filled his eyes and nostrils, making him choke and gasp. In a moment King Philip, Tecumpseh, Osceola, and Girty, the renegade, were dancing and whooping around Rod Grant, flourishing their tomahawks and knives.

From the midst of the enveloping mass of smoke and sparks came a harsh voice, vibrant with intense rage:

"Whoop it up, you skunks! You'd better carry the game through and finish me, for if you don't I'll make every one of you dance a different jig before long!"

CHAPTER VI.

THE RESULT OF A PRACTICAL JOKE.

The woods rang with their whoops and yells; their circling figures cast flitting, grotesque, fantastic shadows. The helpless captive choked and strangled; the fire had begun to scorch his shins.

Suddenly, with a series of answering yells, half a dozen masked fellows charged forth from the darkness and fell upon the savages, who, in seeming panic, took to their heels and fled, after a brief show of resistance. Two or three of the newcomers had apparently made an effort to dress themselves like cowboys, while the remainder simply wore rough, ill-fitting clothes, or garments turned wrongside out. One, who seemed to be the leader, scattered the blazing leaves and sticks with his feet and began stamping out the fire.

"Pards," he said, "we've put the pesky redskins to rout and saved this poor fellow from a frightful death. I reckon he will be very grateful."

62

The still choking captive, blinking the smoke from his eyes, gazed sharply at the speaker.

"I'm sure much obliged for the temporary relief, Mr. Barker," he said; "but I'm not chump enough to opine you're through with your shindig, and I allow there's something more coming to me."

"What's this?" cried the other. "His voice sounds familiar. His face—I've seen it before. So help me, he's the galoot that led the cowpunchers who lynched my partner, poor old Tanglefoot Bill. I swore vengeance upon him, and my hour has come. He shall pay dearly for what he did to Tanglefoot. Eh, pards?"

"That's right; that's right," they cried, glaring threateningly at the captive through the eyeholes of their masks.

"Let's swing him from a limb," proposed a stout chap, who was occasionally losing a peanut from a hole in the bottom of the well stuffed side pocket of his coat. "Many a time and oft has he boasted of what he has done to cattle rustlers like us."

"My deduction is——" began a little chap; but instantly some one gave him a poke in the ribs, which cut him short.

63

"We'll bear him to our retreat amid the mountains," proposed the leader, "and there we can decide what fate shall be meted out to him. Release him from the tree, but blindfold his eyes, in order that he may not observe the trail we follow."

These instructions were carried out, although they took care to leave Grant's hands pinioned behind his back. A thickly folded handkerchief was placed over his eyes and securely tied at the back of his head. Barely was this done when the three redskins and the renegade came sneaking back from the shadows of the woods and joined the self-styled cattle rustlers. Threatening Grant if he made an outcry, they hurried him forth from the woods and away toward the twinkling lights of the distant village. Down the Barville road they went, approaching the dark and silent academy and the gymnasium. Among themselves at intervals they muttered fierce threats of vengeance for the death of the mythical "Tanglefoot Bill."

Once or twice a sound like a suppressed, smothered giggle came from behind the mask of the fat fellow, causing one of his companions to give him a vigorous punch and hiss into his ear an order to "dry up."

64

Within the gymnasium a shaded light glowed dimly. Beneath this light they gathered, with the unresisting and still blindfolded captive in their midst.

"What shall we do with him, comrades?" questioned the leader.

"String him up to a rafter," urged one of his followers.

"Show him no mercy," advised another.

"Make short work of him," growled still another.

"Had we known who he was," said the leader, "we'd never risked our lives to rescue him from the redskins. Comrades, listen. In yonder small, dark room lie the bleaching bones of poor Tanglefoot Bill. While we are debating over the proper fate for Bill's slayer, I would suggest that we place the wretched captive in that room with the remains of his victim."

This proposal meeting no opposition, Grant was pushed toward a door, at which one of the masked fellows took his place with his hand on the knob. At a signal from the leader, the door was opened, the blindfold snatched from Rod's eyes, and he was given a push that sent him staggering into the room. At the same time some one cried in his ear:

65

"Behold the bones of your victim!"

The door slammed and the key was hastily turned in the lock.

Barely succeeding in keeping upon his feet, Rodney Grant stumbled against something that rattled; and then in the deep darkness of that place he saw lying at his very feet what seemed to be a

skeleton, every bone of which glowed with a dull, phosphorescent luminosity. Involuntarily he backed away from the thing until he had retreated against the door.

"Great jackrabbits!" he gasped. "It can't be——" He choked, the words seeming to stick in his throat, for, to his added amazement and consternation, the skeleton moved, its head rising slowly from the floor and the upper part of its body following. Little by little it continued to rise, until at last it was in an upright position. Then one long, faintly gleaming arm was lifted from its side until it became outstretched toward the shivering, cowering lad. From some source a hollow groan sounded, followed immediately by a faint, huskily spoken word, twice repeated:

"Retribution! Retribution!"

Outside that room, which in the days when the building had served as a bowling alley had been a washroom and a closet for the keeping of clothing and various other articles, one of the masked jokers was manipulating the cords that had caused the skeleton to rise and lift its arm. Another fellow, with his mask removed, had applied his lips to a knothole in the partition, through which he sent the groan and spoke that terrible sounding word.

"Gee whiz!" giggled the fat chap. "I'll bet he's pretty near frightened into fits. I know I'd be."

"Shut up, Chub!" hissed the leader, who was listening at the door. "Of course he's scared stiff, for he's a coward, anyhow."

"He ought to be yelling blub-bloody murder by this time," murmured Osceola, the Seminole.

"Can yeou hear anything, Berlin?" asked Tecumpseh, the Shawnee.

"How can I hear anything with all you fellows pushing and chattering?" fretfully retorted the one at the door.

"My deduction is," said the chap who had pulled the cords, "that he's too scared to even utter a chirp."

"I bate a hundred dollars," laughed King Philip, "that this will cook him so he won't tell no more yarns about hunting Indians and lynching cattle thieves."

"Shut up!" once more ordered the leader. "I can hear something now. Listen to that. What's he doing?"

The sounds, low and weird and doleful, issuing from that small, dark room, filled them with unspeakable astonishment.

"So help me, Bob," spluttered King Philip, "he's singing!"

It was a sad and doleful wailing, like a funeral dirge, and the jokers, who had been ready to shriek with laughter a few moments before, were now struck dumb by wonderment, and more than one of them felt a shiver creep along his spine. Suddenly the singing ceased, but it was followed by a burst of wild laughter even more startling.

"He's gug-giving us the ha-ha," said Osceola. "Now what do you think of that!"

There seemed, however, to be no merriment in the strange, wild peals of laughter which reached their ears. Agitated and apprehensive, one fellow seized the shoulder of the chap who stood at the door.

"Open up, Bark," he urged—"open up! Turn the lights on, somebody. Let's see what's the matter in there."

As the lights were turned on the door swung open, and those practical jokers, crowding forward, beheld a spectacle that made more than one recoil. In some manner Rodney Grant had succeeded in freeing his hands from the rope. His coat had been torn off and flung aside. His shirt was ripped open at the throat, and one sleeve had been torn into shreds. He was crouching on one knee directly in front of the dangling skeleton, and the flood of light from the open door fell on a face so wild and terrible that the disguised boys shuddered at beholding it. He was white as a sheet; his eyes glared, and a frothing foam covered his lips.

"Avaunt!" he shrieked. "Quit my sight! Let the earth hide thee! Thy bones are marrowless, thy blood is cold; thou hast no speculation in those eyes which thou dost glare with!"

"Great mercy!" gurgled one of the group at the door. "He's gone mad—stark, staring mad!"

CHAPTER VII.

THE ONE WHO LAUGHED LAST.

While they stood paralyzed Rodney Grant suddenly leaped to his feet, still jabbering and laughing wildly, seized the skeleton, tore it from the ropes by which it was suspended, and charged them with the grisly thing in his grasp. Right and left they scattered, terrified beyond words, some of them actually uttering screams of fear. Their one great desire seemed to be to get out of the way and give Grant plenty of room.

Having driven them in this manner, the victim of the joke hurled the skeleton aside, rushed across the open floor of the gymnasium, caught up a chair and dashed it through a window, carrying away sash and glass. A single step he retreated, and then, with a forward bound and a yell, he followed the chair through the broken window, disappearing into the darkness outside. The appalled boys heard the sound of running feet swiftly die out in the distance.

"Well, we've done it!" said Cooper huskily, as he tore off his mask and revealed a face almost as ghastly as that of the lad who had leaped through the window.

"You're right, Chipper," agreed Chub Tuttle, also unmasking. "We drove him plumb daffy. It's awful!"

"He busted the skeleton," said Sleuth Piper, gazing ruefully at the broken thing, which lay on the floor where Grant had flung it. "The prof will raise the dickens about this."

"Oh, hang the sus-skeleton!" stuttered Phil Springer. "Think of driving that fellow out of his wits! Gee! boys, it's bad business."

"Yeou bate it is," agreed Sile Crane. "We'd orter knowed he wasn't well balanced, for his old aunt has been half crazy all her life."

Tuttle, his peanuts forgotten, had dropped his mask to the floor and sunk limply on a bench near the lockers, where he sat shivering like a round jelly pudding.

"It's awful," he muttered over and over—"it's awful, fellows!"

"I guess we're in a bad scrape," said Hunk Rollins, who was posing no longer as Girty, the renegade.

"It's awful!" mumbled Tuttle. "If we had ever stopped to think that he came from a family of loose screwed people we might not have pushed this thing so far."

"He's busted the skeleton," complained Piper again. "Won't the prof be hopping about that!"

"Busting the old sus-skeleton is nothing compared with driving a chap plumb cuc-crazy," groaned Springer. "Perhaps he'll never get his wits back. Maybe they'll have to send him to a mum-madhouse, and we'll be responsible—think of that, boys, we'll be responsible! I'll nun-never get over it."

"Who proposed this thing, anyhow?" asked Roy Hooker, looking around. "Was it you, Sleuth?"

"Not much I didn't," answered Piper instantly. "It was Barker's scheme. He said Grant was a scarecrow who was even afraid of the prof's old skeleton, and suggested that it would be great fun if we could only haze him the way college fellows do."

"But you got the skeleton. If it hadn't been for you——"

"Now don't you try to shoulder all the blame onto me," cried Piper, in terrified resentment, forgetting for the time being his artificial style of speech. "You were all in for it, every one of you. I simply had some keys by which I could get into the lab, where the skeleton was kept. You're all as deep in the mud as I am in the mire. Barker is really the one who engineered this thing."

"Where is he, anyhaow?" asked Crane, looking around.

"Yes, where is he?" cried the others, realizing for the first time that the fellow they had recognized as their leader was missing.

They called to him in vain. The outer door of the gym stood slightly ajar, and, after a time, looking at one another in dismay, they understood that Barker had slipped away.

"Now what do yeou fellers think of that!" rasped Sile Crane. "He's skedaddled and left us; he's run away."

"Well, if that isn't the tut-trick of a coward, I don't know what you'd call it!" exploded Springer.

"He needn't think he can get out of it that way!" blazed Jack Nelson.

"I'm sick," moaned Tuttle—"oh, I'm awful sick! What do you s'pose they'll do to us if we've really drove Grant batty? Oh, say! won't I catch it at home!"

"We ought to follow him," said Nelson. "We ought to catch him. No telling what he will do. Maybe he'll jump into the lake or the river and be drowned."

"I'm going home," wheezed Hunk Rollins huskily. "Somebody is liable to come along and spot the whole of us here." He edged toward the door.

"Yeou're another quitter, jest like Barker," roared Crane suddenly. "Yeou pranced around and made a lot of fightin' talk to Rod Grant arter yeou'd figured it out that he wouldn't take yeou up, and now yeou're so allfired sca't yeou want to skedaddle."

"Somebody has got to help me take the skeleton back to the academy," said Piper appealingly. "Don't skin out and leave me, boys; let's hang together." 75

"If we don't hang together," muttered Cooper, with a rueful grimace, "we may hang separately."

Little did they dream that at that very moment they were watched by two pairs of eyes gazing at them through the broken window.

Grant, having made his spectacular getaway, reached the road and ran as far as the lower corner of the academy yard, where he stopped, breathing a trifle heavily, and leaned upon the fence. In a moment he was startled by a voice coming from the shadows of a nearby tree.

"What's the matter?" was the question that reached his ears. "What's going on at the gym to-night?"

He recognized the voice as that of Ben Stone, whose figure he could perceive in the denser darkness under the tree. For a moment he hesitated; then, with a short laugh, he answered: 76

"Oh, just a bit of a monkey circus, that's all. A few of my friends tried to force me into playing the clown, but I sure reckon the laugh is on them some. What are you doing here?"

"I knew something was up," answered Stone, as he came forward, "and, while I didn't want to butt in, I couldn't choke down my curiosity entirely. Tell me about it."

Grant did so briefly and concisely, beginning with his ambush by the fake Indians. Although a narrative unadorned and cut short, it was vivid and interesting enough to absorb the listener.

"All the time," proceeded Rod, "I was doing my level best to get my hands free, for I allowed I'd sail into that bunch right lively if I could obtain the use of my paws. I was sure enough jarred some when they handed me into the dark room with the old skeleton and the thing rose up on its hind legs and groaned. That made me give an extra twist, and I broke the rope. I knew where I was, for Roger Eliot had shown me all over the gym. I likewise knew the powdered chalk for marking the field was kept on a shelf in that closet. It didn't take me long to think of a plan to turn the laugh on that bunch of merry old roasters. I found the chalk and rubbed it over my face. Then, feeling around, I got hold of a cake of soap on the washstand and bit off a piece, which I proceeded to chew up so that I could froth at the mouth in fine shape. All the while I was chanting a funeral dirge a plenty doleful, punctuating it with occasional loud and mirthless ha-ha's. The game worked well. They were listening, and I reckon it set them guessing. When I heard the key turning in the lock I proceeded to drop down on my shin bones in front of the skeleton, and I turned off a bit of the mad scene from Macbeth. Say, Stone, it knocked 'em stiff. Then when I saw I had them going I grabbed the old skeleton and made a dash at the bunch. They fell over one another in their urgent desire to give me ample room. I didn't propose to let them get their hooks on me again, so I dropped old phosphorus bones, grabbed a chair, smashed a window, jumped through and touched the elevated spots outside. I opine the merry jesters left behind are a plenty disturbed about now, and——" 77

"Sh!" hissed Ben suddenly, grasping Grant's arm. "Here comes somebody." 78

They hastily retreated into the darkness beneath the tree, from which shelter they saw a fellow pass at a run.

"One of my late entertainers on the way to his downy couch," whispered Rod, smothering a chuckle of satisfaction. "I trust his slumbers to-night may not be disturbed by unpleasant dreams."

"I believe it was Barker," murmured Stone;

"Oh, Barker!" said Grant, with a snap of his jaws. "He was sort of a high cockalorum with the gang. I judge he put up the job on me. And now he's quit his partners in crime and scooted. I sized him up for that kind of a piker. Let's slide down to the gym and see how the gang is taking it." 79

And so it happened that, standing outside the shattered window, they were more or less highly entertained by the talk of the frightened boys within the gymnasium. Also, as those lads had removed their masks, all save Barker, who had deserted, were seen and recognized beyond any question or doubt. After it had been arranged that Piper and Crane should return the broken skeleton to the academy laboratory and the others were preparing to scatter quietly to their various homes, Rod and Ben decided it was time for them to depart.

In Stone's room at Mrs. Jones' home Grant washed the powdered chalk from his face, combed his hair and made his appearance as passable as possible.

"Aunt Priscilla will sure be a plenty worried by this time," he said, "and I don't want to frighten her into fits by showing up looking like a battered specimen from a railroad wreck. If you'll loan me a coat, I'll be much obliged. I can get mine to-morrow."

Wearing Ben's best coat, the young Texan finally said good night and departed, feeling well satisfied with himself and the manner in which he had turned the joke on his hazers.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE WHITE FEATHER.

Nearly a dozen boys of Oakdale Academy slept poorly that night; some of them scarcely slept at all. Of the latter Chipper Cooper turned and tossed and twisted all through the long hours, and finally when he did doze a little it was only to be aroused by the morning whistles of the mills, which brought him out of bed, shivering and nerveless, fully two hours ahead of his usual rising time.

When he knew his father had gone for the day he crept down stairs, to the astonishment of his mother, who, after taking one look at his haggard face, decided that he must be ill. Her conviction that this was the case seemed confirmed by the fact that he could eat no breakfast, although he sought to reassure her by saying it was far too early for him to have any appetite. Realizing at last that he must offer some explanation for his strange behavior and unusual appearance, he confessed that he had been troubled by a slight attack of indigestion on the previous day, which was true. As a penalty for this subterfuge he was compelled to swallow a tablespoonful of some homemade remedy which Mrs. Cooper sternly forced upon him.

81

An hour later Chipper was puttering about in the woodshed when he heard a footstep and looked up to discover Chub Tuttle shivering in a turtleneck sweater outside the open door. Chub likewise looked pale and heavy-eyed, and a single glance was sufficient to let each lad know what the other had passed through.

"Gosh! it's cold this morning," mumbled Tuttle. "Ground is froze stiff and puddles skimmed side of the road."

"Yep," answered Chipper; "there'll be skating pretty soon. What you doing over here so early?"

Tuttle entered the shed. "I couldn't sleep at all last night," he confessed. "Don't b'lieve closed my eyes once. Couldn't help thinking about Rod Grant going clean off his nut."

"Sh!" hissed Chipper, tiptoeing up some steps and closing a door that led toward the kitchen. "I don't want mother to find it out—yet. I s'pose she'll have to know about it pretty soon. Sleep! Say, I never got a bit. Couldn't help thinking all night long that Grant might be lost in the woods or drowned or freezing or something. Have you heard anything this morning, Chub?"

82

"No; I cut across back lots so's not to come through the main street of the village. Four or five times last night I sat up in bed, thinking I heard people out searching for Grant. Jiminy, Chipper, didn't he look just awful when Bern opened the closet door! I've never seen a crazy person before, but I knew he was stark daffy the minute my eyes fell on him."

"So did I," nodded Cooper. "We should have had sense enough to realize that, having a batty streak in his family, he was liable to go woppy like that."

"Never occurred to me," confessed Chub, turning the sawhorse on its side and seating himself on it. "Did you eat any breakfast?"

"Not a morsel."

"Same here. Have some peanuts."

83

Cooper declined the proffered handful of peanuts, and Chub, trying to swallow one, nearly choked over it.

"I'm worried sick," acknowledged Chipper. "I'd give anything in the world if I hadn't taken part in that fool racket last night. You know only a year or two ago some students at West Point drove a fellow half crazy hazing him, and he knocked one of the bunch out with a chair. Came near killing him, too. The fellow didn't die, but the doctors said it was doubtful if he'd ever get over it. Read about it in the newspapers. Funny thing, but the chap they were hazing was named Grant, too."

"I guess this hazing business ain't as much fun as it might be," sighed Chub. "You'll never get *me* into any more of it."

"I think I've had my fill, too. I just hate to show up at the academy to-day."

The sound of a low, peculiar whistle, like a signal, drifted in through the open door of the shed, causing them both to give a start.

"That's Sleuth!" palpitated Chipper, starting for the door.

84

Hesitating on the road in front of the house, they beheld Billy Piper, who turned into the yard at once and hurried toward them, in response to a beckoning signal from Cooper. His manner was nervous and furtive, and he glanced round as if in constant apprehension of feeling the hand of an officer at his collar.

"Hello, Chub; you here?" he said. "Just come over by the lower bridge. Thought I'd come that way, so I wouldn't have to pass through town. Say, who do you s'pose I saw waiting for the morning train over at the station? You can't guess. It was Barker."

"Barker?" exclaimed Chipper and Chub in a breath. "Waiting for the train? Where's he going?"

"He didn't want me to know he was going anywhere, but I caught him with his satchel in his fist, and he had to own up. Said he'd had an invitation to visit Fred Merwin over at Clearport. Now my deduction is——"

"The sneak!" cried Cooper resentfully. "He's running away!"

"That was my deduction," nodded Piper.

"And he was really the fellow who put up the whole job," gurgled Tuttle. "He's skinning out on us; he's leaving us to face the music."

"And if that doesn't prove him to be the biggest coward in Oakdale I'll eat my hat!" snarled Cooper. "He made a lot of talk about Grant being a quitter and a coward, but now he's showing himself up all right. Say, I'd like to have just a few words with him—I'd like to tell him what I think. Come on."

"Too late," said Piper. "There's the train whistling now."

The sound of a locomotive signaling for the station beyond the river reached their ears through the clear, cold November morning, and they knew that long ere they could reach the depot the train would pull out for Clearport.

"Let him go," muttered Tuttle. "He'll have to come back. He can't dodge it this way."

In the shed those three unhappy boys discussed the affair until the first bell sounded from the tower of the academy, when at last, encouraged by one another's company, they set forth for school, making haste through the main part of the village. As they approached the academy Phil Springer stepped round a corner and beckoned to them.

"Juj-juj-jiminy!" chattered Tuttle, his teeth rattling in spite of his efforts to prevent them. "They've heard something about Grant!"

Their hearts heavy, they followed Springer. Behind the academy they found assembled the rest of the boys who had taken part in the hazing, with the exception of Berlin Barker, and these lads gazed at them inquiringly as they approached.

"Have yeou fellers heard anything?" asked Sile Crane.

"Not a thing," answered Piper. "What have you heard?"

"Nothing, and that's mighty funny. We expected old Priscilla Kent would have the whole town stirred up by this time. If Rod Grant hadn't come home last night she'd been throwing fits all over the territory before this."

"Perhaps he came home," said Cooper hopefully. "You're right about Miss Priscilla, and so in this case no news sounds like good news."

"Have you seen anything of Barker this morning?" questioned Jack Nelson.

Sleuth promptly gave them the same information concerning Berlin which he had imparted to Cooper and Tuttle, concluding with an expression of his views regarding the conduct of Barker. Their indignation was boundless, and, as one fellow, they agreed that the chap who had been the main mover in the hazing had shown the white feather.

"That's enough for me, by jinks!" cried Sile Crane. "He run away last night, and now he's dug out of Oakdale. Yeou bate I'll tell him something when he comes back! If Rod Grant is——"

"Great Cæsar!" gasped Piper suddenly. "Here comes Grant this minute, and Stone is with him!"

He pointed with an unsteady finger, and those boys beheld Rod Grant and Ben Stone coming down along the footpath from the direction of Tige Fletcher's house.

CHAPTER IX.

MOMENTS OF APPREHENSION.

As Grant drew near they saw he was regarding them with a half taunting expression on his bronzed face. In return they stared at him wonderingly, seeking to detect in his manner some symptoms of craziness.

"Dud-dinged if he don't look all right," muttered Phil Springer.

"I guess he's got over it," said Sile Crane.

Followed by Stone, the boy from Texas vaulted the back yard fence and came straight toward them.

"Well, how are the noble warriors and the desperate cattle rustlers this morning?" was his mocking inquiry. "You sure appear a trifle upset, gents. King Philip has a pale and languid look; Tecumpseh seems some disturbed, and I declare, Osceola is nervous. Girty, the renegade, has backed off, ready to take to his heels. I miss the familiar face of the chief of the cattle rustlers. Is it possible he has found himself indisposed this morning, which has compelled him to remain in bed? Take you all together, you're a sure enough meaching-looking bunch." 89

"Survey them, Stone. Would you ever imagine these brave bucks possessed the hardihood to lay in wait, in superior numbers, under cover of darkness, and jump on a lone and unsuspecting person? Can you pick out among them the bloodthirsty redskins who would cruelly tie a captive to the stake and attempt to burn him alive? There they are—Cooper, Crane and Springer;—and there's their disreputable accomplice, Rollins, otherwise known as Girty, the renegade. These others are the cattle rustlers, who rescued the unfortunate wretch from the Indians and bore him to their mountain rendezvous, where they threw him into a room with the bleaching bones of poor old Tanglefoot Bill. Is it any wonder they drove the victim of such cruel treatment clean batty? Is it any wonder that he chanted a doleful dirge, and rubbed powdered chalk on his face, and chewed soap until he could froth at the mouth? Such behavior on his part certainly indicated that he had gone plumb loony." 90

He concluded with a burst of laughter that grated harshly on the ears of the deluded jokers, who were slowly beginning to understand that they had been fooled completely—that the joke was on them. The realization of this brought flushes of shame mounting to their faces.

"Well, I'll be switched!" gasped Crane. "He's a-givin' us the laugh."

Chipper Cooper pretended to look around on the ground. "Can anybody find a hole small enough for me to crawl into?" he muttered. "I want to get out of sight—quick."

"I don't blame you any," chuckled Rod Grant. "Take my advice and seek seclusion and shelter in the swamps of the Narragansetts. You were a bum redskin, anyhow. You gents had a heap of fun, didn't you? But you always want to remember that the fellow who laughs last laughs best. It's my turn now, and I'm enjoying it a plenty. You ought to see yourselves. You're the cheapest looking aggregation of hazers I ever beheld. Some of you appear sick enough to have a doctor." 91

This was true; without exception, they all wore a silly, shamed expression.

The sudden sounding of the last bell came as welcome relief, and they lost no time about hustling indoors, followed more leisurely by Grant and Stone, the former continuing to cast jibes after them.

During the morning session the boys were given time to think the whole matter over, and with the coming of a calm realization that they had been not only checkmated but completely hoist on their own petard, their chagrin was intensified. Occasionally one of them would steal a sly glance toward Rod Grant, but whoever did so was almost certain to meet the chaffing, derisive gaze of the boy from Texas. Some made secret vows of vengeance, while others were more inclined to "own the corn" and acknowledge themselves outwitted. What they now dreaded more than anything else was the stinging tongue and pitiless badinage of the new boy. 92

At intermission they held a secret conclave, at which a few betrayed their continued rawness in the face of advice from others to swallow the medicine, bitter though it was, and make the best of it.

