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