"I tell yeou, fellers," said Sile Crane, "after due consideration, I'm sorter inclined to own right up before Grant that he come it over us mighty slick. We started aout to have haydoo-gins of fun with him, but before we got through he made us look like a cage of monkeys, and that's all there is to it. I snum, I think 'twas pretty clever of him."

"Bah!" growled Hunk Rollins. "If you want to lay down and let him use you for a foot-mat, go ahead. I don't feel that way, and I don't propose to do it. He's been shown up as a case of bluff. He hasn't got the nerve to fight, nor even to play football. Are we going to let that sort of a feller crow over us?" 93

"I've got an idee," said Crane slowly, "that Rod Grant ain't lackin' in nerve. No feller could 'a' stood what he did last night, bein' chucked into a dark room with a real skeleton that had been rubbed over with phosphorus, and then fooled the bunch of us by makin' b'lieve he was crazy, unless he had pretty good nerve. He's refused to play football, and mebbe he won't fight; but I cal'late the

chap that keeps treadin' on the tail of his co't is goin' to run up against a s'prise party some day. Bimeby he'll wake up and break loose, and when he does there'll be some doings."

Returning to the academy after dinner, Chipper Cooper found a number of the boys still talking about Grant.

"Say," cried Cooper, "you can't guess who called me up over the long distance ten minutes ago."

"Barker," said Nelson instantly.

"You win."

"Bub-Barker!" sneered Phil Springer. "What did he want?"

"Wanted to know what we'd heard about Grant. Said he naturally felt somewhat anxious."

"You bate he felt that way!" exclaimed Crane scornfully. "What'd you tell him?"

"I told him all about it—told him what a lot of lobsters we were."

94

"What made yeou do that?" cried Crane. "Why didn't yeou tell him they'd had to put Grant in a strait-jacket, or somethin' like that?"

"Didn't think of it quick enough, Sile; but I told him the fellers were mighty disgusted because he sneaked out."

"What'd he say to that?"

"Oh, he denied that he had sneaked. Said he'd had a standing invitation from Merwin, who had been urging him for a long time to come over, and that was why he went. All the same, I could tell by the sound of his voice that he was greatly relieved."

"Of course he was," nodded Nelson. "We all know he skipped out and left us to face the music. Now that there's nothing more to worry about, he'll come back with his head up."

"Nothing to worry about!" sighed Billy Piper. "Wait till the prof finds out what happened to his skeleton. My deduction is——"

"He'll *bone* the whole school to tell who did it," sighed Cooper. "If anybody squeals, we'll find ourselves in a mess."

95

"If anybody sus-squeals!" muttered Springer. "What's going to prevent Grant from giving the whole thing away?"

"He'll do it," said Rollins. "That's the way he'll get even with us."

"Get even!" said Roy Hooker. "Seems to me he's more than even as it stands."

With the beginning of the afternoon session they perceived something in Prof. Richardson's manner which increased their apprehensions. Nevertheless, not until he had heard the physiology class and was on the point of dismissing it did the principal speak out. Standing beside his desk, he removed his spectacles and held them balanced upon his thumb, while his eyes surveyed the scholars before him, several of whom found it difficult to hide their nervousness.

"It's an unfortunate thing," began the master calmly, "that some young men in this school seem to hold very crude and unsatisfactory ideas regarding honor and decency. You know very well that I have always favored clean sport and decent fun—I have even encouraged it. Yesterday I informed the members of this class that I had secured a human skeleton, which those who wished to do so might examine at an extra session after school closed to-day. This skeleton had been placed in the laboratory. I have but recently discovered that the laboratory has been entered by some one and the skeleton has been broken. It was strung upon wires, and may be restored. This, however, in no way palliates the offense, which was no more nor less than a shameful act of vandalism. It is quite likely that more than one person was concerned in this despicable business. I'm not going to question you individually, but I warn you now that I shall deal severely with the culprits when I learn who they are, unless they at once own up to the deed. The lad who comes to me first with an honest confession will be treated with more or less leniency. It may be that some one who was not concerned in the matter—who is in no way responsible—knows something about it. If so, I hope he will speak up at once and tell the truth. This is his opportunity. Let him speak."

96

It seemed that the master's gaze came to a rest upon Rodney Grant as he concluded, and more than one lad in that class felt his heart stand still, believing it almost certain that Rod would grasp this opportunity to complete the work of retaliation. For several moments the silence was intense. The prominent "Adam's apple" in Sile Crane's neck bobbed convulsively as he swallowed. White around the mouth, Chub Tuttle slowly rolled his eyes in Grant's direction. Rod was looking straight at the professor, but he sat unmoved and calm, like an image of stone.

97

"Very well," said the master at length; "you have had your opportunity, and no one has chosen to speak out. Perhaps some one will decide to do so after further consideration. At any rate, I shall leave no stone unturned in my efforts to learn the identity of the rascals. The class is dismissed."

School over for the day, Ben Stone found an opportunity to question Grant. "What would you have done," he asked, "if the professor had singled you out and put it to you point-blank?"

"I should have declined to answer."

"Then he certainly would have believed you concerned in the breaking of the skeleton."

98

"I was."

"But you were not to blame. If you had told the truth the other fellows would have had to suffer,

while you must have been exonerated.”

“Had he cornered me,” said Grant, “I should have requested that the same questions be put to every other fellow in school.”

“What if they had lied? They might have denied knowing anything about it.”

“In that case,” said Grant, “I should have told the story of the hazing and refused to give the names of the fellows who took part in it.”

“Do you think they would have followed the same course—all of them, or any one of them—had the situation been reversed?”

“I don’t know,” answered Grant; “but I hope so.”

CHAPTER X.

WHO TOLD?

Jack Nelson was right about Barker; Berlin came back "with his head up." To the surprise of his teammates, he was on hand for football practice that night, having caught the afternoon train from Clearport. When some of the boys commented on the shortness of his visit to Merwin and hinted broadly that he had made that visit for the purpose of avoiding the height of a severe storm which had threatened to fall upon the heads of all concerned in that piece of skylarking at which he was the master mover, he made an indignant denial. Even Crane, who had vowed he would give Barker a piece of his mind, was silenced by Berlin's resentment and anger over the insinuation that he had shown the white feather.

Barker was not one of the few who betrayed a disposition to make the best of the fact that Grant had turned the joke upon his tormentors; on the contrary, this knowledge seemed to pierce his very soul with a red-hot iron, and he became still more vindictive and vicious toward the lad from Texas, declaring he would yet make the fellow laugh out of the other side of his mouth. Nor was his bitterness softened in any degree when he was told of Grant's silence regarding the breaking of the skeleton. 100

"He didn't dare peach, that's all," said Berlin. "If he'd had the nerve, he'd blown the whole business."

A secret known by many persons may scarcely be called a secret, and almost invariably it is sure to "leak." For reasons, Roger Eliot had not been taken into the confidence of the hazers, yet it was not long ere he learned what had happened on that lively night, and in his quiet way he took occasion to jest a trifle at the expense of the fellows concerned. They wondered who had told him, and Rollins expressed the belief that Grant must be "tattling and boasting."

With the approach of the date for the Wyndham game, which was to conclude the season, football almost wholly absorbed the attention of the boys. Every effort was being made to strengthen the weak points on the team, for Oakdale still hoped to defeat the former champions and conclude a remarkable series of triumphs by winning the championship for the first time in the history of the academy. Although he pretended to be optimistic, the coach kept the players keyed to a fine point, never once permitting them to get the impression that the game would be anything but a stern battle from start to finish in which the failure of a single fellow to do his level best might prove disastrous. 101

In secret consultation with Eliot, Winton owned up to apprehension concerning two of the players, and repeated over and over that even one more good man might strengthen the eleven enough to bring about the desired victory. Although Grant's name was not mentioned again, Roger felt sure the coach had him in mind, but Eliot knew well enough there was no prospect of altering the fellow's decision about playing. Furthermore, the time had already grown too short for the new boy to put in the practice he would need to become at all efficient.

The game, to be played in Wyndham, was scheduled for a Saturday. On Friday, at the beginning of the afternoon session, Prof. Richardson startled the school by delivering a grim lecture on the evils of hazing. Beneath his calm but scathing words some of the boys writhed visibly, despite their efforts to maintain a semblance of indifference. They knew, at the very start, the cause of this lecture, and concluded at once that in some manner the principal had learned the particulars of the hazing affair in which they had been concerned. As he went on the master proceeded to cite special instances in which hazing had resulted in the wrecking of the mental or physical health of the victims. He denounced it as disgraceful, unmanly and brutal, adding that he had been mortified and shocked to learn that various of his most respected boys had been concerned in such a piece of work. 102

"A few days ago," said the professor, "I had something to say to you about the breaking of the skeleton in the laboratory, which at that time I supposed to be an act of vandalism. I have since learned that this skeleton was used by the hazers to frighten the unfortunate subject of their pitiful sport, and that it was broken while being thus used, and then returned to the academy. I declared, should I learn who had been concerned, that I would be severe in my punishment; but that declaration was made without a full understanding of the circumstances. I am now in complete possession of the facts, and I know the name of every boy who took part in that disgraceful frolic. The wisest men often feel at liberty to change their minds, and, without any claim to special wisdom, I have changed mine. I shall not inflict immediate chastisement upon the offenders. However, I shall hereafter keep close and constant watch upon them, and any further offense of theirs coming to my notice shall not pass, I promise, without merited discipline. I am not so old that I do not understand that boys will be boys, but there are plenty of clean and manly sports in which you may indulge to your heart's content without danger of bringing to yourselves pangs of regret, and without fear of inflicting shame upon your parents and friends by your behavior. Although I have been exceedingly mild in my denunciation of your conduct, I wish you to know that I feel highly incensed and grieved and regretful over it." 103

Without exception, they were intensely relieved when he had finished. Few of them ventured to 104

exchange glances, but behind his geography Hunk Rollins grinned and winked at one or two of the guilty chaps who chanced to look in his direction.

After school that night, ere proceeding to the football field for final signal practice, half a dozen lads gathered behind the gymnasium.

"Somebody pup-peached," said Phil Springer.

"Well, whoever the pup is, he's a peach, that's all I have to say," observed Chipper Cooper.

"Who d'you s'pose it was, fellers?" questioned Sile Crane.

"My deduction is," said Sleuth Piper, "that it was a certain party named Grant."

"Of course it was Grant," agreed Berlin Barker. "No one else would do it."

"If it was him," said Tuttle, "why didn't he come right out with it when the prof gave us that first game of talk about busting the skeleton and offered to let off without punishment any one who would own up?"

"Because he's a sneak and a coward!" exclaimed Berlin. "He was afraid to get up before the whole school and squeal, but he went to Prof. Richardson privately and told the whole business. I'll bet my life I'm right."

"Of course you are," eagerly put in Rollins—"you're dead right, Berlin. You've got the cheap skate sized up correct."

"If you *are* right," said Cooper, "we'd all better show Mr. Grant what we think of a sneak. I'm in favor of sending him to Coventry. Let's cut him out, let him alone, have nothing to do with him; let's not even speak to him. If every fellow will do that, he'll enjoy himself hugely—I don't think."

"It's a good idea," nodded Barker.

"Maybe there's one feller yeou can't git to agree to it," drawled Crane. "Ben Stone's ruther chummy with Rod Grant."

"There was a time when Stone wasn't very popular around here," reminded Barker.

"Oh, yes," nodded Sile; "but yeou don't want to forgit that he come out on top, just the same."

"Look here," sneered Berlin, turning on the lanky fellow, "if you want to take up with a sneak and a coward like this boasting Texan why don't you say so? If you want to be friendly with a skulking, white-livered creature who peaches on you behind your back you can do so."

"Naow yeou hold right on!" snapped Crane. "I ain't said nothin' about bein' friendly with him myself, have I? We all know haow we used Stone and what come of it. Bern Hayden was at the head of that business, and he's got out of Oakdale and gone to school somewheres else. I just mentioned the fact that Stone was ruther friendly with Grant. I s'pose that's natteral, too, seein' as he recollects what happened to himself when he first hit this taown. We don't know yet for dead sartain that 'twas Grant who give us away, and so I'm in favor of goin' slow, that's all."

"We don't have to have proof against him," retorted Barker. "Nobody else would tell. Besides that, he's shown himself to be a quitter and a cheap dub. A fellow who hasn't the sand to play football when his team needs him is a——"

"Sh!" hissed Piper. "Here's Eliot."

"Come on, fellows," called the captain of the team, looking round the corner. "What are you doing here? The coach is waiting for us."

They followed him to the field.

A slight spitting fall of snow, beginning early the following morning, filled the boys with apprehension, but it did not result in a storm; and at ten o'clock the members of the team and the coach set out on their long ride over the frozen roads to Wyndham. A group of boys and girls who could not make the trip to witness the game were assembled at the square in front of the postoffice, and gave the buckboard load of husky youngsters a rousing send-off. As the buckboard swung down the main street Piper espied a sturdy, solitary figure in front of Stickney's store.

"There he is!" exclaimed Sleuth. "There's Grant watching us!"

"The cheap, blabbing coward!" cried Barker.

Ben Stone, sitting in front of Berlin, twisted round in his heavy overcoat.

"Look here, Barker," he said indignantly, "if you're referring to my friend Grant, take my advice and use different language in my hearing."

"Oh, ho!" sneered Berlin. "Your friend Grant, eh? Well, you must be proud of your friend!"

Stone's face was flushed, and he would have made a hot retort had not Eliot promptly interfered.

"Drop it, both of you," commanded Roger. "This is no time for a quarrel. We've got a football game on our hands."

"All right, captain," said Ben, straightening round. "I'm mum."

Barker laughed mirthlessly, and the buckboard rumbled across the bridge.

Little did those boys dream that while they were on their way to the scene of the contest Rodney Grant made arrangements with the telephone operator in Wyndham to secure the earliest possible report of the game. And while they were fighting desperately on the field Grant sat within instant call of the phone, waiting to bear of the result. When at last the exultant Wyndham operator

transmitted over the wire the intelligence that Oakdale had been defeated by a score of 10 to 6, the boy from Texas returned to the home of Priscilla Kent in a deeply dejected frame of mind.

"I'm sorry," he said to himself. "It's too bad."

CHAPTER XI.

IN DOUBT.

In the development of character defeat often plays an important part. The person who has never known the pangs following failure, whether deserved or otherwise, is poorly prepared to face such a misfortune when it comes to him, and at some time it must befall every one. Continued success is almost sure to breed over-confidence, self-conceit, underestimation of others, and, in many cases, downright caddishness. A certain amount of failure, a proportionate share of defeat, adds stamina and determination to a character that is naturally strong, and the experience thus obtained may be turned to profit in teaching the luckless one how to avoid future mistakes. It is only the weak and unfit who are ever totally crushed and disheartened by failure.

Hunk Rollins was one of the dejected members of the Oakdale eleven who whined after the Wyndham game was over, repeating his conviction that luck was against Oakdale and declaring she never could hope to defeat Wyndham.

Roger Eliot, hearing Rollins, had something to say:

"We lost the game in the last ten minutes of play, and we did so simply because you and one or two other fellows got cold feet. We made our touchdown and goal easier than we had dreamed we could, and that swelled our heads. We thought we were really going to have a snap; but when Wyndham woke up, got wise to our style and held us even play, our confidence began to ooze away. Those fellows fought for every point, and never let up once. After they tied us we went to pieces. If every man on the team had continued to do his level best, the game would have ended in a draw."

"Perhaps you would have been satisfied with that?" sneered Hunk.

"At least, it would have been better than losing. It's no use to cry over spilt milk. Everything considered, we have been amazingly successful this season, and the fact that we came so near downing Wyndham should spur us on to get after that bunch just twice as hard next year."

"You'll never beat them," Rollins once more asserted.

"We'll never do it with fellows on the team who think we can't."

"That's a knock at me."

"It's the plain truth, Rollins. Considering the material we had to build on, we turned out a corking team. We owe a lot of gratitude to the coach."

"Perhaps you'd won if you'd been able to strengthen your team with the feller from Texas."

"Bah! We couldn't have won anyhow," put in Barker. "I wonder we made as good showing as we did."

Roger turned on him. "You were one who let up toward the last of it, Barker. You surprised me by your lack of spirit. You were given one splendid chance to get through for a big gain, possibly for a touchdown, and you shirked."

Berlin's face turned white, and a resentful gleam of anger rose in his eyes.

"Look here, Mr. Eliot—the season is over and I no longer feel it necessary to call you captain—I want you to understand that I did my best, and if you say anything different you're a——"

"Stop, Barker! I wouldn't use that word if I were in your place, for if you do you'll find you're not dealing with Rodney Grant. There was no excuse for your quitting. You weren't used up, but you flinched at the critical moment. I didn't intend to say this publicly, but you joined Rollins in the cry-baby act, and I couldn't help speaking out. It's not the first time, either, that you've shown a disposition to lie down and let others face the brunt of things. I think you know what I mean."

Barker shivered with a sort of cold rage. Eliot had not lifted his voice, but, knowing him as he did, Berlin was seized by a sudden disinclination to provoke him further.

"All right," he muttered. "I'm not going to quarrel with you now, Eliot, but I won't forget this."

The boys journeyed homeward through the gathering darkness and stinging cold of the November night in anything but a happy condition. No one cared to accept Tuttle's offer to treat on peanuts, and Cooper's efforts to jolly things up by springing some bad puns and cracking a few stale jokes fell lamentably flat.

Not a few of them fancied Rod Grant must be secretly rejoicing over the result of the game, and, naturally, this increased their dislike for the Texan. Grant found himself shunned and practically ostracized by all save Stone and Eliot, and even Roger made no particular effort to be friendly. Stone stuck by faithfully, regardless of the efforts of various fellows to lead him to do otherwise.

Cold weather deepening, the boys fell to watching Lake Woodrim with longing eagerness for the time when it should close over and the ice become sufficiently strong for skating. In due course this happened, and, with their skates polished and ground, the fellows flocked to the lake, accompanied by a few girls who likewise enjoyed the sport.

School over one day, Grant was standing alone on the academy steps gazing toward the lake when Stone, carrying his skates, came out.

"Hello, Rod," said Ben. "Come on."

"Where?"

"Down to the lake. The ice is great."

"I don't skate."

"Don't? Why not?"

"Never learned."

"That's queer."

"Not so queer when you consider that we have blessed little skating in the State of Texas."

"Oh, I didn't think of that. Well, now is your time to learn, and I know you'll like it."

"I haven't any skates."

"I'll loan you mine."

"That's right good of you, Ben, old man; but I don't think I'll try it—now."

"Why not?"

"Well, to tell you the plain truth, I'm not anxious to make an exhibition of myself before everybody. Sometime, perhaps, I'll sneak off by my lonesome and have a go at it. Is the ice solid all over the lake?"

"Well, pretty nearly all over it. There are one or two weak spots, but we know where they are, and we keep away from them."

"Do you swim?"

"Sure; don't you?"

"Yes, but I fancy it would be right unpleasant to take a dip in that icy water."

Ben was thinking of Grant's words as he clamped on his skates at the edge of the lake down behind the gymnasium. There was something strangely contradictory about the boy from Texas, who had betrayed a disposition to swagger a bit and to boast in a joshing way, but who would not fight, who had refused to play football, and who now was plainly indisposed to make himself an object for jesting or ridicule by attempting to skate. Whether this backwardness came from a sensitive temperament, or whether Grant was actually lacking in courage, was a question Ben could not decide. There had seemed to be some timidity in the fellow's desire to know whether or not the ice was sufficiently strong for skating all over the lake. Finally, swinging away to join some shouting lads who were engaged in an impromptu game of hockey, Stone dismissed the problem.

Even then Grant was on his way to Stickney's store, where he purchased a pair of skates. Supper over that night, he set off alone toward the upper end of Lake Woodrim.

CHAPTER XII.

COLD WEATHER IN TEXAS.

In the shelter of Bear Cove, the shore of which was heavily wooded with a growth of pine, Rodney Grant clamped on his skates. Through the still night air, at intervals, came the faint, faraway shouts of skaters who were enjoying themselves on the broad lower end of the lake. From a distance, while making his way to this secluded spot, Rod had seen the gleaming light of a bonfire which had been built on Crooked Island; and, pausing for a few moments, he had watched the flitting, darting figures of the skaters passing between himself and the light, which flared and rose with the application of fresh fuel brought from along the shores. And while he watched a feeling of loneliness crept over the young Texan.

"But I'll keep away from them until I can skate some," he muttered, as he resumed his journey across the frozen fields and pastures.

Having secured the skates to the stout soles of his heavy boots, Rod started to rise, but dropped back with a faint grunt of surprise as the irons shot out from beneath him.

"Right slippery things," he half chuckled. "I reckon I'll have to be careful how I get up."

A sapling close by the shore aided him, but when he had reached an upright position he found to his perplexity that instinct led him to cling fast to that slender young tree, with the apprehension of a fall strong upon him in case he ventured to let go. His ankles were inclined to wobble weakly, and a queer, disconcerting sensation of uncertainty made him hold his breath.

"What's the matter with me?" he growled fretfully. "I didn't expect to skate right off in polished style, but I'll be hanged if I believe I can even stand up on the things. I've watched the fellows at it, and it seems easy enough to go skimming around first on one foot and then on the other. They didn't make any mess at all about it."

His feet started backward beneath him, and he pulled himself up, causing the sapling to bend and crack.

"Maybe these new skates are too blamed slippery," he thought. "If that's right, I wonder why the man who sold them to me didn't say something about it. Well, I don't care a rap; I'm going to give them a try."

With an effort, he swung round and let go his hold on the sapling. The sensation of suspense and uncertainty deepened swiftly as he found the skates slowly carrying him away from the shore, while at the same time he realized that his feet were spreading farther and farther apart, a thing he could not seem to prevent.

"Great smoke!" he gasped. "I'll split plumb in two if this keeps up. Ugh!"

The final grunt was pounded from his lips as he came down sprawlingly upon the solid ice.

For at least thirty seconds he sat there, scratching his head in a state of doubt and chagrin.

"I've ridden buckers," he said, "and I've even busted one or two bad ones; but I knew how to go at that job, while this business has got me stuck complete. I'm guessing some."

His perplexity was rapidly changing to annoyance and vexation. Getting on his knees, he cautiously placed his right foot beneath him and attempted to rise. In a twinkling he was stretched at full length upon his stomach.

"Dash the things!" he cried savagely. "I don't see how anybody ever stands on them, much less goes scooting around doing fancy tricks. Maybe if I could get Stone to give me some pointers I might catch onto the game. But I don't want any one to give me pointers," he continued warmly. "I'll learn how to skate all by my lonesome, or I'll break my wooden head."

Aroused to this point, he continued his efforts with grim and unabated determination, in spite of repeated falls, some of which shook him up thoroughly and quite knocked the wind out of him. He was just beginning to fancy himself making slight progress when a burst of laughter caused him to twist his neck round to glance toward the nearby shore, which incautious movement again sent him flat upon the ice.

"Woosh!" he wheezed, sitting up.

"Oh! ho! ho! ho!" shouted some one, who seemed to be literally choking with merriment.

"Hee! hee! hee!" laughed another voice.

He could see them there at the edge of the ice, two dark figures faintly discernible in spite of the black background of pines.

"You seem to be plenty amused, gents," he observed sarcastically. "I opine I'm providing a better entertainment than a real circus clown could hand out; but I want you to understand this is a strictly private show, and you're not at all welcome unless you can show invitation cards."

"Oh, say!" piped a high-pitched voice; "it's the feller from Texas, I guess. He don't seem to know

much about skating.”

“How did you ever get that idea?” growled Rod. “I’m the champion skater of the Panhandle country. I’ll guarantee you can’t find a native son of Rogers County, Texas, who can show me any points at skating.”

One of the fellows came sliding out onto the ice, followed slowly by the other.

“Funny you should be all alone here,” said the chap in advance. “You know me—Spotty Davis.”

“Oh, Davis!” muttered Rod, not particularly mollified, recalling instantly that he had heard something about the fellow having been concerned in a particularly low and contemptible trick upon Stone, which had placed him in decided disfavor at Oakdale. “What are you doing here?”

“Me and my friend, Lander, came over here to skate,” explained Spotty.

“Why didn’t you skate down the lake with the rest of the fellows?”

“Oh, we’ve got our reasons. You see Lander he’s just come back to Oakdale after being away for a couple of years, and he don’t care much about the fellers ‘round here.”

“They’re a lot of stiffs, the whole bunch of them,” said Lander. “Spotty is the only friend I have got in town that I care a rap about. He’s the only one who seemed glad to see me back. Some of ‘em wouldn’t even say hullo.”

“I guess Grant knows what they are,” chuckled Davis. “They’ve handed him the frosty, too. That was some of Berlin Barker’s work, and the rest of the crowd fell into line.”

“Barker!” sneered Lander. “He thinks he’s somebody. I ain’t got no use for him, nor for Roger Eliot, either.”

“Eliot!” snapped Davis. “He threw me down; kicked me off the team. I won’t forget it, and some day, perhaps, I’ll have a chance to get even. Just learning to skate, Grant?”

“Just trying my hand at it—I mean my foot.”

“You certainly was making a mess,” snickered Spotty. “You need some one to give you a few pointers. Wait till we put on our skates, and we’ll show you. Eh, Bunk?”

“Sure,” agreed Lander cheerfully. “I don’t believe there’s anybody around Oakdale can skate better than me.”

“You seem to have a right good opinion of yourself,” said Rod, as the two boys seated themselves on the ice and began fastening on their skates.

“Oh, there ain’t much of anything I can’t do first-class,” boasted Bunk Lander. “I’m a ripping good swimmer, and I can play baseball and football as well as the next feller.”

“You remind me some of a gent who dropped into Rogers County, Texas, two years ago,” said Grant. “He was from the East, and his name was Jim Lander. Any relation, I wonder?”

“I don’t know; never bother any about my relatives. How was it this Jim Lander reminded you of me?”

“Why, he gave out the same generous flow of hot air; he was always telling how good he was. The punchers christened him Hot Air Jim. Why, his line of talk would melt ice in zero weather, and he proved it, too. You know we don’t have much ice down that way, but that year there came a big freeze. It seemed to strike Rogers County in particular, and it was the worst ever known. Why, gents, it actually froze the Canadian River stiff clean to the bottom in a single night.”

“What are you giving us?” exclaimed Lander.

“I was starting in to tell you how this yere gent we called Hot Air Jim saved us from a terrible calamity,” answered Rod soberly; “but if you don’t want to hear it——”

“Go ahead,” urged Davis. “Spiel it off.”

“Well, as I was saying, that sudden freeze congealed the whole Canadian in those parts till the river was like an Alpine glacier. It was sure enough extraordinary, for such a thing never happened before. There wasn’t any snowfall accompanying the phenomenon, for I judge it was too cold to snow. What was more remarkable, the zone of that freeze didn’t seem to extend more than fifty miles or so into the mountains. Beyond that the river flowed on in the same old fashion, but when it hit the cold country it simply turned to ice and went to piling up higher and higher, choking its channel and overflowing in all directions. That dam of ice heaped itself up across the mouth of a huge valley, until the force of the water behind it began to push it along across Rogers County. We discovered the ice was moving slowly at first, but after a time you could see it creep along, groaning and cracking and complaining all the while. And don’t forget that it was spreading out over the country just as fast as the water behind it forced it down out of the mountains.

“You can perceive, I opine, that the whole Canadian country was threatened with devastation, for the irresistible force of that mass of ice was sure bound to sweep everything before it. People were in a panic when they came to realize this. The only thing that could save us was a sudden break in the cold spell, and we saw no signs of that. Then I thought of Jim Lander. It was a great thought, gents. I sent for him and brought him out there and set him to blowing off hot air about himself. Inside of half an hour the thermometer went up twenty points, and the temperature of the surrounding country for at least a hundred miles was modified amazingly.

“Pretty soon the ice began to melt and run, and this continued as long as we could keep that man Lander talking. Maybe you won’t believe it, but inside of two hours the ice was all melted and the

river pouring down its bed in a perfect flood, while the surrounding country was a foot deep in water. Then we tried to shut Lander off; but he had started going, and he couldn't seem to stop. Say! he kept on blowing until the water began to steam and get hot, and in his immediate vicinity it actually boiled. We had to capture the man and gag him in order to prevent the whole of Rogers County from being cooked then and there."

"Gee!" said Bunk Lander. "That sounds me like a lie."

"It is possible!" murmured Grant.

CHAPTER XIII.

A BOND OF SYMPATHY.

With their assistance and advice, Rod finally found himself making some progress at learning to skate. Slow progress it seemed, indeed, yet he was genuinely elated when he finally found himself able to stand on the irons and stroke a little in an awkward way; for this was the promise of better things to come, and, despite black-and-blue spots and wearied, wobbly ankles, he was determined to acquire skill at that winter pastime which all the boys seemed to enjoy. At intervals, having labored back to the shore, he sat down to rest, watching his two companions skimming hither and thither over the surface of the frozen cove. Once they joined him.

"Pegged out?" questioned Spotty kindly.

"Not a bit of it," replied Rod, with a touch of pride. "I've busted bronchos in my day, and learning to skate is a parlor pastime compared with that job. I'm going at it again directly."

"You'll learn all right," assured Lander. "Every feller gets his bumps when he first tries it. Boo! it's cold to-night. Wish we had a nip of something to warm us up." 130

"Hot coffee wouldn't be bad," said Rod.

"Coffee!" laughed Bunk derisively. "I'd like something stronger than that, but you can't get much of anything around this old town. Tell you what, I know where to find some slick old cider, and that would be better than nothing. 'Tain't so easy to get it, though. My grandfather put it up, and he's got it bottled and stowed away in his cellar. Guards it like a hawk, too."

"Can't you swipe a bottle or two?" asked Spotty eagerly. "I know what it is, for didn't we have a high old time with some of it over at your camp in the swamp back of Turkey Hill?"

"I'd forgot about that," laughed Lander. "We did have a racket, didn't we, Spot?"

"Yes, and I had a headache the next day. Your old granddad's cider is stout enough to lift a safe." 131

"Oh, he knows how to fix it. He doctors it up with charred prunes and brown sugar and raisins, and mixes a little of the real corn juice in with it. A swig or two of that stuff is enough to make a feller feel frisky as a colt. Maybe I'll be able to get hold of some to-morrow. Say, Spot, I wonder if my old camp is still standing?"

"Guess it is," answered Davis, "though the log we used to cross over on is gone, and you can't get to it very easy."

"We can get to it all right now the swamp is froze up. That was a corking place, and I had some fun there till I got caught. We'll have to take a look at it, me and you, the first chance we get. Maybe your friend Grant would like to come along."

"Just now," said Rod, "I'm particularly interested in acquiring the art of skating. What's this camp you're talking about?"

"A little old log cabin I built on sort of an island in the middle of the swamp back of Turkey Hill," explained Lander. "It made a great place for fellers that was congenial to sneak off away from people and have fun. There was a sort of path through the swamp, and, by cutting down a tree and dropping it across the worst place, we could get over to the island slick. I had that old joint fixed-up fine, too, with bunks and blankets and an old stove; and you should have seen the stock of provisions I put in—everything a feller needed to live comfortable and feed well for a month or more." 132

"Where did you get all that outfit?"

"Oh, I got it all right," answered Bunk evasively, while Spotty smothered a chuckle. "If it hadn't been for that sneak, Barker, who come prying around, I'd never had any trouble. Why, the great detective, Sleuth Piper, was fooled completely. He was all balled up on the big sensation that had everybody in Oakdale talking, and his deductions about it would have made a horse laugh."

"Don't talk to me about him!" snarled Davis suddenly. "He's one of the bunch I've got it in for, all right. A detective! Why, he couldn't detect anything."

Rodney Grant could not help feeling a slight bond of sympathy between himself and these lads who bore a strong dislike for the very fellows who had accorded him such unfair and shabby treatment. True, there was something about them which gave him a sensation of distrust, yet they also were outcasts in a way, and he could not help thinking that their misfortune might not be wholly merited. Of a generous nature, he believed every person had redeeming qualities, and nothing irritated him more than the common impulse of the masses to jump on a fellow who was down. 133

"You'll have to come over and see my old hang-out sometime, Grant," said Lander. "If the stove is still there, I imagine the camp might be chinked up a little and made pretty comfortable for some fellers who wanted to sneak off and have a little quiet fun. Of course everybody around here is watching me, and I'll have to make a bluff at walking a chalk-line; but I'm going to be careful, and any lobster who sticks his nose into my business will stand a chance of getting it pinched."

"That's the talk!" cried Davis. "I don't blame you a bit."

Although he wondered what all this sort of conversation meant, Rod, following the true Texas code of manners, refrained from asking questions. If they wished to take him into their confidence, well and good; but, if they did not, he would not pry.

After a time they resumed their skating, and Rodney, still further elated, found that he was making decided progress. He even ventured forth from the cove in the direction of Bass Island, but Spotty skated after him and warned him to keep away from the southern end of the island, where there were always "breathing holes" in the ice.

"There are currents come round both ways and meet there," said Davis, "so it's never really safe, even in the middle of the winter. Eliot broke through all by his lonesome last winter and come mighty near drowning."

"Which would have been a terrible loss to the community," laughed Lander, skating backward near at hand.

"What have you got against him?" questioned Spotty. "He didn't have anything to do with handing you that swift poke you got."

"Oh, no; but he always seemed to think himself too good for association with common people. Just because his father happens to have the dough, he has a way about him that I can't stand. You know what he did to you."

"That's all right; I'm not standing up for him. Say, Rod, old feller, you're coming fine. You were falling all over yourself a while ago, but now you can get around pretty well. It won't take you long to skate first-class."

"Thanks for the encouragement," laughed Grant.

"Come out here with us to-morrow night," urged Spotty, "and we'll give you another lesson."

"Sure thing," agreed Bunk.

"I'll do it," promised Rod.

CHAPTER XIV.

A NARROW ESCAPE.

The following morning, not a little to his wonderment, Rod found his legs were lame and his ankles a trifle stiff. Being a fellow of active temperament and athletic mold, and having ridden the range and punched cows, it vexed him to find his efforts at skating, having lasted less than two hours, should have done him up to such an extent.

"I must be getting soft," he muttered, as, following a sponge bath, he rubbed himself down and massaged the sore muscles of his legs. "I'll slump out of any sort of condition if I don't look out."

Gradually, as he moved around, the lameness passed away, although it did not wholly disappear. At school he heard the boys talking ice hockey and discussing the organization of a basketball team to furnish sport when, later, snowfalls should put an end to skating; and once more, with a sensation of resentment, he felt himself barred from their circle, although as a student at the academy he should have been one of them. This led him openly to accept the friendly overtures of Spotty Davis, observing which, Ben Stone, who had remained faithful despite public sentiment, did not seem to be wholly pleased. Nevertheless, Stone made no comment.

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Lander was not a student at the academy; he had never completed his course in the grammar school, and he now spent his time loafing around the village, being closely watched by the people who knew him of old; for no one trusted him.

With suppressed impatience, Grant waited the coming of another night. It fretted him to see the boys and girls skating on the lake during noontime intermission, yet he found a fascination in watching them, and he noted that Barker and Eliot seemed to be the most graceful, accomplished and proficient of all the fellows. Not until he had acquired much more skill would he be ready to make a public appearance on skates.

Leaving his aunt clearing the table after supper, with the monkey watching her from its perch on the back of a chair and the parrot grumbling in its cage, Rod secured his skates and again turned his steps toward Bear Cove. As he approached the cove he was surprised to hear voices and laughter, and, pausing to listen, he learned that Davis and Lander were there ahead of him.

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They were sitting on the shore in the shadow of the pines, and their voices sounded strange, while their laughter was of a high-pitched, unnatural sort. They looked up with a start as he paused beside them, for the carpet of pine needles had muffled his footsteps.

"Who the dickens——" cried Spotty.

"Why, it's Rod—our friend Rod, Spot," said Lander. "'Lo, old chap. We're waiting for you. How is the weather in Texas to-night?"

"'Tis Rod, ain't it?" whooped Spotty familiarly. "Good old Rod, the cow-puncher and fabricator. Glad to see you, old man. Say, Bunk, where's that flagon of joy juice?"

"Here 'tis," said Lander, handing something over. "Great stuff for a cold night; it's good as an overcoat."

"Have a nip, Rod," invited Davis, holding it out as Grant sat down at the edge of the ice.

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"What is it?" asked Rodney.

"Some of old Gran'ser Lander's bottled elixir of life. Gee! it does stir up a feller's blood and make him feel good and warm. Don't be afraid of it; take a good pull."

Davis thrust a gurgling bottle into Grant's hand.

"Oh, I don't believe I want any of that stuff," laughed Rod. "I'm not cold."

"Do you good, just the same," declared Bunk. "You don't know what we're offering you. It's nothing but harmless cider. Go ahead and try it."

Thus adjured, the boy from Texas removed the stopper and tipped the bottle to his lips. One small swallow was quite enough; he spat out the second mouthful.

"Cider!" he exclaimed. "It tastes like vinegar to me. You don't mean to say you like that stuff?"

"No vinegar about it," said Lander, with a touch of indignation. "It's just plain hard cider, doctored and bottled by my old grandpop. I had hard work sneaking it out under my coat. Perhaps you may not like the taste of it at first, Rod, but you'll get so you'll like it if you keep trying it."

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"It gives you that funny feeling, that funny feeling," chanted Davis, ending with a silly laugh.

Disgusted with them, Rod forced the bottle into Spotty's hands.

"My father is a temperance man," he said. "He won't have a drop of booze around the ranch, for he's seen the bad effects of it. One of our best men got his skin full and was lost in a norther. When they found him he was pretty near gone, and he lost both hands from that freeze—made him a cripple for life."

"Oh, that was different," said Bunk. "He had been drinking the real stuff; this is only cider."

Nevertheless, Grant, preparing to clamp on his skates, firmly refused to touch the bottle again. Lander and Davis had another drink, and then they attached their own skates to their feet.

"I'm afraid," said Spotty, rising somewhat unsteadily, "that you're a rather tame old cowboy, Rod. I'm afraid that's why the fellers don't take much stock in you. You duck at everything." 141

"They're welcome to take as little stock in me as they choose," said Grant, a trifle warmly. "I came out here to learn to skate, not to guzzle old cider."

They followed him onto the ice, and Spotty, attempting to do some fancy tricks, sprawled at full length, whereupon he sat up, whooping with laughter.

"Hold on, Grant," called Lander, as Rod started off. "We're going to give you further instructions, you know. Don't mind Spotty. That upper story of his is so light he can't keep his balance."

"Never mind me," returned Rodney; "I reckon I'll get along all right."

He was gratified to find he had lost none of the slight knack at skating acquired on the previous night, and this gave him so much confidence that he rapidly improved. At first his lame ankles protested, but they soon ceased their rebellion, and a sense of exhilaration came to him as he found himself swinging back and forth across the cove with fairly long strokes and remarkable steadiness. Nevertheless, he was annoyed by his companions, who persisted in following him and getting in his way, offering suggestions and making silly remarks. To get away from them he skated out toward the open lake. 142

Suddenly round Pine Point flashed a light, followed by another and another. Half a dozen boys, bearing torches, came upon Grant and his persistent mates ere they could escape. Three of the torch bearers were Eliot, Barker and Rollins. Berlin flashed the light of his torch upon them, and then, whirling to skate backwards as he went past, cried out to the others:

"Here's a fine collection! The cow-puncher has found some company to suit his taste."

This produced a laugh, which appeared greatly to irritate Lander, who shouted:

"Go on, you bunch of dubs! Nobody wants anything to do with you, anyhow."

Spotty Davis broke into a series of derisive cat-calls and taunting jeers, to which the torch bearers gave no heed. Some of the party turned back at that point, but two or three continued on round the northern end of Bass Island.

"They make me sick!" snarled Lander. "I'm going to get at that feller Barker some day, and when I do he'll know something has happened to him." 143

In spite of himself, Grant could not wholly smother a feeling of regret over having been seen with those two chaps. Barker's sneer had left a sting, a fact which he would not have acknowledged had any one intimated as much. Wishing to get away by himself, he improved an early opportunity to skate off, leaving Bunk and Spotty still telling each other what they thought of certain fellows in Oakdale; and he paid little heed to his course until, of a sudden, he discovered the shore of Bass Island not far away at his right.

"Jingoes!" he muttered, attempting to check his progress suddenly. "This must be the dangerous place they told me about. Those 'breathing holes' in the ice——"

In spite of his efforts, his momentum had carried him onward, and suddenly both skate-irons cut through beneath him. There was a terrifying, cracking sound, and in a twinkling he felt himself plunged into the icy water. A cry was cut short on his lips as he went under.

Although he rose almost immediately to the surface and clutched at the thin edge of the ice, he could feel the current which swept round the island pulling at his legs. The ice gave way, and he clutched again and again, struggling to keep himself from being sucked beneath it. 144

"Help!" he cried.

A moving, flashing light gleamed across the glassy surface of the lake. It was followed by another and still another. The three torch bearers, who had circled round the island, were now speeding southward. Two of them seemed to be racing far over toward the western shore of the lake. Apparently the third had not joined in this contest, and he was much nearer.

"Help!" called Rod once more.

The nearest skater heard the cry and swerved suddenly in Grant's direction.

"What's the matter?" he shouted. "Where are you?"

"Here—here in the water. I've broken in." 145

Grant's teeth rattled together as he uttered these words, the icy chill of the lake seeming to benumb him through and through. Nevertheless, he fancied he had recognized the voice of the approaching fellow as that of Hunk Rollins, and a moment later the waving torch, lighting the face of its bearer, showed beyond question that it was Rollins.

At a safe distance Hunk came to a full stop. "Who is it?" he called again.

"It's I—Grant. Can't seem to lift myself out. I can barely hang on."

"Jerusalem!" gasped Hunk. "I don't dare to get near you. It's dangerous there." Then he whirled swiftly and went skating away as fast as he could, yelling at the top of his voice: "Hi! hi! fellers! Come back! Grant's broke in!"

To the dismay of the boy in the water, the racing torch bearers did not seem to hear Rollins, who continued to pursue them, repeating his calls. Farther and farther away they went, the sound of their skates ringing over the surface of the lake.

"By the time he overtakes them I'll be done for," thought the unfortunate lad; and even as this passed through his mind the ice broke again, compelling him to make another struggle to fling his arms out upon it. In that terrible moment it seemed that Rollins had deliberately deserted him—had even been willing to leave him there to perish.

"I must get out alone. I must get out somehow," he mumbled huskily. "If it wasn't for the current I might—"

Again the ringing sound of skates reached his ears, and hope flared up strong as that sound became more and more distinct. It came from the direction of Bass Cove, and, approaching across the ice, he discovered two figures, one in advance of the other.

"Hi, there! Hi, Grant! Is that you? Where are you? What's the matter?"

It was the voice of Lander.

"Here! here!" answered Rod, as loudly as he could. "I've broken in. Can't you help me?"

"Look out, Bunk," warned Spotty, who was behind. "It's dangerous there."

One of Lander's skates raked along the ice as he set it sidewise to check his speed.

"I see him!" he cried. "There he is, Spot! Hang on, Grant, old feller; we'll get you out somehow. Hang on a little longer."

Away he went toward the nearby island, while Davis, getting down on all fours, crawled cautiously toward Rodney. From the shore of the island came a cracking sound, like some one thrashing amid the underbrush and saplings which grew upon it.

"We told ye," said Spotty—"we told ye to keep away from here. Gee! you're in a bad fix. If we had a rope or something, we might haul you out."

"You'll have to get busy pretty soon," returned Grant. "The way this current pulls is something fierce."

Out from the shore of the island flashed Lander, bearing a long pole in his hands. Making a half circle, he passed Spotty, who uttered some cautioning words, slowing down as he drew near Grant.

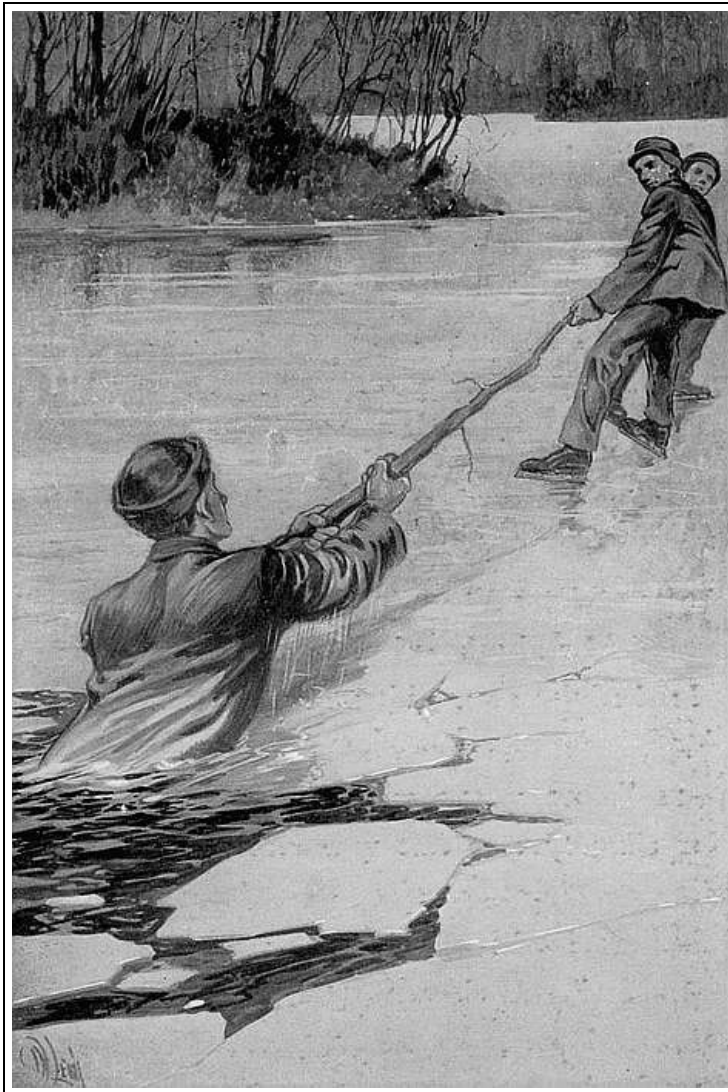
"Come on, Spot," he urged. "The ice seems to be solid here. We've got to pull him out of that. Here, Rod, old man, get hold of the end of this pole if you can—get hold and hang on for your life."

Grant grasped the end of the pole with both hands, having lifted the upper part of his body onto the edge of the ice, which buckled and permitted the water to flow up around him, although it did not break. Urged by Lander, Davis ventured nearer and added his strength in pulling. Together they dragged the weakened and nearly exhausted lad out onto the solid ice.

"Come," said Bunk, seizing the water-soaked chap and lifting him, "stand on your pins if you can. We've got to hustle you under cover before you freeze stiff. Just stand up, and we'll push you along."

Down the lake they swept with him, meeting Rollins, Barker and several others, who, still bearing torches, were returning.

"Oh, you've pulled him out, have you?" cried Hunk.



TOGETHER THEY DRAGGED THE WEAKENED AND NEARLY EXHAUSTED LAD OUT ONTO THE SOLID ICE. —Page 148.

“No thanks to you,” flung back Lander. “We heard him hollering to you. Why didn’t you stop and help? He’d ‘a’ drowned for all of you.”

“I went after the other fellers,” said Hunk.

“And if you’d had any sense at all,” sneered Lander, “you’d known he’d ‘a’ gone down before you could bring them. You didn’t have nerve enough to give him a hand, that’s all. Here’s your friend Barker with Mr. Rollins, Grant.”

“So I observe,” said Rod. “He’s found some company to suit his taste.”

CHAPTER XV.

WHEN A GRANT FIGHTS.

Rod Grant appeared at school the following day apparently none the worse for his unpleasant experience. Ben Stone congratulated him on his escape, but his distant and repellant air held the other boys aloof, if any of them were disposed to make advances.

As soon as he had concluded a hasty supper that night, Stone set out for the home of Priscilla Kent. Following the dark footpath upon which Grant had been ambushed by the hazers, Ben reached the lonely little cottage and knocked at the door.

Miss Priscilla Kent answered the summons, a lamp in her hand and her pet monkey perched upon her shoulder. As she opened the door the caller was startled to hear a harsh voice within the house crying:

"Up with the anchor! Heave ho! Shake out another reef! Salt horse for mess! Kill the cook! Kill the cook!"

"I beg your pardon," said the spinster in a surprisingly mild and gentle tone of voice; "it's only my parrot. I got him from an old sea captain."

"Oh!" said Ben, plainly relieved. "I didn't know. I thought——"

"Some one was being murdered, I s'pose," smiled Miss Kent. "Living alone, as I have, my pets have served as company. Won't you step in?"

Was this mild, fragile, gentle woman the person all Oakdale declared cracked in the upper story? Ben wondered; and then he remembered hearing it said that she was afflicted only at intervals.

"My name is Stone," he explained. "I'm a scholar at the academy, and I thought I'd call on Grant."

"You're the first caller he's had. I think he'll be s'prised to see you."

A door opened at the head of the stairs, and Grant appeared in the light that shone from a room beyond.

"Who is it, aunt?" he asked.

"A caller to see you, Rodney. He says his name is Stone."

"Oh, Ben!" exclaimed Rod, in apparent wonderment. "Is that you, Ben? Come up."

"All right," said Stone, starting to mount the stairs as Miss Priscilla closed the door.

"You're off your course, you lubber!" squawked the parrot. "Salt horse for mess! Kill the cook!"

"Polly is very noisy to-night," remarked the spinster apologetically.

Involuntarily Stone dodged as something went darting past him up the balustrade. Then he laughed a bit, beholding the monkey perched on the newel post at the head of the stairs.

"Come down, Nero! Come back here, sir!" called Miss Priscilla. "He wants to get inter your room, Rodney."

"And tear up my books and papers again," laughed Grant. "Chase yourself, you Roman emperor!"

The monkey dodged, chattered, and slid tauntingly down the balustrade.

"He's a lively rascal and sure plumb full of mischief," said Rod. "Come into my den, Ben. Hardly expected to receive a caller here to-night—or any other time."

The room was small but comfortable, being warmed by a tiny air-tight stove. Two Navajo rugs brightened the old-fashioned rag carpet on the floor, and there were some pictures on the walls which plainly had been hung there by Grant himself. An old oak bedstead took up considerable space, although it had been set as far back as possible in a corner. On a table, bearing a shaded lamp, were books and papers and some playing cards carefully laid out face upward in a series of small piles. A chair stood where Rod had pushed it back from the table on hearing some one at the door.

"Just amusing myself for a few moments with a little game of solitaire," explained the boy from Texas, observing the visitor glance toward the cards. "Have to do something to pass away the time, you know. Have the easy chair, won't you?"

"I—I'm not going to stop long," faltered Ben. "The other chair will do just as well."

But Rod laughingly forced him to take the easy chair. "If you're comfortable, perhaps you won't be in such a great hurry. It's a sure enough novelty for me to receive a visitor, and you've got me wondering a plenty how you chanced to come round."

"I wanted to see you," said Ben slowly. "I wanted to have a talk with you, Rod."

"Well, we can talk ourselves black in the face, and nobody to bother. Go ahead and string it off."

"You were lucky to escape being drowned last night."

"Sure thing. I reckon I'd gone under right there if it hadn't been for Bunk Lander. He stood by like a man."

The embarrassment of the visitor became more apparent.

"Doubtless Lander deserves all the credit you give him, Rod."

"He certain does."

"But if you had not been with those fellows——"

"Oh, I know what you're driving at now. Look here, Stone, I like you; you've treated me like a white man. I can't say as much for some other chaps around here. Just because I kept my mouth shut and minded my own business when I came here, a lot of pin-heads began to sneer about me and say I was a fake who'd never even seen the State of Texas. I was born in Rogers County, which is located in the Panhandle of the Lone Star State. Those fellows didn't disturb me a whole lot, Ben; but, just for a joke, I decided to give them something really worth talking about. As long as they had the notion that every Texan must talk dialect and act like a half-civilized man, I took a fancy to play the part for them. It was a sort of a joke with me. I'll say right here and now that I reckon we've got as decent and refined people in Texas as you can find anywhere around these parts, though doubtless it would be right difficult to pound this fact into the heads of some chaps."

"That's not what I'm driving at," said Ben, "and I don't believe your statement that you hail from Texas had anything to do with turning the fellows against you. The team needed strengthening; they wanted you to play football, and——"

"I claim, as a free and independent individual, that I have a right to play football or not, just as I choose."

"Of course you have, but loyalty to the school——"

"Whatever I may do or decline to do, Stone, you may be sure I have good and sufficient reasons. A fellow's motives are sometimes misunderstood."

"That's quite true," agreed Stone. "I had an experience decidedly more unpleasant than yours when I first came to Oakdale."

"But you pulled out on top. Why? Because you played football?"

"No, not that; because circumstances and events made me understood at last. I've never questioned your courage, Grant, but you know lots of times a fellow has to prove himself before he's estimated correctly. I don't believe you're a quitter; I don't believe you've a yellow streak."

"Thanks," said Rod, with a slight touch of sarcasm which he could not wholly repress.

"But you know how most fellows estimate a chap," Ben went on hastily; "they judge by outward appearances."

"Evidently my appearance is decidedly against me," laughed Rod.

Involuntarily the visitor lifted a hand to one of his ears, half of which had been cut away cleanly at some time by a sharp instrument. He could not have been called a prepossessing or attractive lad, but there was a certain rugged honesty and frankness in his eyes and his manner which stamped him as the right sort. Nevertheless, during the first weeks of his life in Oakdale, being misunderstood and misjudged by nearly every one, he had passed through a cloudy and bitter experience.

"It's not wholly by a fellow's looks that he's estimated, Rod; actions count, you know. I came here an unknown, just as you did; but you have the advantage of me, for you're a good-looking chap, and I'm simply ugly. Now if you'd happened to hit the fellows just right at first, and you'd deported yourself according to their views regarding the code of behavior for an Oakdale Academy man, you might have become popular at once."

Rod snapped his fingers, rising to fling a leg over one corner of the table, on which he half seated himself, the other foot upon the floor, leaning forward toward Ben.

"Who are these narrow-minded, Puritanical, half-baked New England cubs that allow they have a right to lay out a code of deportment and behavior to be followed by me?" he cried scornfully. "It was chance that corraled me in this wretched hole, not choice. What do these fellows here really know about me, anyway? Nothing. Disgusted with their nosey, prying ways, I've amused myself by stringing them—by telling preposterous tales of my wild adventures and hairbreadth escapes. Evidently it hasn't helped my cause much, for the blockheads seem to lack imagination and a real sense of humor. Why, they really thought I was trying to make them believe those yarns, while all the time it was apparent on the surface to any one with the slightest horse sense that I was joshing. They think me a braggart. Bah!"

Ben twisted uneasily upon his chair. "They don't understand you, Rod, any more than they understood me at first," he said soothingly. "Now I'm willing to take your word for it that you had some good reason for refusing to play football—even for swallowing the slurs and insults of Hunk Rollins and Berlin Barker."

The eyes of the young Texan flashed and a flush deepened in his bronzed cheeks.

"Rollins is a cheap bully," he declared, "and it seems to me Barker showed himself up for a coward when he ran away from Oakdale with the idea in his head that he had been chiefly concerned in driving me dotty."

"Your estimation of Rollins is pretty near correct," nodded Ben, remembering his own experience

with the same fellow; "and if you had come out boldly and faced Barker when he returned from Clearport I'm sure the situation would be different to-day."

"That would have made it necessary for me to fight him," said Rod, "and I have my reasons for avoiding anything of that sort. It may make me look like a coward, but if anybody will take the trouble to look up the records of the Grants in Rogers County, Texas, he will find there never was a cowardly drop of blood in one of them. Beginning as a nester or small rancher, my father found himself up against the big ranchers who wanted his acres and were determined to drive him out. He's there now, and he owns a pretty sizeable ranch for these days. But he had to fight for his rights, and I don't allow the remembrance of some of the things he went through is any too agreeable. He's carrying a bullet in his right hip which made him lame for life, and his left arm is gone at the elbow, the result of a gun fight, in which he received a wound that didn't get proper attention for three days. You haven't heard me blowing about these things, but they're straight facts, with no fancy touches added for effect. And as long as I have said this much, let me add that the other man, whose name, by the way, was Jennings, didn't come out of it as well. There's been a white stone standing over him for a good many years."

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"Gracious!" muttered Ben.

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"This is between us, Stone. I'll ask you not to repeat it, for if you should, the fellows around here would believe it another of my fanciful fabrications. Things are somewhat more peaceful in Texas these days, but the old grudge, a sort of feud between the Jennings and the Grants, has never died out. I was sent to school in Houston before I came here. Fred, the only son of old man Jennings, attended that same school. I won't go into detail, but he picked his time to get at me. They took him to a hospital, and I went home to the Star D Ranch in something of a hurry. When a Grant finds it necessary to fight, usually something happens to the other fellow."

CHAPTER XVI.

INDEPENDENT ROD.

Despite those final words, the boy from Texas had spoken quietly and without giving the impression that he was boasting; indeed, it seemed as if this much had escaped his lips through a sudden impulse, which he now more than half regretted.

"I could tell you something more, Ben," he said; "but they are things I do not care to talk about, and I've said enough already—too much, perhaps."

"Not too much," protested the visitor hastily. "For I fancy that I myself am beginning to understand you better than I did. If the fellows knew——"

"I don't want them to know. Don't forget I've trusted you thus far in strict confidence. I could give you reasons why I don't play football and why I hold in abhorrence the usual practice of hazing at school or college; but, as I just remarked, I don't care to talk about those things. I've been sent here to attend school, and I reckon I'll do so for all of the narrow-minded, misguided peanut-heads in Oakdale."

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"That's right," encouraged Ben. "Sometime they'll find out their mistake."

"It certainly is a matter of indifference to me whether they do or not," laughed Rod. "I'm some independent in my ways."

"But there are some things no fellow can afford to do," said Ben. "Now I didn't come here to knock anybody, but I think there are certain facts you ought to know about those chaps you were with last night. I want you to understand I haven't any grudge against Davis, even though he was concerned in a mean and despicable plot to make me out a cheap sneak thief—a plot which, fortunately for me, fell through. Spotty really wasn't nearly so much to blame as the chap who put him up to it, an old and bitter enemy of mine who is no longer attending school at Oakdale. I think Davis is easily influenced, but his natural inclinations seem to be crooked."

Grant was listening seriously enough now, and Stone continued:

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"Even Lander may have a streak of decency in him, but he's always been the black sheep among the boys of Oakdale, and anyone who chooses him for a friend is almost certain to be estimated by the company he keeps. To-day some of the fellows, skating up at Bass Cove, found there on the shore a bottle containing a little frozen hard cider. Now they're saying you fellows were boozy last night, and that's why you skated out onto the dangerous ice and broke through."

"So that's what they're saying!" cried Rod hotly. "It's a lie, as far as I'm concerned."

The visitor nodded his head in satisfaction. "I'm glad to hear you say that, and I believe it. I've already expressed my belief that it wasn't true; now I shall tell them I know it wasn't."

"Lots of good that will do!" scoffed Rod. "Don't put yourself out to do it, Ben; let the chumps think what they like."

"But—but," faltered Ben, "no fellow can afford to have such lies circulated about him."

"Second-hand contradiction of a lie seldom stops its progress."

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"Why don't you deny it?"

"Bah! Would you have me pike around after those fellows who have given me the cold shoulder and meachingly protest that I wasn't boozy last night? Why, that would rejoice certain members of the bunch who, I'm sure, have taken prime joy in spreading the yarn."

"You know, some fellows think you peached to the professor about that hazing business, and you haven't denied it."

"If I started in denying the lies cooked up about me, it's plain I'd be kept plenty busy. By and by they may get tired of it and let up."

"Perhaps you've never heard just why Lander happened to leave town so suddenly two years ago?"

"No."

"Shortly before he got out, a series of petty robberies were committed in Oakdale, rousing the people here to a state of apprehension and indignation. The worst of these was the breaking into Stickney's store one night and the pilfering of a whole lot of provisions, tinware, cutlery, and a gun. A day or two later Bunk Lander was caught in an old camp he had built out in the swamp back of Turkey Hill, and in that camp they found the stolen goods. They were going to send him to the reform school, but he was not taken into immediate custody, and ere he could be sent away he disappeared. His father, who is a poor, hard-working man, sent him off somewhere. Since then Mr. Lander has settled with the people who were plundered, fixing it up some way so that Bunk has ventured to return. I thought you ought to know all this, Rod."

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Grant rose, walking to the door and back. Standing beside the table, he looked at Ben.

"Right serious business," he admitted. "But possibly Bunk didn't realize just how serious it was."

When I first came to Oakdale I heard some fellows who aren't reckoned to be particularly bad chaps joking with one another about robbing orchards and plundering somebody's grape arbors. I wonder if they realized that they were thieves."

"Oh, but that's different—in a way," Ben hastily said.

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"In a degree, perhaps," nodded Grant. "But it was theft, just the same. Those fellows were right proud of it, too."

"Most fellows consider hooking apples or plundering grape vines as permissible sport."

"Oh, yes, I know that. And to Bunk Lander's undeveloped sense of right and wrong, stealing provisions and other stuffs he desired to furnish his camp, may have seemed like permissible sport. I doubt not that the fathers of some of these very fellows who plundered orchards and grape arbors were plenty rank and severe against Lander when he was caught, yet in a degree their own sons were no better than Bunk."

Stone found himself somewhat staggered by the force of this argument.

"I'm not saying that even Bunk is irreclaimable," he hastened to state. "But it seems to me that under the circumstances you can't afford to let yourself be classed with him."

"It wouldn't surprise me any if Lander had as much honor in his makeup as Hunk Rollins, or even Berlin Barker; yet those fellows are accepted as the associates of the most respectable chaps in Oakdale. Stone, old man, last night Rollins left me hanging precariously to the edge of the broken ice while he skated off, yelling to his friends. On the other hand, Bunk Lander took a chance and pulled me out. He saved my life, Ben, for I wasn't able to get out alone, with the current dragging at me the way it did. If anybody reckons that a Grant is going to forget a thing of that sort, he's making a mighty big mistake."

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"Which means, I suppose," said Ben, rising, "that you propose to stick by Lander?"

"Which means that I propose to treat him white and do him a decent turn if I ever get the chance. Everybody around here has thrown him down on his past record, and that's the best way to send a fellow who has made a mistake straight to the dogs. We all make mistakes, and when we do we need somebody to encourage us, not to kick us. No, Stone, I shan't go back on Lander."

"Well?" cried Ben suddenly, "although I haven't succeeded in the object of my visit, I want to say that I rather admire you for your stand, and here's my hand on it."

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"Thanks," laughed Rod Grant, as they shook hands.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE FIRST SNOW.

Rodney Grant seemed to take genuine pleasure in showing his disdain and defiance of public opinion by openly associating with Lander and Davis, and he was seen often in their company. Even Roger Eliot, naturally broad-minded and liberal, could but deplore this; and Stone found himself quite alone in any effort to defend or justify the actions of the singular boy from Texas. It was generally believed and proclaimed that Grant had found associates to his liking, and more than once the old saw, "A person is known by the company he keeps," was applied to him.

The young people of Oakdale were making the most of the skating when, after a slight warning flurry, a slow, steady downfall of snow set in, growing heavier with the passing of a cloudy afternoon.

"No more fun on the lake for us," moaned Chub Tuttle, standing more than ankle deep outside the academy as the scholars came trooping forth. "This snow has fixed the skating all right."

171

"Snow doubt about it," punned Chipper Cooper, turning up his coat collar and pulling his cap down over his ears. "We'll have to take to another line of sport, and it's likely there won't even be any sliding worth while for some time to come."

Nearly all night long it snowed, but with the coming of another dawn the storm ceased, the sky cleared, and the sun beamed cheerfully on a world wrapped in a mantle of white, gleaming with the prismatic colors of millions of diamonds.

At an early hour, having eaten breakfast, Rod Grant was viewing the scene with admiration and pleasure when he discovered two dark figures tracking across the open fields toward the cottage of Miss Priscilla Kent. Immediately he recognized Lander and Davis, watching them with curiosity and interest as he perceived that they were walking on snowshoes. They hailed him as they drew near, and, with his trousers laced into the tops of high, heavy leather boots, he waded out knee-deep to meet them.

172

"Top of the morning, Roddy," cried Bunk, in his familiar way. "What are you doing with yourself?"

"Morning, Lander. Morning, Davis. I was just getting ready to turn myself into a human steam-plough and wield my aunt's big shovel. Got to open up the path as far as the road, you know."

"That's work," grinned Davis, two missing front teeth in his upper jaw giving him anything but an appearance of comeliness. "Work was made for slaves."

"But you Yanks took away our slaves," reminded Rod jovially, "and so we have to bend our backs like common people."

"Eh?" grunted Spotty in surprise. "Your slaves? Why, Texas—why, I've always thought of Texas as a Western State, and——"

"We're right proud to be called Southerners," said Rod. "Find any sport walking on those things?"

"Oh, it's sport in a way," answered Lander. "Besides, a feller can get around almost anywhere on 'em, no matter how deep the snow is. I and Spot have been talking about going over to my camp Sat'day. Without snowshoes we'd have to do some tall wading. If we can get a dog, and the snow packs down some, perhaps we'll try the rabbits a crack—and *that's* sport. Ever shoot rabbits?"

173

"Jacks."

"Oh, yes, I've heard about them. Our rabbits are different; they're good to eat. Say, it would be fun to shoot a few and have a rabbit stew over at my camp. I can make the stew, too."

"That wouldn't be so bad," admitted Grant, who had a taste for hunting.

"Want to come in on it? Come ahead. I've been telling Spot I thought we might borrow old Lem Sawyer's hound, Rouser. He's a good dog, though, like Lem, he's getting rather old. Lem's laid up with the rheumatism this winter, and I don't believe he will do much rabbitin'."

"I'd have to have some snowshoes and a gun," said Rod.

"Bet we could get them of Sawyer. You know how to shoot?"

174

"A little," smiled the boy from Texas, "but I don't know much about using snowshoes, though, watching you fellows, it seems easy enough."

Spotty chuckled. "Try it," he invited. "Try mine. Go ahead."

Obligingly he slipped his toes out of the straps and stepped off into the snow. Grant was willing enough to make the trial and, wading alongside, he mounted on Spotty's snowshoes. Having inserted his toes beneath the straps, he started off with a confidence that was soon upset, as he was himself by stepping on one snowshoe with the other, which plunged him to the full length of his arms, burying his face in the snow. Nor could he rise until he had succeeded in getting his feet free from the snowshoes, after which he floundered part way over and stood up to discover Both Davis and Lander convulsed with laughter.

"Looks easy enough, don't it?" cried Bunk hilariously.

"Hang the things!" growled Rod, his face flushed with chagrin. "They seem contrary as an unbusted bronch. You fellows don't have any trouble managing them." 175

"There's a little trick to it that you'll have to learn," explained Lander. "To begin with, those boots of yours are too stiff and heavy. You see, I've got on moccasins, and Spotty's wearing some limber-soled shoes. You've got to lift the front end of the snowshoes with your toe and let the heel drag, slipping the shoe forward as you step, this fashion. Watch me and get wise."

Grant watched Bunk walk around easily in a broad circle, which brought him back to the starting point.

"I see," nodded the boy from Texas, "and I reckon I can catch onto it after a little practice. Where can I get a pair of moccasins?"

"Stickney carries 'em; he carries everything. Mebbe Lem Sawyer'll have an old pair he'll sell cheap, for he's hard up and needs the money. I'll find out if you want me to."

"Go ahead. I've never yet mounted anything I couldn't master, and, having been bucked off by a pair of snowshoes, I'm right eager to get busy in proper fashion with the things. Think I'll get the shovel now and go at it opening the path. I won't have much more than time to finish that job before school." 176

Having watched them depart, he went at his task, making the snow fly with a pair of lusty arms, which, in spite of the heavy work, betrayed no weariness until he had finished.

At noon that day Davis informed him that Lander had succeeded in borrowing Sawyer's dog, gun and snowshoes for the following Saturday, and that Sawyer had agreed to sell his moccasins at a bargain if they were what Rod wanted.

"We'll show you some fun," promised Spotty. "We're going over to Bunk's old camp to-night to see if everything is all right there. If it is, we'll have the stuff ready for a stew Saturday, and as sure as we can start any rabbits we'll give you a feed that will be good for a hungry man. Watch for us in the morning. We're going to show you how to navigate on snowshoes."

They came the following morning, bringing the snowshoes and moccasins, and Rod had his first lesson. As soon as he caught onto the knack of it, he made satisfactory progress, and was praised by both Spotty and Bunk, although he found it impossible to get over the snow for any distance with as much speed and ease as they could. 177

"You're coming all right, old man," assured Lander. "I've seen lots of fellers try it who didn't get along half as fast. Just you keep practicing, and you'll break in fine."

Rodney continued to practice, and by Saturday he had thoroughly mastered the art of getting around with considerable skill and ease upon snowshoes.

Friday night about an inch of light snow fell on top of the other, which had settled beneath the rays of the sun, giving a perfect opportunity for rabbit tracking, as Lander joyously explained when he and Spotty appeared at an early hour. They were leading Sawyer's old black-and-tan hound, and, besides their own guns, they brought the man's double-barreled breech loader for Rodney.

And so, thoroughly equipped, the boys set off for the day's sport. 178

CHAPTER XVIII.

RABBIT HUNTING.

Standing amid the clustered alders which lined the banks of an ice-bound stream that flowed through a little valley, Rodney Grant listened with a tingling thrill to the musical baying of a hound running a rabbit. Rouser had struck a scent, and now, after circling some distance into the deeper woods, the sound of his voice, growing more and more distinct, indicated that he was coming back. Holding Lem Sawyer's gun ready for use, Rod changed his position somewhat, in order to get a better view through a little break or opening in the alders. The snow crunched softly beneath his feet, and a few light, feathery flakes, dislodged as he brushed against the bushes, floated down around him. A chickadee, undisturbed by the baying of the dog or the presence of the boy near at hand, performed some amazing evolutions amid the branches a few feet away, keeping up the while a constant friendly chatter in a ludicrously hoarse and husky tone. Up the bank behind Rod, some distance to the right, the snow crunched a little and a dark figure appeared at the edge of the spruces.

180

"St! 'st!" came a double hiss of warning. "Watch out, Grant! He's coming! He's coming! You may see him first."

It was Spotty, who had sought a more favorable position, only to be led back that way by the baying of the dog. Lander had gone still farther up stream.

Hearing the hound coming in full tongue, Rod did not even turn his head, but crouched a bit to peer through the opening down which the dog's voice floated from the shadowy woods beyond the stream. His eyes were keen for the first glimpse of the running rabbit, and his finger was ready for the trigger.

Whit-ker-whit—whirr!

Spotty, moving again, had sent a partridge out from beneath the shelter of some low-hanging evergreens. With a gasp, he swung half round and blazed away, almost blindly, at the flitting bird, which went soaring over the alders toward the cover of the dense woods beyond the stream. He knew he had missed, even as he fired.

181

Grant, straightening up as if jerked by an electric shock, saw the brown bird flash against a bit of gray sky. There was no time to bring the butt of the gun to his shoulder. He fired, seemingly without taking aim, and the partridge crashed down through the alders, falling with a "plump" to the snow.

"Get him—did you get him?" palpitated Spotty.

"I reckon I did," answered the young Texan coolly, stooping to peer through the bushes and perceiving the bunch of brown feathers that lay so still some distance away.

But the rabbit was still coming, if the approaching staccato of the hound was to be accepted as positive evidence, and Rod, satisfied that the partridge would remain where it had dropped, again turned his attention to the business from which it had been temporarily distracted.

"By, jinks!" muttered Spotty. "I guess he can shoot, all right."

182

Over in the woods beyond, the fleeing rabbit had stopped short at the crashing report of the gun, sitting straight up on its haunches for a fleeting moment, its whole body aquiver with terror. Only for a moment did it linger. The clamoring dog on its track was coming, filling the whole woods with a racket which plainly told that the scent was rapidly growing warm. Ahead silence had followed that double burst of terrible sound, but behind was the relentless pursuer, who was making the forest ring. The hunted thing seemed to know where the crossing of the stream could most easily be made, and beyond the stream, up the bank, were the thick firs and the deep, sheltering shadows.

On it came once more, with great bounds, long ears flattened back. Gray almost as the snow itself, it leaped forth into the little opening.

This time the butt of the gun in Rodney Grant's hands was pressed to his shoulder for an instant. The left barrel belched smoke, and the rabbit, shot-riddled in the midst of a leap, was practically dead when it struck the snow.

"Get him—did you get him?" yelled Spotty once more.

183

"I sure did," laughed Grant, breaking down the gun to eject the empty shells. Blowing through the barrels, he slipped in fresh cartridges, snapped the gun together, pushed through the bushes to pick up the partridge, and had almost reached the rabbit when Rouser came bellowing forth from the woods to stop in surprise and sniff around the furry, blood-stained body.

"Say, you're a holy terror!" spluttered Davis, as he came crunching and crashing through the alders. "You can shoot some, can't you?"

"It's a cinch with a shotgun," laughed Rod. "I've always done most of my shooting with a rifle."

"Don't believe Bunk thought that rabbit would circle back this way," confessed Davis. "If he had, he

wouldn't have gone up-stream. He'll be coming pretty soon, now that Rouser's quit talking after that shooting. We had better go meet him."

Already the dog was sniffing around in the bushes for a fresh scent. Spotty called the animal, and they pushed up-stream, soon discovering Lander approaching.

184

"Get anything?" asked Bunk.

"I didn't," acknowledged Spotty. "I put up a biddy, but I missed her. Rod brought her down, though, and he got that rabbit, too."

His gun tucked under his arm, Lander looked at the partridge and the rabbit in evident surprise.

"Great luck," he commented, with an evident shade of chagrin. "Good work for a greenhorn. Sometimes it happens that way; the feller who's green gets all the chances."

"Greenhorn!" snickered Spotty. "You should see him shoot. Here, Rouser, come back here! Come back, sir!"

The old dog had been slipping away into the woods, but he returned at the command.

"Well, we'll have our stew all right," said Lander. "That's a consolation for us, Spot."

They moved on, Bunk leading and directing the dog. After a time another track was picked up, and again Rouser went baying off into the woods.

185

"We'll wait a while and see which way he turns," said Bunk, who hoped to pick the lucky location for himself this time.

"Hark! What's that?" cried Davis suddenly, as the distant report of a gun drifted to their ears.

"Somebody else out for rabs, I guess," growled Lander. "Yes, there's their dog. Listen!"

Another hound, much farther away than Rouser, was heard giving voice.

"Bet the feller that fired made a miss," grinned Spotty. "It takes old Deadeye Grant from Texas to bring 'em down."

With his ear cocked, Lander listened. After a time he said:

"This is a good place, Grant. You stay here. Spot, you can go farther up this time. I'm going to cross over."

Watching them hurry away, Grant said nothing, although he knew Bunk was trying to secure for himself the chance of the next shot.

For some moments after they vanished his keen ears heard an occasional distant sound, like the cracking of branches or the rustling of bodies pushing through thickets; but this gradually died out, and something like a lonely hush settled over the winter woods. He could still hear the distant baying of the dogs, but this seemed even to accentuate the stillness in his immediate vicinity.

186

"I reckon it was more by accident than anything else, that Rouser turned the rabbit back my way before," muttered the lad from Texas, "and I don't judge it will happen again. If I stay here I won't get another shot. Bunk and Spotty count on doing the rest of the shooting themselves. By the sound, I should say Rouser will be over in the next township before he stops."

The inactivity swiftly became irksome to him, and finally, with gun tucked under his arm and game bag containing the rabbit and partridge slung from his shoulder, he set forth, guided by the barking of the dogs. At times he was forced to stoop to make his way through the low, scrubby growth, and once he paused to tie a red silk handkerchief about his neck, down which the snow had an uncomfortable way of sifting from the overhanging bushes which he disturbed as he pushed along. He made no attempt to follow either Lander or Davis, but finally, to his satisfaction, the sound of the dogs grew more and more distinct, and he came to a swamp growth where rabbit tracks and paths were plentiful. This swamp covered an extensive territory, and in its depth the hounds seemed to be pursuing the twisting, turning, circling game.

187

"I'll bet something that both Bunk and Spotty are here somewhere," laughed Rod softly. "They tried to leave me picketed over yonder where there wasn't a show for me to do a whole lot of shooting. Perhaps they think I've done enough already."

"Who!" came a hoarse shout, which sounded almost in Rod's ear and caused him to give a ludicrously startled jump. Ere he could recover and shoot, a fluffy gray thing shot out of the shadows at one side and was gone into the still deeper shadows of another thicket.

"An owl," muttered Grant, with a short laugh and a feeling of foolishness over his alarm. "He was sitting right there on the broken branch of that old dead stub. Owls aren't good to eat, but, mounted, he would have made a good trophy for my room."

188

Still, with the sound of the dogs drawing nearer, he spent little time in regretting the escape of the owl. Once the hounds were so close that he stood half crouching, peering into the shadows of the swamp, fully expecting to see the hunted rabbit come bounding forth into view; but suddenly the baying swept away to one side and passed on to the north, denoting that the furry fugitive had made a turn in the effort to baffle the clamoring animals that would give him no rest.

"It's right plain he's sticking to this swamp tract," thought Rod, "and so I judge he'll come round this way again if some one doesn't pop him over."

He moved on a few rods, found a spot that seemed favorable, placed himself with a tree at his back, and continued to wait, as motionless and rigid as the tree itself.

189

It was quite warm down here in the swamp, where no breath of air stirred. If other living creatures there were in the immediate vicinity of the young hunter, it appeared that they were also hypnotized into stony silence by the baying of the dogs, now drawing near, now receding, growing faint, becoming plainer again, and finally seeming swiftly to approach.

"If I get this fellow, too, I'll sure have the laugh on Bunk and Spotty," whispered Rod, holding his gun ready to clap it instantly to his shoulder.

The dogs came straight on. Unless they changed their course soon, they must certainly pass within easy shooting distance. The wild, blood-thrilling music of their voices made the whole swamp ring. Once the waiting lad fancied he heard a slight crashing off at the left, but, thinking it might be Lander or Davis approaching, he did not turn his eyes in that direction. Now it seemed that the passing of any second might bring the hounds into view. Beyond question they were close upon the rabbit, and——

Up went Rod's gun. His eye caught the sights, his finger pressed the trigger. Following the report of the piece, the smoke, drifting slowly upward on the heavy air, unveiled the rabbit kicking in its last throes upon the blood-stained snow. 190

"Another!" exulted Rodney Grant, as, ere advancing, he extracted the empty shell and slipped a fresh one into the gun.

A black-and-tan dog flashed into view, reached the slain rabbit and nearly lost its footing in the attempt to stop promptly.

"You're pretty lively for an old dog, Rouser," chuckled Rod. "You certainly seem to have amazing good wind."

But, still baying frantically, another dog was coming, and within ten feet of the rabbit Grant stood still, uttering an exclamation of surprise, his eyes fixed on the hound that was yet sniffing around the dead game.

"It's not Rouser!" he muttered. "It's——"

"What in blazes do you mean by shooting a rabbit ahead of my dog?" cried a voice. 191

Rod twisted the upper part of his body round and gazed over his shoulder at two lads with guns who were hurriedly approaching on snowshoes.

CHAPTER XIX.

AN ENCOUNTER IN THE WOODS.

The one in advance from whose lips that angry question had been flung, was Berlin Barker. Phil Springer was following. Barker's face was almost snow-white, made thus by the rage that was consuming him. Springer looked greatly disturbed, and he muttered to himself:

"Now there's sure to be tut-trouble."

"What do you mean by it?" again demanded Berlin, as he faced Rod a short distance away, his gun gripped tightly in his glove-protected hands.

"I didn't know it was your dog." Slowly and awkwardly he shifted his position, in order to face Berlin.

"You lie!" retorted Barker; and every nerve in Grant's body went taut as a bowstring.

With excited yelps, old Rouser came bursting forth from the woods.

"There's the dog I reckoned was running this rabbit," explained the young Texan, his voice a trifle husky, yet remarkably steady. 193

"That old has-been!" sneered Barker. "Why, he isn't worth a charge of shot to put him out of the way; and he's been bothering Silver Tongue. Of course you heard both dogs running."

"Yes, but——"

"If you know anything at all, you certainly knew old Sawyer's cripple wasn't leading."

"I saw Rouser take up a track. It's your dog that mixed in and interfered—if that is your dog."

"You bet he's mine! Just bought him for a fancy price, too, and I don't propose to have him spoiled by Sawyer's worthless brute. I'll settle it. Come here, Silver Tongue—come away and give me a chance."

His gun half lifted and ready for use, Barker attempted to call his own dog away from the other. Divining the fellow's purpose, Rod Grant took three hasty strides, placing himself between Rouser and Barker.

"Get out of the way!" snarled Barker. "If you don't you'll have a chance to pick some shot out of your legs." 194

The brown eyes of the boy from Texas glowed strangely, and he also held his shotgun ready for use.

"If I were in your place, my friend," he said, "I wouldn't try to shoot old Rouser; for just as sure as you do you'll have a chance to bury your own dog."

He meant it, too; there could be no doubt about that. Nor was he in the slightest degree intimidated by the menacing weapon in Barker's hands. Shivering, Springer held his breath and watched those two lads gazing steadily into each other's eyes. At length Phil managed to speak.

"Quit it, bub-both of you!" he spluttered. "Be careful with those guns!"

"Which is right good advice for your friend," said Rod, without permitting his glance to waver for an instant from Barker. "If he should shoot up old Rouser, it sure would be a shame to retaliate on his innocent dog. I admit I'd feel much more like letting him have it himself."

"You hear that, do you, Phil?" cried Berlin.

"Yes," answered Springer, "and bub-by jingoes, he looks like he might dud-do it, too!" 195

In spite of himself and his intense rage, Barker wavered. For once, at least, he had found no symptom of faltering or timidity in the fellow he bitterly detested.

"Hey, what's the matter over there?" cried a hoarse voice, and Hunk Rollins, breaking forth from a thicket, came shuffling toward them on snowshoes, carrying a gun. They were now three to one against Grant, but still Rod stood his ground unmoved.

"He shot a rabbit in front of Berlin's dud-dog," hastily explained Springer, "and Berlin's blazing mad about it, too."

"What's he doing here, anyhow?" questioned Rollins contemptuously.

"I allow," said Rodney, something like a faint smile flitting across his face, "that I have as much right to hunt rabbits hereabouts as you fellows."

"Take his gun away from him!" roared Hunk. "Knock the packing out of him!"

But he stopped short with his first step toward the boy from Texas, for the muzzle of Grant's gun swung toward him, and Springer shouted a warning. 196

"Look out! He'll shoot!"

"Gee!" gasped Rollins. "He don't dast!"

"Don't make any mistake about that," advised Rodney. "It would be a clean case of self-defense, and only a fool would let you take his gun away from him and beat him up."

"Ginger!" gurgled Hunk. "I believe he means it!"

At this juncture Lander and Davis put in an appearance and came forward, wondering at the tableau they beheld. Grant laughed aloud as he saw them.

"Now we're even as far as numbers are concerned," he observed, suddenly at his ease.

"What's the row?" questioned Bunk, glaring at Barker. "We heard you fellers chewin' the rag half a mile away, I guess."

"Oh, there isn't any row to speak of," said Rodney. "Both of these dogs were running the rabbit yonder, which I happened to shoot. It chanced that Barker's dog was ahead of Rouser, and so Mr. Barker foolishly got a trifle warm under the collar. He made some silly talk about shooting old Rouser, but I don't reckon he really meant it."

"Oh, he did, hey?" shouted Lander, getting purple in the face. "Threatened to shoot Rouser, did he? Well, say! I'd like to see him try it!"

"He won't try it," assured the boy from Texas. "He got all over that inclination some time before you arrived, Bunk; but I had to tell him what would happen to his own dog if he didn't hold up."

"What a set of cheap skates!" sneered Berlin.

"Cheap skates, hey?" rasped Lander. "Well, if there's anybody around these parts cheaper than you are, he can be bought for less than a cent. I know you pretty well of old, Barker. It was you who helped turn the fellers against me, and you was mighty rejoiced when I got into that little scrape two years ago. I don't forget them things. Now you and your friends better chase yourselves and take your dog along with you, if you care anything about him. We're hunting here in this swamp, and we don't propose to be bothered by you. Git!"

"We don't cuc-care about hunting around here," said Springer hastily. "Come on, Berlin."

Although reluctant to be driven away, Barker, having cooled down somewhat, began to entertain apprehensions for the safety of Silver Tongue should he remain in that vicinity.

"Mr. Grant is very courageous—when he has a gun in his hands," he sneered. "At any other time he's a——"

"You've said that before," interrupted Rod in a tone that made Berlin start a bit in spite of himself. "Be careful that you don't say it once too often."

Barker shrugged his shoulders and laughed. "I don't have to say it; every fellow in Oakdale knows what you are. Come, Silver Tongue—come, sir. Come on, fellows; there are plenty of other places to run rabbits."

"And, counting yourself and your friends, you make a fine bunch of dogs for the purpose," Lander flung after them.

In a few moments Barker and his companions disappeared into the woods, and soon the muttering of their voices died out in the distance.

"How'd you get here, anyhow, Roddy?" questioned Bunk, with a grin. "We left you 'way back yonder."

"Yes," nodded Grant; "but I reckoned there wouldn't be much shooting over there, so I pulled my picket pin and moved. Here's another rabbit for that stew."

"By jinks! Bunk," said Spotty, "we ain't shot one yet. We took him out to show him how 'twas done, and he's showed us."

"He showed Barker, too, I guess," chuckled Lander. "Say, it done me good making that bunch turn tail and dig out. 'Tain't more'n a mile to my camp, if it's that fur; let's strike over that way, for I'll have an appetite by the time we can dress the rabbits and the partridge and get the stew cooked."

"I've an appetite now," declared Rod. "I've enjoyed the sport this morning very much indeed."

CHAPTER XX.

A SUNDAY MORNING CALLER.

On Sunday morning, between the hours of nine and ten, Spotty Davis knocked at the door of Miss Priscilla Kent. The spinster, dressed in plain black alpaca, admitted him when he asked to see Rodney.

"You'll find my nephew in his room right up at the head of the stairs," she said. "Rap on the door. I don't think he'll have much time to talk to ye, though."

Spotty's knuckles on the door panel brought Grant, half dressed and wondering.

"Hello!" he exclaimed in surprise. "You? I wondered who it could be. My visitors are sure getting amazing plentiful."

Davis walked into the room.

"Kinder thought I'd come round and chin with ye this morning," he grinned. "Sunday's always a punk day fur me. I hate the sound of church bells. Went to see Bunk, but he'd gone off somewhere a'ready."

"So you accepted me as a last resort," laughed Rod. "Well, I'm afraid I won't have much time to chin." 201

"Why not? What you doin'? I see you're dressin' all up in your best bib and tucker. Goin' somewhere?"

"Yes, to church."

"What-at?" cried Spotty incredulously. "You don't mean it!"

"I sure do."

"Why, I didn't know you ever 'tended church."

"I haven't as much as I should since coming to Oakdale," admitted Rodney; "but you see my aunt is very peculiar, and she seldom goes. This morning she conceived a sudden desire to attend, and asked me if I'd go with her. That's why I'm shifting over into my glad rags now."

"Priscilla Kent in church'll make folks rubber sure enough," said Spotty, who had seated himself comfortably on the easy chair. "But say, I bet I know why she's goin'. They've got a new minister, a young feller that ain't married, and every single girl and widder and old maid in town is jest flockin' to hear him. They say he's perfectly lovely. Hee! hee! I guess your aunt is gittin' the fever." 202

Rod smiled. "Perhaps you're right," he admitted; "but really, I doubt if she's even heard there has been a change of ministers, for you know she is something of a recluse, and doesn't gossip with the neighbors. You'll excuse me if I keep on with the adornment of my person."

"Oh, go ahead," nodded Davis, producing a pack of cigarettes. "I'll have a coffin nail and be sociable while you're toggin' out. Say, that stew was rippin' good, wasn't it?"

"First rate," agreed Rod, searching for a suitable necktie in a drawer. "I allow I enjoyed it, all right."

"What do you think of Bunk's old hang-out?"

"It's a right comfortable place."

"It's great. We ought to have some fun over there this winter. We three make a pretty good crowd. Of course it would be better if we had another feller, but the right kind can't be found around here. You didn't seem to feel much like playing cards yesterday."

"Not for money, and that was what Bunk proposed." 203

"And I was busted," chuckled the visitor, "so there wasn't anything doin'. Bunk's pretty slick with the pasteboards. You've got to keep your eye peeled for him. All the same, he needn't think he knows it all; there is others."

"Playing cards for money is bad business," was Grant's opinion. "I've seen trouble come of it. I'm willing enough to play for sport."

"But there ain't much sport in it unless there's a little money up. If I'd had some loose change in my clothes, I'd tackled Bunk yesterday. Say, I've been thinking how we bluffed Barker and his bunch, and it makes me laugh."

Grant frowned. "Berlin Barker wants to put a curb on his tongue, or it's going to get him into trouble some day."

"Oh, he don't love you a bit, and he'll love you less since you give him that call. Gee! I didn't know what was goin' to happen when I and Bunk heard you chawin' and come out where we could see ye standin' there holdin' your gun jest as if you meant to use it any minute!"

"I should have used it if Barker had carried out his threat to shoot Sawyer's hound," declared Rod; 204

“but I’d been sorry afterward, for I meant to shoot his dog the instant he fired at old Rouser. That would have been a right nasty thing for me to do.”

“I don’t see why.”

“Silver Tongue wouldn’t have been to blame for the act of his master.”

“Oh, a dog’s only a dog,” said Davis, letting thin dribbles of smoke escape from his mouth as he spoke, “and you’d been justified in it.”

“I don’t see it in that light—now. I should have been revenging myself on a dumb animal that had done me no harm. At the time, however, I didn’t stop to consider that any. Stir a Grant up right thoroughly, and he isn’t liable to take consequences into consideration. It’s best for me to look out not to get riled, though that isn’t easy sometimes.”

“To hear you chin like that,” grinned Davis, “anybody’d think you a red-hot proposition; but around here they’ve got the idee you’re mild and docile and all your talk is hot air.”

“Something may happen sometime,” returned Rod, “to satisfy them that it’s not all hot air—though I hope not.”

The voice of his aunt called him from the foot of the stairs, and he stepped outside the door to answer her. She wished to know if he was nearly ready, and he replied that he was.

“It will take some time to get to the church, Rodney, and the second bell will commence ringin’ pretty soon. We’d better start in a few minutes.”

“I’ll be down right soon,” was his assurance as he turned back into the room.

Spotty had abandoned the butt of his cigarette and risen to his feet; he was standing with his hands in his pockets, seeming deeply interested in one of the pictures hanging on the wall.

“Well,” he said, turning, “I guess I’ll skin along and leave ye. Jinks! you’re goin’ to look stylish today, Rod. Where’d you git all them good clothes?”

“My father blew himself on me when he decided to send me East. Reckon he wanted me to make a good appearance in the bosom of refined and cultured New England.”

“Even Barker doesn’t dress as swell as that. The only feller around here who ever did was Bern Hayden, and he certainly did put on the lugs; but he was a rotter. Hope you enjoy the sermon, old chap. Don’t let Aunt Priscil’ flirt with the new minister. Hee! hee! hee! So long.” With this final bit of pleasantries Davis departed, hurrying down the stairs and out of the house.

Grant finished dressing in a few moments and was ready to join his aunt. He paused to pick up his money and some keys and pocket trinkets which he had left lying on the table. Something caused him to hesitate as his fingers touched the little thin fold of bank bills, and he was suddenly struck with the idea that the money was not lying as he had dropped it. He counted it over, finding a five, two twos and two ones.

“Eleven dollars,” he muttered. “Why, I sure thought I had another two dollar bill. I would have sworn I was carrying thirteen dollars, besides the change in my pocket. It can’t be—”

He stood there frowning for several moments, plainly perplexed and undecided.

“Oh, I must be mistaken!” he finally exclaimed. “Spotty has had his lesson, and he wouldn’t do a thing like that again. Besides, he was put up to the first job; he didn’t do it of his own accord. I’ve bought skates and moccasins and things, and I must have made a mistake about how much I spent. Still, it might be right wise not to put temptation in the way of a fellow like Davis.”

Pocketing the money, he descended to join his waiting aunt.

CHAPTER XXI.

WHAT SLEUTH PIPER SAW.

From the lips of Rollins and Springer the boys of Oakdale Academy learned something of the encounter with Grant during the rabbit hunt, but, naturally, even Springer colored his statements in a manner which did not place Barker in an unfavorable light. Save to sneer about the boy from Texas, Berlin himself had little to say. Nevertheless, the general impression went forth that Rod had first threatened to shoot Silver Tongue, and had been prevented from doing so only by Barker's firm stand. This added to the almost universal dislike in which the young Texan was held.

Ben Stone refrained from questioning Grant directly, but he gave Rod a chance to make a statement, and was disappointed when the latter betrayed a disinclination to talk of the matter.

Grant still bore himself with unruffled independence, paying such attention to his studies that he stood high in his classes and received the outspoken approval of Prof. Richardson. This also, under the circumstances, did not conduce to his popularity. With Davis and Lander he continued friendly at all times, actually taking a sort of perverse satisfaction in the knowledge that his enemies were calling attention to his behavior as proof of their just estimate of his character.

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A bit of "soft weather," with cold nights, made excellent sliding, and evening after evening the double runners, loaded with laughing, shouting boys and girls, went shooting down Main Street through the very center of the town and over the bridge as far as the railway station. Although Rod was never caught watching them, more than once he paused at a distance to listen to their joyous cries, and, truth to tell, there was regret in his heart.

Thursday morning Sleuth Piper, reaching the academy, had a tale for the ears of a group of interested listeners. Mysteriously beckoning the boys around him in the coat room, Piper held up one finger for silence.

"Sh!" he sibilated. "Perhaps some of you fellows observed that I was not out sliding last night. I struck a trail. Having noticed that one Rodney Grant and his two boon companions were not to be discovered around the village evenings, my astute mind led me to the deduction that they must be up to something of a dark and secret nature. Last night, from a place of secure cover, I watched with the patience of a redskin, and eventually I was well rewarded for so doing. I saw the miscreants meet secretly on High Street, near the foot of the path which leads to the home of Priscilla Kent. Under cover of darkness the beforesaid miscreants set forth to the westward, totally unaware that I was shadowing them. Of course, as there was no immediate cover for concealment, my task was extremely difficult, and when they reached the Barville road I lost them."

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"Is that all you've got to tell us?" asked Chub Tuttle, cracking a peanut. "I thought you'd caught them robbing a hen-roost or breaking into a bank."

"I lost them for the time being," continued Sleuth, undisturbed; "but, after meditating at the corner for some time, I was led to the deduction that they had gone north toward Turkey Hill, as it was not probable they would have chosen that roundabout course to turn the other way."

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"Great head, Sleuth," complimented Cooper.

"They must have made haste," said Piper; "for, though I hustled along all the way to the hill, my searching eyes failed to discover even a glimpse of them. Nevertheless, I was not baffled. Further meditation led me to decide that there could be only one destination for the aforesaid miscreants. It was awful dark in the woods over back of the hill, but my iron nerve remained unshaken. Setting my teeth firmly, I followed the course of Silver Brook all the way up to the swamp, into the vastness of which I boldly penetrated."

"Daring deed," murmured Cooper, in mock admiration.

"By this time," pursued Piper, unmindful of the interruption, "my keen intellect was satisfied beyond reasonable doubt that the destination of that trio of night prowlers was Lander's old camp. You see, my perspicacity was alive and working."

"Who's he?" questioned Cooper.

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"Who's who?" snapped Sleuth, irritated.

"Why, Percy P. Cacity. Have there been rumors afloat concerning his death?"

"Shut up! You're interrupting the flowing course of my thrilling narrative. Having decided beyond doubt that I would find them at Bunk's camp, I stole onward through the silent depths of the gloomy swamp. Not a sound broke the deathly stillness."

"Not even the bark of a dogwood tree?" questioned Chipper.

Sleuth glared at him. "If you don't want to listen, go chase yourself and give others the chance. It was so dark there in the swamp that even I, with all my keen sagacity, found it difficult to locate that old camp. At length, however, I perceived a faint gleam of light, and my heart gave an exultant leap, although my nerves were steady as iron. Guided by the before-mentioned light, I made my perilous way onward. I had not been deceived, for the beacon gleamed through the window of the

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den I sought. I was within a rod of the place when a sudden terrible racket broke forth. The sound of loud and angry voices reached my ears, telling me beyond question that there was a commotion within. Knowing full well that while they were making all that racket the before-mentioned miscreants could not hear me, I dashed forward to the window, through which I peered, beholding a scene of strife and contention. The rascals were there; perhaps they had been there for half an hour or more while I was seeking to locate them. They had built a fire, and, by the light of an old kerosene lamp, I perceived that they had already engaged in a suitable diversion for such reprehensible characters. Briefly and concisely stated, they had been playing cards—for money.”

“I wonder where Spotty Davis got the money to play with?” muttered Sile Crane.

“There were cards scattered on the table before them, and I know I saw money also,” Piper declared, “Lander was wrought up to a white pitch of wrath. I give you my verbatim statement that I never saw a feller as mad as he was. From his angry words I instantly gathered that he had caught Davis cheating, and he was strenuously seeking to lay violent hands on the aforesaid Davis. Mr. Grant, of Texas, had interfered and was keeping them apart, though it was plain enough that Spotty wasn’t anxious to mix it up with Bunk. Just as I looked in Lander yelled at Grant to take his hands off, and when the last mentioned party failed to comply Bunk let him have a poke in the mug.”

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“Oh, joy!” chortled Cooper. “That cooked Mr. Grant, didn’t it?”

“Cooked him!” exclaimed Piper. “It turned him into a raging whirlwind. Say, you should have seen him sail into Lander! Why, he had Bunk pinned up against the wall, shaking him like a rat, in less than two seconds. I never saw any human being as mad as Grant, and I give you my word he handled Bunk just like a feller might handle a baby.”

“Come, come!” scoffingly derided Barker, who had joined the group in time to hear part of this yarn. “What are you giving us, Sleuth? Why, that fellow wouldn’t fight, and, if he did spunk up enough courage to try it, Lander could whip him with one hand tied behind his back.”

“Don’t you believe it!” spluttered Sleuth. “I know better. I know what I saw, and he took the starch out of Bunk Lander in double quick order. He just fastened his hooks on Bunk’s woozle and choked him till his eyes stuck out, and I was beginning to think that would be the finish of the before-mentioned Lander. It was a tragic and terrifying spectacle. Davis was frightened into fits, and finally he rushed forward and tugged at Grant’s wrists, begging him to stop. Just as I was deciding that I had arrived in time to witness red-handed murder, Grant suddenly seemed to come to his senses; he let go of Lander, who dropped in a heap, as limp as a rag, gasping for breath. Davis was crying by this time; never saw anybody so frightened. Grant backed off a step or two, sort of shivering, his face pale as chalk. ‘Get some water, Spotty,’ says he. ‘I’m glad I didn’t kill him.’”

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Barker laughed in his cold, sneering way. “You have a vivid imagination, Sleuth,” he said; “but you want to quit reading cheap novels.”

Piper resented this. “I’ve given you the plain, cold, unadulterated facts, Mr. Barker. I know what I saw.”

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“Perhaps you dreamed it.”

“Nothing of the sort.”

“Perhaps you saw them playing cards, but this final sensational touch of your dramatic tale—this account of the fight—is preposterous. Grant wouldn’t any more dare buck up against Bunk Lander than against me.”

“Take my advice,” said Sleuth, “and don’t count on it too much that he wouldn’t dare tackle you.”

“Why, that has been proved to everybody’s satisfaction.”

“Not to mine since what I saw last night. I give you my word, I’d rather get a grizzly bear after me than that feller. Soon’s I saw Spotty getting a tin can to bring water, I sagely concluded it was time for me to move, and straightway I did so. I wasn’t nearly as long getting out of the swamp as I had been finding Lander’s camp.

“That’s the whole veracious narrative, faithfully given in the minutest detail. But let me add that the chap who wakes Rod Grant up and gets him real fighting mad is liable in less than ten seconds to find himself taken all to pieces and scattered over the immediate vicinity; I’ll stake my professional reputation on it.”

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CHAPTER XXII.

THE FATE OF SILVER TONGUE.

Following Barker's lead, some of the boys derided certain features of Piper's story, it being difficult for them to believe that the seemingly boastful, but timid, Texan could have mustered courage to match himself barehanded against Lander. Spotty Davis arriving, they questioned him. At first Davis betrayed amazement, but when pressed hard he denied everything.

"Who's been tellin' there was any trouble between me and Bunk?" he cried. "There ain't nothin' to it. Why, we wouldn't have a fallin' out over cards nor anything else. Some sneakin' spy made up that yarn."

"I think that settles it," laughed Barker.

No one ventured to say anything to Grant, who, as usual, was quiet and reserved, and held himself aloof.

"As docile as a sick kitten," chuckled Cooper. "Think of Sleuth comparing him to a grizzly bear! My! but Piper'll get dotty if he don't stop reading the rot he feeds on."

After supper that evening Davis again called on Rodney Grant.

"I want to thank you for what you done last night, Rod," said Spotty, accepting the easy chair and bringing forth his cigarettes. "Thought it wasn't best for anybody to see us talkin' together around the academy to-day. Say, do you know some sneak was spyin' on us?"

"Spying?" questioned Grant. "What do you mean?"

"I mean that somebody saw that mix-up at the camp."

"Impossible!"

"They did," persisted Davis. "Four or five fellers asked me about it just as soon's I got to the academy this morning."

"I don't see how any one could know," muttered the boy from Texas, in perplexity.

"I've been thinkin' it over. There was only one way: somebody must have followed us and peeked in at the winder."

"I hope not," said Rod, tapping the chair restlessly with his knuckles. "What did you tell the fellows who questioned you?"

"Nothin'; I just denied everything flat. Say, have you seen Bunk to-day?"

"No."

"Nor I. Jingoese! but you did slam him around fierce. You scat me when you took to chokin' him that way. I never saw anybody look so savage in my life as you did, and I swear I thought you meant to kill him."

Rodney Grant shrugged his shoulders, and it almost seemed as if he shivered a bit.

"I lost my temper, Spotty, and that's a bad thing for anybody to do—especially bad for me. I'm glad you grabbed my wrists and shouted at me just as you did, for it sort of brought me to my senses."

"I bet Bunk was astonished. He didn't think you'd do anything like that—didn't think you could. I don't understand why you've taken so much sass off Rollins and Barker. I'll guarantee you could wallop either one of them in a minute and a half. No, sir, I don't understand it."

"Perhaps you don't, but I do, Spotty, and that's plenty sufficient."

"Lander was a chump to get mad the way he did."

"But he caught you slipping a card off the pack. Really, you were to blame, Davis—and I was to blame, too."

"You? Why, you didn't play."

"No; but I sat there and looked on, knowing all the time that card playing for money is bad business, just as I think I told you once before."

"Bunk didn't really have no kick comin', for he's slippery with the pasteboards himself. I was just tryin' to hold up my end with him."

"The chap who plays cards with any one he knows to be crooked is doubly foolish, as there's only one way for him to escape being trimmed: he must cheat also. Where did you get the money to play with, Spotty?"

"I—oh, I got it by—by sellin' something. What makes you ask?"

"I knew you were broke a few days ago," said Grant, his steady eyes fixed on Spotty's flushed and confused face.

"Sometimes I have a little change in my clothes. Occasionally the old man digs up for me, you

know."

"Well, I hope that hereafter you'll know better than to play cards for money. It's dead sure you'll not play while I'm around, for I got my lesson. You weren't at school this afternoon."

"No; ain't comin' no more this term. There's only another week of it, anyhow."

"Not coming any more? Why not?"

"Didn't you hear about it? I had a mix-up with Barker to-day noon, and the old prof took a hand in it."

"What sort of a mix-up?"

"Oh, Barker happened to catch me lookin' into his desk, and he proceeded to put his paws on me."

"Why were you looking in his desk?"

"Lost my algebra," answered Spotty glibly, "and I was lookin' 'round for it. Barker come up behind me, and we was tumblin' 'round in the aisle when the old prof appeared and dipped right in. Jinks! I was hoppin' mad. But he wasn't fair, anyhow; he went for me and hardly said a word to Barker. When I answered back he told me to go home and stay there until I was ready to apologize. I don't care a rap. I shan't apologize now, for I'll dodge the final examinations, and I don't believe I could pass 'em. But, say! you just wait till I get some kind of a chance to square up with Barker! I've got it in for him, and I'll make him pay. He'll wish he never put his fins on me."

"You're sure revengeful, Spotty," laughed Rod; "but I opine it's mostly hot air with you. You talk a plenty, but you wouldn't really do anything."

"Oh, wouldn't I! You don't know me. Perhaps you'll change your mind about me some day. I don't forgit things, and I don't forgive, either."

"That's a right bad policy."

"You needn't talk! It don't strike me that you're one of the forgivin' kind. I hain't seen you snoopin' 'round after any of the fellers that's done you dirt."

"Hardly. I'm not disposed to beg my enemies to accept my forgiveness, but if they should come to me man-fashion and ask to be forgiven, that would be different."

"I don't s'pose you're chump enough to fancy they'll ever do anything like that?"

"No, indeed. Still, as long as they let me alone things will move along right placid and serene."

"But Barker didn't let me alone. He won't let you alone, either. He's got it in for you, and he's goin' to soak you any chance he gets. He don't like me because I told the truth about his chum, Bern Hayden, and saved my own neck by it. That's a peach of a necktie you're wearin', Rod. Where'd you git it? Didn't buy it 'round these parts, did ye?"

"Oh, no; I had it when I came here. Put in a full supply, you know."

"You're sort of dressin' more'n you did at first. I don't blame ye; I'd wear swell togs if I had 'em. This old tie of mine is gittin' on the bum, but it's all I've got."

Smiling, Grant rose, opened a drawer and brought forth a number of neckties, which he tossed on the table. "Take your pick out of those," he said. "You may have your choice."

"Thanks," cried Spotty eagerly. "This bright blue one just about hits me."

"You seem to like bright colors."

"I guess I do, reds and blues in particular."

"Well, I've got a red one somewhere that you may have also," said Rod, rummaging in the drawer, from which he removed handkerchiefs, collars and various other articles. "I don't care for it much. I wonder where the thing is. I believe I threw it on the top shelf in the closet." He opened the closet door and stepped inside, leaving Davis, who had risen to his feet, inspecting and admiring those articles of personal adornment which had been brought forth from the drawer.

In a few minutes, discovering the red necktie, Rod reappeared and passed it over, Spotty again expressing his thanks.

"I'll cut a swell with this," grinned the visitor.

They chatted a while longer, and finally Davis took his departure.

The following day Spotty loafed around the village, proudly wearing the red necktie.

Saturday dawned cold, bleak and threatening; the sky was heavy and the air chill and penetrating; it was one of those depressing winter mornings which gives a person in the country a feeling of loneliness.

Springer and Piper, on their way past Barker's home, saw Berlin appear in the open stable door with a piece of rope in his hand. They stopped and called to him, and he beckoned.

"Cuc-come on," said Springer, leading the way toward the stable.

"Seen anything of my dog, fellows?" asked Berlin.

"I haven't," answered Phil.

"Nor I," said Sleuth. "Lost him?"

"He chewed off his rope and got out. It's the second time he's done it this week. Sawyer lets his old

hound run loose, and when Silver Tongue gets out they go off into the woods together and run rabbits. I don't like it. I'll have to get a chain for Silver Tongue, and I'm going to tell Sawyer he'd better keep his hound tied up. It spoils a young dog to range the woods without his master. Going to snow, isn't it?"

"My deduction is that it will," nodded Sleuth. "By the inclement aspect of the weather, I should say we were due to get a stiff old storm."

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"That will spoil the sus-sliding," complained Springer. "The hill has just got into good shape, too. Don't seem as if a fellow can more than begin to have good fuf-fun before something happens to spoil it. Snow fixed our skating, and now if we get a big lot of it it will put our sliding on the punk for a while. Then what will we do?"

"We'll have to get our fun indoors. There's basketball, you know, and it's time we were at it. Wonder if Stone is going to play?"

"I dunno," said Sleuth; "but my deduction is——"

"Your deductions are generally bad."

"Is that so!" cried Piper resentfully. "Perhaps you've forgotten my remarkable work in the Ben Stone-Bern Hayden case? I received the unqualified and flattering approval of the judge for that."

"Oh, it was accidental; you just happened to guess right once in your life. I'm going down town to see if I can get trace of Silver Tongue. Come on with me."

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But barely had they started when Sleuth Piper uttered a cry and pointed: "There's your dog now! What's the matter with him? He's hurt."

The young hound had appeared, and he was barely dragging himself along as he crept staggering toward the stable, an occasional low, moaning whine coming from his lips.

Barker uttered a shout and ran toward the dog. As he approached he saw that Silver Tongue was leaving a bloody trail behind him, and also that there was a shocking gory wound in the animal's side. At Bern's feet the creature sank on the snow, uttering a mournful, quavering, heart-piercing howl.

Three agitated, sickened boys gazed down at the stricken dog. Barker's face was ghastly white, and he choked as he cried:

"Somebody has shot him! Oh, the whelp—the wretch!"

CHAPTER XXIII.

FOLLOWING THE TRAIL.

Half an hour later, lying on a blanket in the stable, the dog breathed its last, while the three enraged and sorrowful lads stood looking on. Barker's face was grim and bitter, his heart bursting with the wrath his lips could find no words to express.

Springer drew Piper aside. "Who do you sus-suppose would do a miserable, dirty thing like that, Sleuth?" he asked in a whisper.

"Not having had time to investigate the affair thoroughly, I'm not fully prepared to answer your question, Phil; but my deduction is that some one shot the poor hound with malice aforethought, or words to that effect."

"It doesn't require extreme perspicacity to arrive at that conclusion," returned Springer sarcastically. "It was a low-down, murderous trick, and the contemptible sneak who did it ought to smart for it. The thing is to find out who it was."

"Berlin isn't popular. He has a number of enemies, and any one of these before-mentioned enemies might have——"

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"Not any one of them; only a fellow of the very lowest and most vicious type would shoot a harmless dog in order to hurt the creature's master. Of course I wouldn't make any accusations—yet; but there are two fellows in town I'd suspect more than any one else."

"In full and complete assurance of confidence, you may mention their names for my listening ear."

"Oh, you can guess. I mean Lander and Davis."

"H'm!" said Sleuth, leaning his chin on his clenched fist and puckering his brow into an expression of profound meditation and thought. "There's yet another whose name has flashed comet-wise through my mind."

"You mean——"

"Grant!" whispered Piper, straightening out his index finger and pressing it against his lips.

Phil shook his head. "No, Sleuth, I can't think it of that fuf-fellow. As unpopular as Grant is, I don't believe he'd do such a contemptible thing."

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"Perhaps not," admitted Sleuth; "but it's the method of great detectives to take every suspicious person into consideration. I'll stake my personal reputation on it that one of the three parties mentioned is the culpable wretch. If you had seen what my eyes beheld over at Bunk Lander's old camp on a certain dark and dismal night, if you had witnessed the venomous rage with which Rod Grant fastened his clutches on the throat of said Lander, you might now be disposed to think him capable even of such an act as this."

"But Davis denied that story; he said there wasn't a word of truth in it."

"And lied in his false throat," growled Sleuth hoarsely. "I know what I saw, and I likewise know that Mr. Grant and Mr. Lander have not been on particularly friendly terms since that narrowly averted tragedy. On the other hand, the before-mentioned Davis and the before-said Grant have been very chummy indeed. Why, Davis has even called on Grant at the domicile of Miss Priscilla Kent—called privately, secretly, surreptitiously, under cover of darkness."

"How do you know?"

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"Oh," answered Sleuth, throwing out his chest, "I've been keeping a vigilant and sleepless eye upon those parties."

"But I can't believe Grant would dud-do it," persisted Springer. "Davis might, and he's particularly sus-sore on Berlin since that little mix-up at the academy Thursday."

"Is it not possible—indeed, probable—that both these persons were concerned?"

"I won't believe it of Rod Grant until I see pup-proof," said Phil.

Barker, having thrown one end of the blanket over the body of the dog, stood frowning a few moments in the open stable door, then turned suddenly to the others.

"I'm going to follow that crimson trail," he announced. "Will you fellows come along with me?"

"You bet," answered Springer.

"Sure we will," nodded Sleuth eagerly.

"Then get your snowshoes, Phil, for we may need them. Here are my old ones, which I loaned Rollins last Saturday; Piper can use those. I shall take my gun."

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"You won't nun-need a gun, will you?" faltered Springer.

"Can't tell; I may. Hurry up after your snowshoes. We'll be ready to start by the time you get back."

Phil went off at a run, while Berlin and Sleuth made preparations to start out.

"My prediction is," said Piper, "that we'll have to hustle, for, if I mistake not, I see a feathery flake or two in the air already. It will be snowing hard in less than an hour, something on which I'll stake my professional reputation."

Soon Springer returned, panting and flushed, bringing his snowshoes. They were waiting for him, Berlin having his shotgun tucked under his arm. By this time the occasional snowflakes had grown more plentiful, and, in apprehension that the sanguine trail would soon be obliterated, they set forth with all possible haste.

For a short distance the crimson drops on the snow took them along the main highway, but presently they were led away across the fields toward the distant woods. More than once they found a spot where Silver Tongue, weakened and nearly exhausted, had lain for a few moments upon the snow. Over a high ridge they went, and then, having to make more speed across a drifted valley, they finally paused to step into their snowshoes. With each passing minute the snowflakes steadily grew thicker, but in the shelter of the woods this was hardly perceptible, and the red drops still guided them easily.

Few words were spoken; even Sleuth's loquacious tongue was stilled. Their heart-beats quickened, they penetrated deeper and deeper into the woods. To Piper it seemed like a genuine man hunt, descriptions of which he had often perused with tingling nerves and intense satisfaction in the favorite stories of his choice, and in his lively imagination they were officers of the law pressing close at the heels of a fleeing malefactor.

At times the evergreen thickets were so dense that they pressed through them with no small difficulty. Once the trail led through some white birches which stood gleaming like silent ghosts there in the shadows. They came out at last to the open meadows beyond the woods and found that it was now snowing so heavily that the next strip of timber could be but dimly seen, as through a veil.

"It's no use," muttered Springer; "this old snowstorm is going to balk us."

Barker, his cap pulled low over his eyes and his body bent forward to catch the occasional red stains which could still be seen through the film of snow that had already fallen, strode on without comment.

And then, at the very edge of the next timber, they found the spot where Silver Tongue had been shot. Beyond that there was no trail of blood, but Piper, searching, quickly uttered a shout of satisfaction, bringing the others hurrying toward him.

"Here's the scoundrel's tracks!" cried Sleuth, pointing downward. "He was on snowshoes. He stood right here behind this bunch of cedars and fired at the dog."

"No question about it," agreed Barker grimly. "Now we must try to follow the tracks."

It quickly became evident that, after doing the shooting, the unknown had made off in great haste, his long strides indicating this. The tracks followed the edge of the woods for some distance and then turned into an old path, along which the pursuers were able to make considerable speed—so much, indeed, that Sleuth, who had heretofore kept close at Barker's heels, finally dropped, panting, behind Springer. As he fell back Piper called a warning to Berlin.

"If we catch him, be careful what you do, Barker, old man; don't lose your head, for you've got a loaded gun in your hands."

Berlin made no reply.

Suddenly the snowshoe trail turned sharply off the path, and once more they found themselves pressing through tangled thickets. They came to a clearing, where there was a small, frozen, snow-buried pond, and there it was no small matter, even then, to follow that snowshoe trail.

"Five or ten minutes in the open, and he will have us bub-baffled," muttered Springer.

"He was making for the big swamp back of Turkey Hill," panted Piper from the rear. "There's no shadow of doubt but he's one of the three suspects we mentioned, Phil; and I'm dead sure I know which one."

Once more they brushed and crashed through bushes and low-hanging branches. Finally, as they again came forth, Barker, amid a perfect tangle of brush, uttered a cry, pointing at something red which dangled from a branch.

"What is it?" questioned Springer.

"A handkerchief," answered Berlin, securing it—"a silk handkerchief. Look here, fellows, I've seen this same handkerchief before. The chap we're after must have been wearing it round his neck. He didn't notice when it slipped off or was pulled off by catching on that bush."

"Let me look," begged Phil eagerly. "By jove! I've sus-seen it before myself! I saw it tied round the neck of a fellow only last Saturday."

"That's right," nodded Berlin triumphantly. "I'm glad you were there, Phil; I'm glad you saw it, too. The name of the miserable sneak who owns this handkerchief is——"

"Rodney Grant," finished Springer.

"My deduction was correct," said Piper, well pleased with himself. "He's the feller who shot Silver Tongue."

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE PROOF.

In the silence which followed the soft, muffled sound of a wood-chopper's axe drifted to their ears from the northern slope of Turkey Hill. Even the snow, which was now falling thickly, could be heard making an almost imperceptible rustling and whispering amid the bushes. Slowly Barker folded the red silk handkerchief and put it carefully away in a pocket.

"I think this will be sufficient evidence," he said harshly; "but we may as well locate the contemptible whelp if we can, and I fancy we'll find him with his pals at Lander's camp. It won't be possible to follow the snowshoe tracks more than two or three minutes longer, but he was certainly heading for that camp."

"If we do find him, be careful with that gun of yours," again warned Piper. "Don't lose your head, Berlin, old man."

"I'm not a fool," returned Barker. "Come on."

The snowshoe trail was soon obliterated, but the last faint tracks were plainly seen to be pointing toward the island in the heart of the swamp, and they pushed straight on. Finally the old camp came into view through the film of falling snow, and in a hoarse whisper Piper called attention to the fact that smoke was rising from the piece of rusty stovepipe which served as a chimney. With all possible caution the three trailers crept forward.

Not a sound came from within the camp; the smoking chimney was the only token which gave evidence that a human being had been there in many hours—possibly many days. After wasting some time in vain listening, Berlin suddenly made a bold move, advancing toward the door.

"Hello!" he muttered, stopping as the others came up behind him. "Look at this!"

There was a padlock on the door, securing it by means of a staple and clasp.

"My deduction is," said Piper, "that the den is deserted and the miscreant flown."

"He's sus-skipped already," said Springer.

Investigation revealed that the padlock was really locked. Then they peered in through the dingy window, and, their eyes after a time becoming accustomed to the gloomy interior, they saw beyond question that no living person was there.

"He hasn't been gone long," decided Barker disappointedly, "for the smoke proves that. There's still a smoldering fire in the old stove."

"Let's hub-bust the door open and look the place over," suggested Springer.

"Let me hasten to caution you against such a proceeding," interposed Sleuth, as Barker seemed to hesitate. "The complete details of our morning's work will doubtless be laid before the public eye, and we must take every precaution not to perpetrate any act that will rebound to our discredit. Let it not be said that, like the owner of this den of iniquity, we broke and entered."

"It wouldn't do any good, anyhow," said Berlin. "We couldn't learn anything further, and I feel certain I already have the proof that will nail the sneak fast."

"What are you going to do about it?" questioned Phil.

"Do?" cried Barker. "I'm going to make him settle—handsomely. I'll teach him he can't shoot my dog without paying for it."

"This will come pretty near fuf-fixing Mr. Grant for good around Oakdale. He'd better pull up stakes and get out."

"He was practically fixed before this," said Barker; "but this will certainly satisfy every doubter as to his character. Even Stone can't have anything to say in his defense after this."

By the time the swamp was left behind the snow was coming down in such an impenetrable mass that they could barely see a few feet in advance, and the wind was rising, forcing them to hold their heads down and bend forward as they breasted the storm.

"It's going to be a ripper," said Springer. "Winter came in early this year, and it's sus-soaking it to us good."

Down the Barville road they went, Barker silently planning his course of action toward Grant.

Until late in the afternoon the storm continued, the wind piling the snow in drifts; between three and four o'clock, however, it abated far more suddenly than it had begun. The wind died down, and the sun, setting beyond Turkey Hill, shot red gleams through a rift in the clouds, gilding the arrow-vane on the steeple of the Methodist church. Men and boys appeared everywhere with shovels, opening paths to houses and clearing the sidewalks. The loafers, who had spent the greater part of the day around the roaring stove in Stickney's store, discussing national politics, high finance, and arguing vociferously over original methods for busting the trusts, gradually melted away until only two rheumatically old codgers who could not wield shovels were left.

Even before the snow had ceased to fall, Rodney Grant was out and at work on the path leading to his aunt's house, and, having begun thus early, he was able to complete the task before darkness came on. He had just disposed of the last shovelful when, straightening up, he perceived two persons plowing toward him, almost waist deep, along High Street. One was a tall, husky-looking man, and the other Rod recognized with some surprise as Berlin Barker. He flung the shovel to his shoulder and turned, but the voice of the man hailed him.

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"Hold on, young feller! We want to see you a minute."

His surprise redoubled, Grant dropped the blade of his shovel to the snow, leaned lightly on the handle and waited. The man he had often seen around Oakdale, but did not know his name. He fancied that Barker's cold, grim face wore an expression of malignant, but repressed, triumph.

"You're Rod Grant, old Aunt Kent's neevy, ain't ye?" questioned the man, coming up.

"I am Rodney Grant, Miss Priscilla Kent's nephew," was the calm answer, although the man's tone and Barker's appearance forewarned the boy from Texas that something disagreeable was about to take place.

"I've got a few questions I want to ax ye, young man, and I advise ye to answer 'em truthfully."

"Save your advice; I'm not in the habit of lying."

Barker laughed shortly, sneeringly, and Rod was seized, as he had been scores of times before, by an intense and almost irresistible desire to lay hands on the fellow.

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"All right," said the man. "Now what I want to know fust is this: Did you go out gunnin' early this morning?"

"Although I consider it none of your business, I'll answer. I did not."

"What? You didn't? Now be keerful. Take keer. You're li'ble to git yourself into a mess."

"What's the game, Mr. Man?" indignantly demanded Rod.

"You'll find out purty quick. What did you do this morning, if you didn't go out gunnin'?"

"I don't mind telling you that I started to go fishing."

"Fishin'? Ho! ho! Where was you goin'?"

"That also is none of your business, but I see no reason why I shouldn't state truthfully that we started for Coleman's Pond. We were going to cut holes and fish through the ice."

"We? Who? Who was with ye?"

"Bunk Lander."

"Didn't you start out alone?"

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"No, sir."

"Didn't you take a gun with ye?"

"No, sir."

"Now hold on, hold on. Be keerful. You're li'ble to git twisted."

"Let me inform you, my friend, that you make me plenty tired. I don't know what you're driving at, but I do know that your insinuations that I am lying are insulting. There's no reason why I should lie."

"Mebbe not. Did you go over to Coleman's Pond? That's a right long distance; 'bout five miles or a little more."

"No, we didn't go over there."

"Why not?"

"Because after we reached Lander's camp, where we stopped a while, this storm began, and we decided it would be right foolish to attempt any fishing through the ice to-day."

"H'm!" grunted the inquisitor skeptically. "Did the Lander boy have a gun with him?"

"No, sir."

"How'd you happen to stop at his camp?"

"We went there for fishing tackle."

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"And built a fire?"

"Yes. We weren't in any hurry and the place was cold, so Bunk started a fire."

"H'm! You've got it fixed up purty well, ain't ye?"

Rod felt his cheeks burn. "I don't know what you mean, for there was nothing to fix up. I do know that you're making me right sore with your questions and your nasty doubting manner, and I don't propose to answer anything further until you inform me what all this is about. What are you driving at?"

The man reached into his pocket and brought forth a red silk handkerchief, which he offered to Rod.

"I guess you dropped this handkercher on your way, didn't ye? It's yourn, ain't it?"

Grant took the handkerchief and looked at it. "Yes," he replied, forgetting his determination to

answer no more questions, "it's mine."

CHAPTER XXV.

SETTLEMENT DAY DRAWS NEAR.

Once more Barker laughed, this time triumphantly, exultantly, for he felt sure that Rodney Grant had trapped himself by that admission.

"I think that's sufficient, Mr. Pickle," he said, addressing the man. "You've done very well."

"Jest wait a minute," advised the man, holding up his hand; "I ain't quite through yet." He turned, with a manner intended to be impressive and awesome, upon Rod. "My name is William Pickle," he announced, "and I'm the deputy sheriff of this town."

If he expected that this statement would cause the young Texan to quail or betray alarm, disappointment was his portion, for Rod remained wholly self-possessed and undisturbed.

"Permit me, Mr. Pickle," he said earnestly, "to inquire how my handkerchief came into your possession. I sure think it's about time you answered a few of *my* questions."

"You sometimes wear that handkercher tied round your neck when you're out gunnin'—or fishin'—don't ye?"

"I may have done so," admitted Rodney; "but you haven't answered *my* question. How did you come to have it?"

"'Twas found this mornin' over on Andrew Dodd's land, back of Turkey Hill. I guess you must have lost it there, didn't ye?"

"I don't think so. In fact, I'm right certain I did not, for I don't remember having it with me to-day. I don't know precisely where Andrew Dodd's land is located, but unless it takes in the swamp west of Turkey Hill I was not on his land to-day. I'm right curious to know what you're driving at, Mr. Pickle, and I opine it's about time for you to come out open and frank, so that I may get your drift."

"I cal'late, young feller, you'd better come down to Lawyer Frances' office with us and settle up with young Barker for killin' his hound which you shot this mornin'."

It was out at last. Grant, still completely self-possessed, looked the officer straight in the eyes.

"You've sure got another think coming to you," he retorted indignantly. "Not knowing anything whatever about this matter you mention, I'll not come to Lawyer Frances' office and settle. I do not own a gun, and I haven't had one in my hands to-day. If Barker's dog was shot, somebody else did it, and you're barking up the wrong tree."

"Of course he'll say that," cried Berlin; "but he caught himself foul when he owned up that the handkerchief was his. I found it hanging from a bush while, with Springer and Piper, I was following his tracks after he shot Silver Tongue. Phil and Sleuth both saw me pick the handkerchief off the branch, and they'll swear to it."

Grant's steady, unflinching eyes were fixed on Barker now, and he seemed to be trying to read the thoughts and motives of this fellow, who since his arrival in Oakdale had so persistently and venomously harassed him. The limits of his endurance had about been reached; the strain was too much, and something threatened to snap. Nevertheless, he still struggled to maintain a desperate hold on himself—struggled to restrain and master the cyclonic Grant temper, which invariably wrought havoc when it broke loose. In his ears at that very moment seemed to echo his father's words of warning, but the hammering of his outraged heart promised to drown those echoes into silence. Despite his outward appearance of self-control, his voice shook a little as he said:

"You've never let up on me an instant, have you, Barker? Well, you sure have no idea of the dangerous ground you're treading on. I tell you now I can account for every minute of my time since leaving my aunt's house this morning, and I can prove that I didn't shoot your dog."

"How will you prove it?"

"By Lander. He met me at the house, and we were together all the time until we returned from his camp after the storm began."

"By Lander!" scoffed Barker. "Why, he's the biggest liar I know—excepting you."

"If you say I shot your dog, you're a liar!"

Teeth set, fists clenched, Barker started; but Pickle's gnarled hand gripped his collar, and the deputy sheriff snapped:

"Hold on, my boy! Go slow."

Grant had dropped his shovel, and now his face was almost as white as the snow beneath his feet.

"Let him come," he begged. "He may as well have it now as any time, and it's plain he'll never be satisfied till he gets it."

"There won't be no fightin' here," asserted Mr. Pickle, thrusting Bern back.

"If there's any law, I'll make him settle!" snarled Barker. "If the law isn't sufficient, I'll take the

matter into my own hands!"

"You've been piling up a right stiff account, Barker," Rod flung back; "and on settlement day you may get all that's coming to you in a lump sum, which possibly will be some more than you're looking for."

"So you refuse to come down to Lawyer Frances' office, do ye?" questioned the deputy sheriff. "Well, you'll be li'ble to land in the lockup when I have the warrant to serve on ye. Come on, Barker, we'll go see Frances and fix things up. That's the proper way to proceed, now that you're dead sartain of your ground."

They turned back toward the village, leaving the boy from Texas gazing after them. As their dark figures melted into the fast deepening darkness, Grant spoke in a low, hard tone.

"Yes, settlement day draws near, Mr. Barker, and when it arrives there'll be a clean wipe-out of the account between us."

CHAPTER XXVI.

GRANT'S DEFIANCE.

It was impossible for Rod wholly to conceal his disturbed state of mind from his aunt, but he skillfully evaded answering her questions, by which she sought to learn what was the trouble. If the implicating handkerchief had been found by Barker, Springer and Piper, as stated, he wondered how it had come to be where it was discovered, and slowly a suspicion and a possible solution crept into his mind. Nevertheless, he was not yet satisfied that a "job" had not been put up on him by Barker, and he felt a strong desire to question Springer and Piper. Later, if they persisted in corroborating Barker's words, he would find the fellow on whom his suspicions had turned and give him a taste of the "third degree."

Unable to remain inactive while his enemy was at work, and really dreading the reappearance of Deputy Sheriff Pickle with a warrant for his arrest, Rod made an excuse to go for the mail and set his feet toward the village. He was hesitating about entering the postoffice when some one called to him from the shadows between two buildings.

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"Davis!" he breathed. "Perhaps this is as good a time as any."

"'St!" hissed Spotty. "Come here, Rod, old feller. Something doin'."

Grant joined him. "What is it, Davis? What's up?"

"I don't know just what's up," answered Spotty; "but there's something in the air, you bet. See that light in the winder over there?" He pointed to a lighted window over one of the stores across the street.

"Yes."

"That's old Shyster Frances' office. They've got Bunk up there, and I guess they're goin' for him. Wonder what he's done now?"

"Got Lander up there, have they? Who's got him?"

"Old Pickle marched him up the stairs, and I see Berlin Barker and his father foller. Can't be they're doin' anything about that old affair, and I'm guessin' what Bunk's been into lately."

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"I reckon I know what they're trying to do," growled Rod, "and I judge it's about time I strolled in on them myself."

He started, and Davis, springing forward, grabbed his arm.

"What are you goin' to do, Rod?" palpitated Spotty. "It ain't nothin' to you. You better keep away."

The boy from Texas shook him off. "Let go! Bunk stood by me when I was in a right bad scrape. Perhaps you'd better come along, too."

"Not on your life!" said Spotty, hurriedly retreating in great alarm. "They don't get me into no mess."

Rodney crossed the street and unhesitatingly mounted the stairs leading to the door of Lawyer Frances' office. Perhaps William Pickle was prepared with the warrant for his arrest, but that did not lead him to hesitate or falter for a second. He saw the lawyer's name lettered in black on the ground glass of the door, through which the light from within faintly shone, and his steady hand found the knob.

The lawyer was sitting at his desk with his swivel chair turned sidewise so that he could face Lander, who, wearing a sullen look of defiance, stood a few feet away. Berlin Barker's father was also seated, with Berlin standing beside his chair. Deputy Sheriff Pickle was posted within four feet of the office door. As that door swung open and the new arrival stepped boldly in, every eye switched from Lander, and Bunk, seeing Rod, uttered an exclamation of relief and satisfaction.

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"Here he is!" he cried. "Now you can question him yourselves. This bunch has been trying to force me into lying about what was done this morning, Rod. Somebody shot Barker's hound, and——"

"Be quiet, Lander!" ordered the lawyer, bringing his knuckles down sharply on the edge of his desk. "Close the door, Pickle. It is rather fortunate this young man chose to come here at this time. Perhaps he has decided to make a confession, which is certainly the wisest course he can pursue."

"I haven't anything whatever to confess, Mr. Frances," said Rodney boldly. "Hearing that Lander had been brought here, I knew well enough what you were trying to do with him, and so——"

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"And so he come running, for fear Lander would peach," interrupted Berlin Barker.

"I didn't have nothing to tell, and if I had I wouldn't 'a' told it," said Bunk.

"You can see the disposition of the boy, Mr. Frances," said Berlin's father. "He brazenly acknowledges that he wouldn't tell under any circumstances."

"But," put in Rod at once, "he states the truth when he says he has nothing to tell. Where are Springer and Piper? I'd like to ask them if they saw Berlin Barker find my silk handkerchief, as he

claimed he did, somewhere back of Turkey Hill.”

“They have already made such a statement in my presence,” announced the lawyer. “The evidence is against you, young man, and the easiest way out of your trouble is to own up and settle for that valuable dog which you maliciously slaughtered.”

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“I object to your language, sir. I know nothing whatever about the shooting of Barker’s dog.”

“Will you explain how your handkerchief came to be found where it was?”

“I can’t explain that—at present,” confessed Rod. “All I have to say is that somebody must have stolen it from me and lost it there.”

Berlin sneered, and his father, pulling a grieved and indignant countenance, said:

“Such a subterfuge is palpably puerile. According to all reports, young Grant, since appearing in this town, has plainly shown himself to be a vicious and undesirable character—such a boy as must contaminate those with whom he associates. He has likewise shown what he is by choosing as companions the worst boys of Oakdale.”

“Got your hammer out, old man,” growled Lander. “You’re one of the kind that don’t want to give a feller no show, and there’s plenty of ‘em ‘round here. Mebbe you think your own son is a little white saint, but——”

“Silence, you young reprobate!” cried Mr. Barker, rising to his feet. “You’ve been watched since you came back here, and——”

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“Oh, yes, I’ve been watched—I know it. Give a chap a black name and then kick him is the way they do hereabouts.”

Grant’s calm defiance had stiffened Lander’s backbone, and he was not at all terrified by the aspect of Mr. Barker.

“Without no cause,” he went on, “your son’s tried to soak Rod Grant, and it’s made him madder’n a hornet ‘cause he ain’t come out of his tricks with flying colors. If I’d been in Rod’s place, he’d found himself up against something hot long ago.”

“Never mind taking up my battle, Lander,” said Rodney. “I reckon I can take care of myself. All I ask of you is that you stick to the straight truth and don’t let any one frighten you into lying.”

“That’s what they was tryin’ to do. They was even callin’ up that old scrape and tryin’ to make me believe something would be done if I didn’t go back on you and tell a mess of stuff that wasn’t true. They can’t prove anything against ye, Rod; the straight facts make an alibi, as they call it in law, and they’ll never git only straight goods from me.”

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Satisfied now that, in spite of the seeming incriminating evidence of the handkerchief, his enemy could prove nothing, Grant uttered a bold defiance:

“I’m here. If they want to arrest me let them do so. Have you a warrant for me, Mr. Pickle?”

“Not yet,” acknowledged the deputy sheriff; “but I’m reddy to serve it as soon’s it’s placed in my han’s.”

“Do you wish to swear out a warrant, Barker?” asked the lawyer.

Mr. Barker cleared his throat, his manner plainly indicating an uncertain state of mind.

“Why, I—I don’t think it’s absolutely necessary to-night, Frances. The fellow won’t be likely to get away, and we may obtain further evidence bearing on the case. That hound was a valuable dog. I paid a fancy price for him, in order that Berlin might have a good rabbit dog, and I’m naturally intensely outraged and highly indignant over the action of this boy in shooting——”

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“I object to your language, also, sir,” cried Rod. “You must plainly realize that the proof on which you base such a malicious charge is worthless, and your persistence in it is plain slander.”

“We’ll get him yet,” declared Berlin savagely—“we’ll get him unless he runs away.”

“I’m not even going to run away as far as Clearport,” returned the boy from Texas cuttingly. “You won’t find me imitating your example, Mr. Barker.”

“If he should run away,” said Berlin’s father, “it might be a good thing for the town; it can spare him and his well chosen companions.”

“Don’t you reckon on it,” advised Rod. “I’m going to stay right here in Oakdale and see this thing through. Maybe when the straight truth comes out you’ll owe me an apology; but, if you’re like your son, I don’t opine I’ll get one. Come, Bunk, let’s pike along.”

“Sure,” said Lander, starting with great willingness.

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Pickle stepped in front of the door, giving Mr. Barker a questioning glance.

“Let them go,” said the man; and Rod passed out, with Lander, grinning, at his heels.

CHAPTER XXVII.

SPOTTY REFUSES TO TALK.

As they reached the street Lander broke into a hoarse, triumphant chuckle of satisfaction.

"They didn't bluff us none, did they, Roddy, old chap?" he said. "You sure did poke it to old man Barker and his measly cub. It done me good to see you stand up to 'em that fashion. But say, what sort of a dirty rinktum has Berlin Barker been tryin' to put up on you now? He's the limit, that snake-in-the-grass. 'Twouldn't surprise me if he shot his own dog so's to lay it onto you."

"No, Bunk, I hardly think he did that."

"Well, you don't take no stock in that handkerchief gag, do ye? He never found your handkerchief the way he claims he did."

"I don't know whether he did or not," confessed Rod. "Not that I believe him any too good to try to throw the blame of this thing onto me by a trick of that sort, but I can't quite come to think that Springer or Piper would back him up."

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"Mebbe he fooled 'em. P'r'aps he had the handkerchief in his pocket and jest flung it on the bush when they wasn't lookin'. Then he could call their attention to it and make b'lieve he'd jest seen it."

"I have thought of that myself, Bunk, and I'm going to ask Springer and Piper a few questions. In the meantime, however, I'm some anxious to interrogate another chap. I wonder where Davis is? He told me they had you up there in the lawyer's office, and I left him out here."

But Spotty had vanished, and he was not to be found anywhere in the vicinity.

"He's a thin-blooded rat," said Bunk. "I always knowed it, but he was the only feller who'd have anything to do with me arter I come back to Oakdale, so I picked up with him. I say, Rod, it ain't done you much good chummin' with us two; for we're both marked, and it don't make no difference what we do, folks is bound to say we're tough nuts and can't be any different. That's what makes me raw all the way through. If a feller happens to make one bad mistake and gits into a tight box people never seem to forget it, and they're always lookin' for him to do the same thing over again, or worse. It's discouraging, Rod. Why, even if I wanted to be a decent feller and tried to be, who'd give me any encouragement? Not a blame soul."

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"You're mistaken, Lander, old chap; I would."

"Oh, yes, that's right; but then, you're different from these narrer-laced, hide-bound muckers 'round here. If they could only catch me foul now, so they could put me down and out for good, it would make 'em bust wide open with glee. No, 'tain't no use for a feller to try to be square and decent."

"Don't you believe it, Lander; the fellow who will try to be decent, and stick to it in spite of everything, is right sure to come out on top and win universal respect in the end. It's only a matter of strength and resolution to fight to the finish, that's all."

"Mebbe so," admitted the other boy, hunching his shoulders and shaking his head doubtfully; "but I ain't never seen nothing to make me believe it. Do you think you're goin' to come out on top here in Oakdale? Have you got a notion that you'll succeed, in spite of Barker and everybody else that's turned against ye, in winnin' the respect of the majority of folks 'round these parts? Say, old pal, forget it! You never will. It's a losing game, and you might as well make up your mind to that fust as last. You ain't obliged to stay here, and if I was in your place I own up I wouldn't stay no longer'n I could pack my duds and catch a train bound for other parts."

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"Lander, my father sent me here to school because I have an aunt in this town with whom I can live, and unless he takes me away in opposition to my wishes you can safely bet I'm going to stay here and finish my course at Oakdale Academy. I'll admit it's not any too pleasant for me, but my blood is up, and I'm a Grant. I've never known a quitter by that name."

Bunk peered admiringly at the speaker, even as he observed: "Funny the fellers 'round here should size you up as a quitter, but I cal'late you're to blame for that by the way you sorter let Barker run over you to start with. Why you done it I can't make out, for I've seen enough of ye to know that you ain't no coward."

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"Thanks," said Rod, with a short laugh. "Most persons have right good reasons for their acts, and this was true in my case. I'm going to look for Spotty at his home now. Will you come along?"

"Guess I will, though you've got me guessin' why you want to see him so bad."

"If I get a chance to talk with him to-night, perhaps you'll find out."

But at the home of Davis they were informed by the boy's mother that he had not returned from the village. They waited a while outside the house, only to be disappointed by the failure of Spotty to put in an appearance. Finally Rod said:

"I'll see him to-morrow; it will give me more time to think the matter over."

Still wondering why Grant was so earnestly desirous to see Davis, Bunk bade him good night and they separated.

Ere Rod slept that night he spent a long time thinking the matter over and planning out a diplomatic method of handling Spotty and getting the exact truth from him; for somehow he felt strangely confident that the fellow could clear up the mystery connected with the shooting of Silver Tongue.

Shortly after nine o'clock Sunday morning the boy from Texas again knocked at the door of Davis' home. Mrs. Davis, a thin, care-worn, slatternly woman, answered that knock and informed him that Spotty was still in bed.

"He ain't very well this morning; he says he's sick," she explained. "He wouldn't git up to eat no breakfast."

"I'd like very much to see him for a few minutes, Mrs. Davis," urged Rod. "Can't I do so?"

"Well, I dunno. He won't like to be disturbed; he gits awful cross and snappy when he is. Still, seein's you and him is friendly, I guess you can go up to his room. It's the open chamber straight ahead at the top of the stairs."

Grant opened the door at the head of the stairs and walked into the barnlike, unfinished chamber beneath the roof. As he did so some one wrapped in several old quilts started up on a bed and looked at him. It was Spotty, who immediately sank down with a groan.

"What's the matter, Spotty, old chap?" asked Rod kindly, as he stopped beside the bed. "Aren't you feeling well this morning?"

"Oh, I'm sick—I'm sick!" moaned Davis. "Go 'way! I don't want to see nobody."

"What ails you?"

"I dunno, but I'm awful sick. My head aches terrible, and I feel rotten mean all over."

"Perhaps you ought to have a doctor."

"I don't want no doctor. I guess I'll be all right in a day or two. Don't talk to me; it makes me worse."

"But I want to talk to you a few minutes, Spotty," said Rod, sitting down on a broken chair close by and putting out a hand to touch the fellow's forehead, which caused him to shrink and grumble. "Your head doesn't seem to be hot. Perhaps you'd feel better if you got up."

"No, sir, I wouldn't. Guess I know. How'd you git in, anyhow? I told the old lady I was feelin' rotten and didn't want nobody to bother me."

"Your mother knew we were friends, and so she let me in to see you."

"She'll hear from me when I do get up. She ought to know better."

"Oh, come, come, Spotty. Of course she reckoned I'd sympathize with you if you were sick. Have you heard about what happened to Barker's dog?"

The body of the boy beneath the quilts twitched the least bit.

"Ain't heard nothing," he growled. "Don't want to hear anything now."

"Somebody shot Silver Tongue, and Berlin is pretty hot over it. You know how much I like Barker. It would do me good to find out who killed his dog."

One of Davis' hands crept up to the edge of the quilt, which he pulled down a bit, turning a foxy eye toward the visitor; but, immediately on meeting Rod's gaze, he sank his head back beneath those quilts, like a turtle pulling into its shell.

"I don't care," he mumbled under the covers; "I don't care about nothing now."

"He thinks I shot Silver Tongue," said Rod, as if it was something of a joke; "but I didn't get the chance."

No sound from Spotty.

"If I had," Grant continued—"well, I won't say what might have happened."

Still the boy in the bed remained silent.

"You know he threatened to shoot old Rouser," Rod pursued, "and there are some persons who might feel that he simply got a dose of his own medicine. Don't you say so?"

"I'm sick," persisted Spotty in a muffled tone. "I ain't goin' to talk."

"I just thought I'd let you know about it, for I reckoned you'd be interested. Oh, here's one of the neckties I gave you hanging on a hook. Do you know, I lost my red silk handkerchief. You didn't borrow it, did you, Spotty?"

"Borrer it!" growled Davis. "You know I didn't. What are you talkin' about?"

"Oh, I didn't know, seein' as we're friends, but you took it for a joke, or something like that."

"Well, I didn't, and now I won't talk no more if you set there and chin for a week."

Nor could Rod get another word out of Spotty, and he was finally compelled to depart in some disappointment, although more than half satisfied that his suspicions concerning the fellow were well grounded.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

AROUSSED AT LAST.

On Monday morning Rod was early at the academy, waiting for Springer and Piper. He paid no apparent heed to the disdainful, contemptuous looks of the boys who saw him posted there on the steps; nevertheless, he took note of their manner and felt fierce, resentful wrath burning in his heart.

The girls likewise regarded him with open aversion. Sadie Springer and Lelia Barker, coming up the path together, beheld the defiant young Texan and exchanged words concerning him. It was natural enough that Lelia should espouse her brother's cause and hold the same opinions regarding Grant; however, for some reason which he himself could not understand, her remark, distinctly heard as she mounted the steps, cut him keenly.

"Why, Sadie," she said, evidently speaking for his ears as well as those of her companion, "he's a perfect young ruffian. No one else would do things he has done."

In many ways Lelia was unlike her brother. She was headstrong and impulsive, and, while Berlin was coldly cautious and calculating, she had often betrayed a daring and almost reckless disposition. He had never been pronouncedly popular, but Lelia was both liked and admired by nearly all the girls and boys of the school. They had never exchanged a word, but Rod, had he analyzed his true feelings, would have found that he also entertained a strong liking for Lelia.

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He forgot her in a moment, however, as he saw Phil Springer and Roger Eliot turn in at the gate, with Piper and some other fellows a short distance behind.

"Springer," said Rod, descending the steps to meet him, "I want to have a little talk with you. You, too, Piper; I'd like to ask you fellows some questions."

They regarded him coldly, repellantly, Sleuth's lips taking on a curl of disdain.

Rod continued quickly: "According to Barker, you fellows were with him when he found my silk handkerchief Saturday morning. Is that right?"

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"Absolutely correct," answered Piper, while Springer merely nodded.

"You were following the tracks of some one supposed to have shot Barker's dog, were you?"

"We were hot on the trail of the scoundrel," said Sleuth. "Only for the snowstorm, we'd tracked him to his lair."

"Did you see Barker find my handkerchief?"

"You bet we did."

"He claims to have found it hanging on a bush. Were you near at hand when he made the discovery?"

"Phil was about five feet behind him, and I was close behind Phil," replied Sleuth.

"Are you positive Barker did not hang the handkerchief on the bush and then call your attention to it?"

Springer suddenly burst into derisive laughter.

"Now what do you think of that!" he cried. "If that isn't about the poorest attempt I ever knew of to struggle out of a thing, I'll eat my huh-hat! It won't do, Mr. Grant—it won't dud-do."

"Not at all," agreed Piper sternly. "Berlin called our attention to the handkerchief before he'd even reached it. He didn't have a chance to hang it there."

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"That's all I want to know," said Rod quietly, "and I'm much obliged to you."

"Don't mention it," returned Sleuth cuttingly.

Barker reached the academy barely in time to escape being late for the opening of the morning session. As he seated himself at his desk his eyes were turned in the direction of Rodney Grant some distance away, but already Rod had a book open before him and was apparently quite oblivious to his surroundings. And all through the forenoon the young Texan gave constant attention to his books and recitations, not even seeming aware of the fact that the other boys drew away from him in classes, leaving him alone and solitary. Even at intermission he succeeded in maintaining his demeanor undisturbed, although with half an eye and no ears at all he could not have failed to take note of the sneers and disdain of his schoolmates.

As the deep snow had obliterated the path across lots, it was necessary for him to take a roundabout course through the village in order to reach his aunt's home; and, on his way for midday lunch, turning up Main Street from the square, he perceived several fellows blocking the sidewalk in front of Hyde's livery stable. Instantly he knew there was trouble impending, but not even for an instant did he hesitate or slacken his steady stride. Rollins, Tuttle, Cooper, Piper, Springer—they were all there. Barker was there, too, standing in the middle of the sidewalk, his gaze fixed on the approaching lad, for whom he was plainly waiting, and Rod knew they had made

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haste to reach this spot ahead of him.

Within Grant's heart a voice seemed calling warningly: "Steady! Be careful! You know what may happen if you lose your head." But they had sneered at him as a coward, they had branded him as a braggart and a quitter, and now the time had come when his manhood would no longer permit him to betray the slightest wavering; so, with his face a trifle pale, but his eyes shining dangerously, and every nerve in his body keyed, he went forward.

Barker held his place in the middle of the sidewalk; unless he turned aside a bit Rod must brush against him. Their eyes met, and suddenly Berlin cried:

"Hold on a minute, you dog-killing whelp! I told you what I'd do if the law wasn't sufficient to make you settle for that dirty piece of business, and now you can't get away unless you turn your back and run for it."

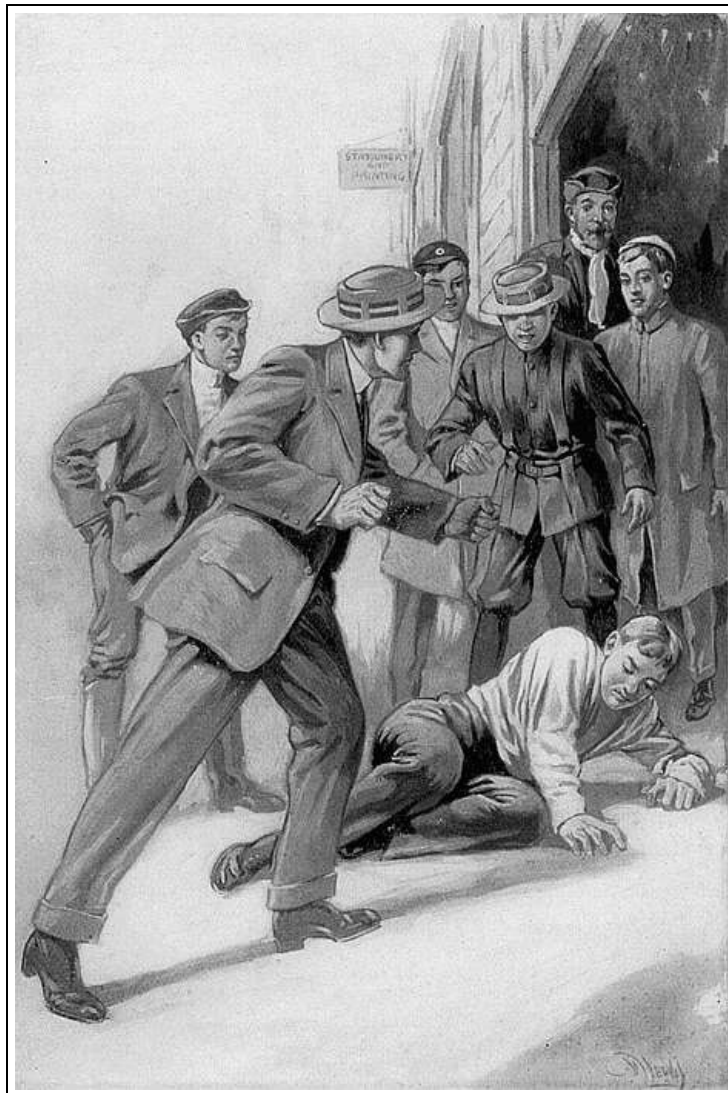
"Barker," said Grant, and there was something in his voice that surprised those waiting, staring lads, "I turned my back on you once, and I've been mortally ashamed of it ever since, even though it was for your own good, as well as my own, that I did so. You've pushed me too far, and I'll never turn again; but I warn you that you'd better step aside right lively and let me pass."

"Ha! ha!" laughed Berlin, in derisive contempt. "You're as brave as a cornered rat."

"Sometimes a cornered rat is dangerous. Get out of my way!"

"I will when I'm through with you—I'll get out of your way and let you crawl home after you've had the thrashing of your life." As he uttered this threat Berlin, having his coat already unbuttoned, suddenly snapped it off and flung it into the waiting hands of Sleuth Piper. "I'm going to smash your face!" he shouted. "I'll teach you to shoot inoffensive dogs, you cheap cur!"

He sprang forward with the final insulting word on his lips and aimed a blow at Grant's mouth. Quick as a flash the young Texan ducked and sidestepped, permitting Berlin's fist to shoot over his shoulder. Untouched, he drove his own right fist with staggering force against the solar plexus of his assailant, stopping that rush in a twinkling; in another twinkling the knuckles of his left hand crashed full and fair on the point of Barker's jaw, and the would-be avenger of Silver Tongue crumpled like a frost-struck autumn leaf and went down.



THE WOULD-BE AVENGER OF SILVER TONGUE CRUMPLED LIKE A LEAF AND WENT DOWN. —Page 280.

It was done so quickly that the boys who had gathered to see Berlin thrash the Texan scarcely had

time to catch a breath before they beheld Grant, his fists clenched, his face ashen and terrible, his lips drawn back from his set teeth, standing over the fallen fellow as if ready to leap upon him as he lay and beat out of his body what breath of life might linger there. But it was Grant's eyes that terrified them the most, for they were the eyes of a wild beast aroused to the most frightful fury; and Piper, dropping the coat and falling back, screamed aloud:

"Stop him, fellers—stop him, or he'll kill Bern sure!"

Somehow it seemed as if that cry brought Rodney Grant to his senses, for slowly his fists unclenched and his hands dropped at his sides, while, with a hissing sound like the intake of steam, he drew a long breath that filled his chest to its utmost capacity.

"Don't worry," he said, and there was something of that same indescribable, awesome touch in his voice; "I won't touch him again. The poor fool can't fight, anyhow. I've tried to keep peaceable and decent; but, now that you've made it impossible for me to do so, if there are any friends of his present who want to take up his fight I sure hope they won't be backward about it; for we may as well have the matter settled right now, to prevent any further uncertainty or annoyance."

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But there was no one who showed the slightest desire to take up this challenge, even Rollins, who had once browbeaten and insulted the boy from Texas, slinking behind Chub Tuttle's roly-poly body in a way that plainly betokened an amazing respect for Grant's fighting powers, at least. Seeing this, the faintest shadow of an inexpressibly contemptuous smile flitted across the defiant lad's face.

"All right," he said, "I'll leave you to doctor up your indiscreet friend, who, I reckon, will come round all right in a few minutes." He passed on, and they took care to give him room.

"Jinks!" breathed Piper, as Barker stirred slightly and uttered a faint sound which caused Springer to kneel hastily beside him. "I told you that feller was a perfect fiend to fight. I knew, for didn't I see him handle Lander!"

CHAPTER XXIX.

THE INCRIMINATING LETTER.

At the next street corner Rod hesitated a moment; then, instead of continuing toward his aunt's house, he turned his steps in the opposite direction and soon arrived at the home of Spotty Davis. He saw and talked with Mr. Davis, who was over from the lower mill for the midday meal.

"My boy?" said Davis. "Oh, he's gone to Belford."

"Gone?" exclaimed Rod, surprised.

"Yes," nodded the man; "I let him have the fare, and he took the mornin' train."

"When will he come back?"

"Dunno; mebbe he won't come back. You see, he's got some relatives over there, and his cousin Jim said he could git him a job in a machine shop. He ain't never been much struck on work, but all of a sudden last night he took a notion he'd like to try it, and he wouldn't let up on me till I give my consent. I guess mebbe 'twill do him good. He got into some kind of a fuss with the perfesser at the academy and was sent home. I cal'late he's got about eddication enough, anyhow, for he never was no hand to study."

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"Belford," muttered Grant. "How far is that?"

"Oh, 'bout sixty mile or so. Why, what's the matter?"

"I would like to see Spotty and have a talk with him."

"Ho! Well, that would be a master long distance to travel jest for a talk."

"Spotty was sick yesterday morning when I called. He must have recovered right suddenly."

"Oh, I guess he wa'n't very sick; he jest wanted to lay in bed, that was all. I hope he'll fall into good company in Belford, for the fellers he's took up with 'round here ain't done him no good."

Rod shrugged his shoulders with a wry smile, bade the man good day, and turned away. So Spotty had left town suddenly and unexpectedly; this act seemed to confirm Grant in his suspicions regarding the fellow.

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"He stole two dollars of my money," muttered Rod, as he walked homeward, "and he stole my silk handkerchief also. It was Spotty who shot Barker's dog, and either he lost the handkerchief afterward or became frightened and left it hanging on a bush in order to turn suspicion from himself. I sure hate to think that last, even of Spotty; but somehow I can't help it, knowing he would reason it out that the condition of affairs between Barker and myself and the possible finding of the handkerchief would make it seem a sure thing that I did the shooting."

Neither Barker nor Grant appeared at school that afternoon, Berlin remaining away because of his intense chagrin and shame, and Rod feeling himself too disturbed to study or appear in recitations. The boy from Texas knew his motives might be misconstrued, but he smiled grimly over the thought that any one should fancy that fear had anything to do with them.

School had closed for the day less than half an hour when Grant, chancing to look out, saw the sturdy figure of Ben Stone hurrying up the path toward Miss Kent's house. The young Texan met Ben at the door.

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"Come in," he invited, and the invitation was readily accepted.

"You didn't show up at the academy this afternoon," said Ben when they were in Grant's room.

"No; I had a reason for staying away, but you can reckon on it that I'll be there to-morrow."

"Something happened," said Stone—"something I want to tell you about."

"Go ahead; I'm listening."

"Of course the fellows had lots to say about the way you did Barker up, but I didn't come to talk about that."

"For which I'm plenty thankful."

"Something happened that gave a setback to the fellows who thought it was you that squealed about that hazing. Cooper, who is usually up to something, brought two live mice in a trap. Prof. Richardson is as scared of mice as any woman could be, and Chipper wanted to put them into the professor's desk. Piper, who always seems to have a key to fit anything, had one that would unlock the desk. You know how Sleuth prides himself on his keen and searching eyes. Well, in the desk he discovered a letter that had been sent to the professor, and he recognized the handwriting on it. Of course he didn't have any right to look at it, but he did just the same—he read it and kept it, too, to show to the fellows. It stirred up something sure enough, for it told all about that hazing and the breaking of the professor's skeleton, giving the names of every fellow who took part in that piece of business. The writer of that letter reminded the professor of his promise to protect any one who should tell him the truth."

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"What a sneaking piece of business to do!" exclaimed Rod.

"It certainly was," nodded Ben, "and I'll guarantee Prof. Richardson regarded it in that light. Perhaps that's one reason why he declined to pull all those fellows over the coals. You see, he'd been forced to jump on some that he plainly regards as his best scholars, and, as long as you made no complaint, he let it pass by handing out that lecture about hazing."

"Which," said Rod, "was sure enough straight dope. This hazing business, when it's carried too far, as it is right often, certainly is all to the bad—as I have good reasons to know."

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"You haven't asked who wrote that letter," reminded Ben.

"I'm not right sure I want to know."

"Why not?"

"Because I never could regard the squealer with an atom of respect. I don't quite understand why he wrote it, either."

"You know the professor threatened to probe into the matter and do his best to find out and punish the guilty parties."

"Yes."

"Well, I suppose the fellow who blowed was afraid some one else would do the same thing, and simply tried to make himself immune from punishment."

"Likely that's right."

"Don't you want to know who it was? It isn't probable you can help finding out, for all the fellows know now, and some of them have told the sneak a few things."

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"I don't opine," laughed Rod, "they'll break their necks hurrying to tell me."

"Oh, there's been a decided change of opinion about you. If it wasn't for that dog-shooting affair, I believe you'd be surprised to find a great many chaps ready to become friendly."

"What do you think about that dog shooting, Stone?"

"I'm dead sure you didn't have anything to do with it."

"Thanks. But of late even you have apparently been influenced by the rising tide of popular prejudice against one Rodney Grant."

"No," denied Ben—"no, indeed; but of late you have held yourself away from everybody. Why, you scarcely spoke to me when we met."

"Being plenty unpopular," said Rod, "I allowed I wouldn't involve you. I was independent enough to believe I could paddle my own canoe. I've observed that about nine times out of ten things work themselves out if you let them alone. I'll guarantee the truth concerning the shooting of Barker's hound will be known in time."

"I hope so, Rod, as that would come pretty near putting you fully and squarely right in Oakdale. Hunk Rollins' letter has——"

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"So it was Rollins," said Rodney quietly. "Well, I can't say that I'm surprised."

"Yes, it was Rollins," answered Stone, "and he's certainly queered himself with everybody. He knows what the fellows think of him now, for nearly all of them have taken pains to tell him."

CHAPTER XXX.

THE REASON WHY.

"That matter never worried me a whole lot, anyhow," said Rod, after a few moments of silence. "I turned the laugh on the bunch that started in to have a howling, gay old time with me, and I was satisfied. I knew I hadn't squealed, and I knew the professor knew it. I will admit, however, that this dog-shooting business has stirred me up some, for it sure was a contemptible thing to do, and I hate to have anybody really think it of me. Have you heard that Spotty Davis has left town?"

"No," cried Ben, surprised. "Has he?"

"Yes; gone to Belford. He went this morning, and his father says he may not come back. Between us, Stone, I'll admit confidential that I'm regretful because he made his getaway before I could put the screws on him."

"Oh!" said Ben, sitting up straight on his chair. "Then you think that Spotty—that Spotty——"

"I have reasons," nodded Rod, "to be right suspicious of him. I went to see him yesterday morning and tried to lead him into owning up to me, but he was in bed, pretending to be sick, and refused to talk. I was mightily tempted to put hands on him and choke him into telling the truth, but with my particular failing in mind, which is the one unfortunate failing of all Grants belonging to my family; I kept a tight hold on myself. I didn't dare even to make a bluff at violence, for fear my anger would get the best of me and I would lose my head."

"Didn't dare!" muttered Ben.

"No, Stone, I didn't dare. We had a confidential talk once before this, and I told you something about the Grants, but a sort of shame kept me from owning up to this special weakness I have just mentioned. It's characteristic of us all that great excitement or acts of contention or physical violence in which we take part should arouse us to a sort of disgraceful frenzy. This was well known of my father, and in the old fighting days they used to say it was safer to stir up a man-killing lion than to provoke Hugh Grant of the Star D. I've told you how he fought his enemies to a standstill and won out, even though maimed for life. The Grants are all fighters, Ben."

"I guess some fellows around here are beginning to believe that one Grant, at least, is a fighter."

"My mother is a gentle, peaceful woman, who has suffered indescribably through anxiety and worryment produced by this fighting strain in the Grant blood. She has told me that more than a score of times she's seen my father leave the ranch fully expecting that he would be brought back dead. In my own case, I have learned by experience that violent physical action on my part, coupled with opposition of the same sort, turns me into a raging creature, wholly lacking in restraint or any thought of consequences. You know what happened to the son of my father's enemy at school in Houston. I nearly killed Jennings. When I came here to school I made a resolve to avoid anything that would be liable to stir me up and lead me into such folly. That's why I refused to play football."

"But football isn't fighting."

"Isn't it?" laughed Rod. "Well, it's fighting for a Grant, as the case of my unfortunate brother, Oscar, proved beyond the shadow of a doubt. I reckon I may as well tell you about him, for then you'll understand things some better. Oscar is several years older than I, and two years ago he obtained an appointment to West Point."

"Oh!" cried the visitor. "Is he—is he the Grant I've heard about who was hazed?"

"I reckon he's the one, for the newspapers printed some stuff about it, although, unlike another certain famous hazing case at West Point, this affair never got into the courts. My brother was a husky fellow, and, urged to do so, he came out for football with the plebe team. He should have known better. It was impossible for him to engage in any sort of a scrimmage without slugging, and he became mighty unpopular in double-quick time. I judge that's why he was singled out especially for a course of sprouts, and there's no question but he was given some mighty rough treatment by the hazers. We never knew the full particulars of what happened. However, we do know he was practically stripped naked on a bitter November night and nearly drowned by having ice-cold water turned on him from a hose or a hydrant or something. When they thought him pretty nearly finished, by his appearance, he was taken under cover somewhere and efforts were made to restore him."

"He came round somewhat more sudden than those men expected, for he broke away, seized a chair and lay about him with it like a madman. One of the hazers was knocked stiff before Oscar drove the others out of the room. Oscar made his getaway, leaving that man, who had received a terrible crack on the head, to be picked up and cared for by his companions. His name was Demarest, and he was taken to the hospital. Next morning Oscar was ill and still half crazed. To cap it all, some one brought him word that Demarest was dead, which was a lie concocted, doubtless, for the purpose of frightening him. A run of brain fever followed, and, though my brother is still alive, he never recovered his normal condition; he's on the Star D now, hopelessly deranged, though harmless."

"Now, Ben, I opine you can understand why I've tried right hard to avoid excitement or violence of any sort that might stir me up and make me temporarily forgetful or reckless of consequences. Barker forced a fight upon me, but it sure was a good thing for him that he couldn't fight much, so that it was all over in a jiffy."

"If the boys knew this," began Ben—"if they had known it in the first place——"

"If I had told them, they'd have thought it more of my bragging," laughed Rod shortly.

"I'll tell them now."

"Please don't do it. I reckon I've satisfied them that I will fight when driven into a corner, and that's enough. I'm still going to keep a tight hand on myself, for I must learn somehow to control my temper. I'll own up it has hurt me some to know that the fellows should think me low down enough to shoot a harmless dog by way of getting revenge on an enemy. One thing I will claim, and that is that all Grants fight open and square and there never was a sneak among them. Sometime I'm sure the truth will come out concerning that dog shooting."

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It came out far sooner than Rod expected. On the following day Joshua Haskell, who owned the northern side of Turkey Hill, making certain purchases at Stickney's store, heard some loungers discussing the shooting of Silver Tongue, and he suddenly developed a great deal of interest in what they were saying.

"What's that?" he asked. "When did this ere dorg shootin' happen?"

"Satterday, sometime before the storm begun," answered Uncle Bill Cole. "The hound was killed in one of the clearin's near the Pond Hole over on Waller's land. Barker's boy and two other young fellers follered the blood drops to that place, and then they tracked the whelp who did the shootin' almost into the Turkey Hill swamp; but the storm come on, and they couldn't foller him no further."

"Huh!" grunted Haskell. "I guess I know who shot that dorg."

"You do!" cried several voices.

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"Yep," nodded the man, "I cal'late I do. You see, I was cuttin' wood on Turkey Hill Satterday mornin'. Just before the storm begun I happened to stop and look down, and I saw a boy come out of the woods on Dodd's land, which j'ines mine. He had a gun, and he was travelin' on snowshoes. A little while before that I'd heared somebody fire a shot over in the direction of the Pond Hole, and he was comin' from that way. Seemed to be in a mighty big hurry, too; but all of a sudden he stopped a minute, and I see him hang something red on a bush. Then he hipered along again, as if he was afeared the Old Nick was chasin' him."

"Well, well!" cried Stickney, thumping the cheese box on the counter with his knuckles. "That must have been the feller. They found a red silk handkerchief that belonged to this yere Grant boy, who's stopping with old Priscilla Kent."

"'Twan't the Grant boy I see," declared Haskell. "I knowed the young rascal, fur off as he was, and he's been up to his shindigs 'round here before. 'Twas old Lem Davis' sneakin' cub, as I'll swear to; and you can bate your last dollar he shot that dorg."

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CHAPTER XXXI.

SOMETHING WORTH DOING.

It was during the first week in January that the great sensation of the winter took place in Oakdale. The January thaw came on early, and several days of warm rain, swelling the streams and overflowing the ponds, was followed by a freezing night or two, which left Lake Woodrim a glare of white ice and brought out every boy and girl who owned a pair of skates. The rising water had forced the opening of the big gates in both the upper and lower dams, and a flood from Lake Woodrim poured down through the channel into the small pond at the south of the village. Above the dam for some distance the sweep of the current toward the open gate had carried away many huge cakes of ice, and all along the shores the rise made it necessary for the skaters to take precautions about getting out onto the lake.

Rod Grant, having found that he could skate fairly well, was there, but he still persisted in keeping much by himself, avoiding as far as possible the advances of the boys, many of whom were now more than willing to be friendly with him. Barker also was there, but he took particular care to keep away from Rod, whom, in spite of Joshua Haskell's story, he yet persisted in pretending to believe guilty of the dog shooting. 301

The skaters had been warned to keep away from the ice in the vicinity of the dam, especially that portion of it directly above the open gate, where the current was strong. Nevertheless, with her usual reckless daring, Lelia Barker skated out toward that dangerous spot, unmindful of the pleading of Sadie Springer and the shouted words of several boys who came hurrying toward her. At the very edge the ice was thick and apparently strong, but suddenly a cry of horror went up as the skaters saw a huge cake slowly cleave off and detach itself from the general mass. Another followed almost immediately, and the foolhardy girl was borne away on that second cake.

A boy, skating with all his might, dashed past several terrified fellows who had stopped to stare helplessly at the trapped girl. Reaching the edge of the ice from which the second cake was swiftly receding, the skater made an amazing and desperate leap across the open water. His momentum carried him to the floating icecake, upon which he struck sprawlingly as his skate irons shot out from beneath him. Across the cake almost to the far edge he slid, nearly sweeping the girl from her feet. The heel of one skate rasped into the ice and checked him, but only the size of the cake prevented it from tipping sufficiently to let him slide into the water. Swiftly he scrambled back to the center of the cake and stood up. 302

It was Rodney Grant, and his face was quite as pale as that of the girl, although his voice was calm and steady as he spoke.

"We've got to get off this thing right lively, or it will beat the stuffing out of us when it goes tumbling and smashing down through the gate. There's only one chance. You've got to get wet, and you sure must trust me. Don't grab me round the neck."

There was no time for another word. They saw him seize her round the waist, lift her bodily from her feet, and then start across the cake with his back toward the dam. Into the icy water he plunged, carrying her with him. 303

Then began a fierce fight for life, watched by horrified boys and weeping girls. Some of the boys had presence of mind enough to dash for the nearest shore, tear off their skates, and attempt to get out upon the dam to offer assistance. They were too late, however, to be of any service in that way.

Strong swimmer though he was, Grant, encumbered by the helpless, frightened and half drowned girl, could not overcome the suction of the water, which relentlessly bore him toward the open floodgate. Fortunately, he did succeed in getting well clear of the huge icecake, which broke up into several crashing, grinding pieces as it was borne through the open gate. At last, whirled onward, he turned all his efforts to the seemingly hopeless task of supporting the girl and keeping his own head above water.

Shouting boys ran down the bank of the stream below the dam. Their cries were heard in the village, and men came hurrying out to learn what had happened. 304

For a moment or two the boy and girl disappeared in the swirl of white water directly below the dam. Few thought ever again to see either of them alive, but sudden cries went up as a human head appeared in the midst of the channel and Rodney Grant was seen still clinging to Lelia Barker as he battled with the current.

"The rocks," cried Phil Springer—"they'll be dashed on the rocks! They're goners!"

In the midst of the stream some ledges thrust themselves, white and slippery, even above the swollen torrent. Ordinarily these ledges stood out high and dry, forming a sort of an island. Grant knew they were there. He knew likewise that the icy chill was numbing him and his strength was failing. If the stream carried them down into the lower pond the chances were a thousand to one that the current would suck them beneath the ice, and that surely would be the end. To the young Texan those ledges seemed the sole possible means of salvation, and, regardless of the threatening bruises or injuries that might be sustained when cast upon them, he fought with every atom of his 305

strength against being borne past.

He made it, too. The water flung them up on the dripping ledges, and there he somehow found a cleft into which the fingers of his right hand gripped, while his left arm still held the girl hugged fast.

"A rope! Bring a rope!" shouted scores of voices.

Two boys ran panting to Stickney's store, returning with a huge coil of stout rope, which some men assisted them in carrying.

"How are we going to get it out to them?" was the question.

Then Bunk Lander appeared. He ripped off his coat and vest and broke the laces of his heavy shoes, which he kicked aside.

"Gimme one end of that rope!" he snarled. "What's the matter with ye, anyhow? Hurry up! Do you want to see 'em drowned?"

"What are you going to do?" asked Phil Springer.

"I'm going to swim out there. Don't talk. Tie that rope round my waist. Come on up-stream farther. I've got to start just below the dam, or the current will carry me past 'em. Come on, you snails!"

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"You can't do it—you can't ever do it!" sobbed a voice.

"Who says I can't?" snapped Bunk. "Oh, is it you, Barker? You ought to be doing something. You watch and you'll see me do it."

Into the comparatively still water just below the northern end of the dam Bunk waded unhesitatingly, with the end of the rope tied round his waist.

"Pay it out free!" he called back. "Don't bother me by letting it get taut."

In another moment, with the water almost up to his armpits, he plunged forward and began swimming with powerful strokes straight out toward the current. It caught him soon and began carrying him down the stream with increasing rapidity as he progressed.

"He can't do it! He'll never make it!" cried some of the spectators.

Bunk did not hear them, and it would have made no difference if he had. He realized that a single moment of hesitation or one false stroke might defeat him, and onward he swam, still heading across the current. Nearer and nearer he was carried to the ledges, and as he tipped his head sidewise to forge still farther toward midstream a sort of mad desperation filled his heart.

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"I've got to do it!" his soul seemed to cry. "I must, and I will!"

An eddy caught him. Fortunately, it helped to bear him in the right direction. A few more strong strokes, and, in spite of his position, he almost laughed aloud with triumph. Now the spectators were yelling:

"He'll do it! He'll make it!"

Onto the ledges Lander was borne, and he also succeeded in getting a hold which he could maintain. Carefully he dragged himself out upon his hands and knees until he knelt on the very apex of the rock. Then with one hand he gripped Grant's collar and assisted Rod in obtaining a more secure position. Lelia seemed unconscious. The two boys looked into each other's eyes, and what they saw there sealed a compact of friendship as lasting as life itself.

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"Good old Bunk!" chattered Rod.

"Boo!" said Lander. "This water's awful cold. Say," he added, pulling in the slack of the rope, "we'll take a turn round under her arms first, then under yours next, and I guess I can hang on all right if them fellers on shore have got gumption enough to pull us out."

They made the rope secure beneath Lelia's arms, leaving enough of the free end to take a turn round Rod and Lander also. Then, signaling to the twenty men and boys on the shore who were ready to pull, they slid from the ledge.

By this time Main Street bridge just above the pond was lined with people who had been brought out by the shouts of alarm. Gaping, they watched the rope drawn in until Grant and Lander, lifting Lelia Barker between them, rose to their feet and waded to the bank. Then the spectators cheered and shouted and screamed like mad, for they had witnessed a double act of heroism that would long be remembered in Oakdale.

Of the three who passed through that terrible experience in the icy water Rodney Grant was the first to recover, and the following day found him apparently as well as ever. Lelia Barker was ill for a day or two, but she likewise came through it surprisingly well. Lander was not so fortunate, for he caught a heavy cold, which quickly developed into pneumonia. Everything possible was done for him; he had the constant attendance of two physicians, and a trained nurse was secured to watch over him faithfully.

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Having a naturally rugged constitution, Lander made a good fight for life, and one day word went round through Oakdale that the doctors said the crisis was past and the boy was safely on the road to recovery.

When the time came that Bunk could receive visitors, Rodney Grant was the first one admitted to his bedside. Looking somewhat emaciated and very pale indeed, Lander was bolstered up amid a mass of soft pillows. His eyes shone with a light of pleasure and a grin overspread his face as he beheld the caller.

"Hello, Roddy, old fel," he said. "I'm glad to see ye. I guess I've had a pretty tight squeeze of it, but you know I'm the toughest feller in town—everybody says so—and it'll take more'n this to kill me."

Grant grasped Lander's hand with a strong yet tender pressure.

"Bunk, old chum," he said in a voice that was husky in spite of himself, "I can't find words to tell you how glad I am that you're coming through all right. Everybody is glad. The whole town has heard the favorable report, and there's general rejoicing."

"You don't say!" muttered Bunk whimsically. "That's mighty queer, and I don't just understand it. They've told me how the fellers have been 'round every day to ask how I was gettin' on; they say even Barker's been here more'n once. Seems queer folks in Oakdale should care a rap about me."

"Bunk, they do care—everybody cares. You'll find when you get out that you haven't an enemy in this town—that every living soul in Oakdale is your friend."

"Oh, say! you can't include Barker. I s'pose he come 'round to ask just for a show of decency, 'cause I helped you save his sister from being drowned."

"You'll find even Barker your friend. Doubtless it was a bitter pill for him to swallow, but he came to me like a man and owned up that he was all in the wrong, asked my pardon, and begged me to shake hands with him."

"Get out!" said Bunk "You don't mean it! Well, come to think of it, it was just about the only thing he could do."

"But he was sincere, I have no doubt of that. He acknowledged that he was satisfied I didn't shoot his dog, even before Cooper received the letter from Davis."

"The letter? What letter?"

"Oh, I forgot you didn't know about that. Spotty, having gone to work in Belford and decided that he'd right likely never come back here, wrote Chipper Cooper, owning up to the shooting of Silver Tongue. In fact, he rejoiced in it and wanted Barker to know that he did it."

"Oh, say, Roddy, some of the fellers 'round here who tried to smirch you must have felt pretty cheap and sheepish when they heard that."

"Without exception they have acknowledged their mistake, and I have found them a pretty decent bunch, after all. They're all good friends with me now. They're just waiting to see you get out, in order to give you a rousing reception."

Bunk was silent for several moments, the look of doubt upon his face giving way to one of growing satisfaction and happiness. Presently he spoke again.

"Rod, do you remember what you told me about the feller who had strength enough to be decent and stick to it in spite of everything, finally comin' out on top of the heap? I didn't believe it then, but now I kinder guess you was right. I was discouraged and didn't cal'late 'twas any use for me to try to be decent, but I tell you right now that I'm goin' to turn over a new leaf, stop wastin' my time loafin', and try to do something worth doin'."

"Bunk," returned Rodney, "when you get out you'll find the whole town thinks that you have already done something worth doing."

Transcriber's Notes

Table of Contents - added apostrophe after "Rod"
orig: III. Rods Wonderful Jump

page 42 - changed semicolon to comma
orig: schoolmates; his manner had

page 75 - removed dash from "get-away" to make usage consistent throughout book
orig: having made his spectacular get-away

page 76 - changed "amuscade" to "ambuscade"
orig: with his amuscade by the fake

page 77 - changed "proceded" to "proceeded"
orig: When I heard the key turning in the lock I proceded

page 93 - added double-quote at end of sentence
orig: Said he naturally felt somewhat anxious.

page 106 - removed dash from "him-self" to make usage consistent throughout book
orig: what happened to him-self

page 121 - removed dash from "near-by" to make usage consistent throughout book
orig: near-by shore

page 133 - added dash to "hangout" to make usage consistent throughout book
orig: come over and see my old hang-out

page 195 - changed comma to period at end of sentence
orig: mad about it, too

page 259 - changed "peurile" to "puerile"
orig: Such a subterfuge is palpably peurile

page 269 - changed "be" to "he"
orig: Ere Rod slept that night be spent a long time

page 306 - added dash to "upstream" to make usage consistent throughout book
orig: Come on upstream

Note: "make-up" and "makeup" are used with and without a hyphen in the book -
these are left unchanged - it appears that "make-up" is used
to refer to face paint, while "makeup" is used to refer to character traits

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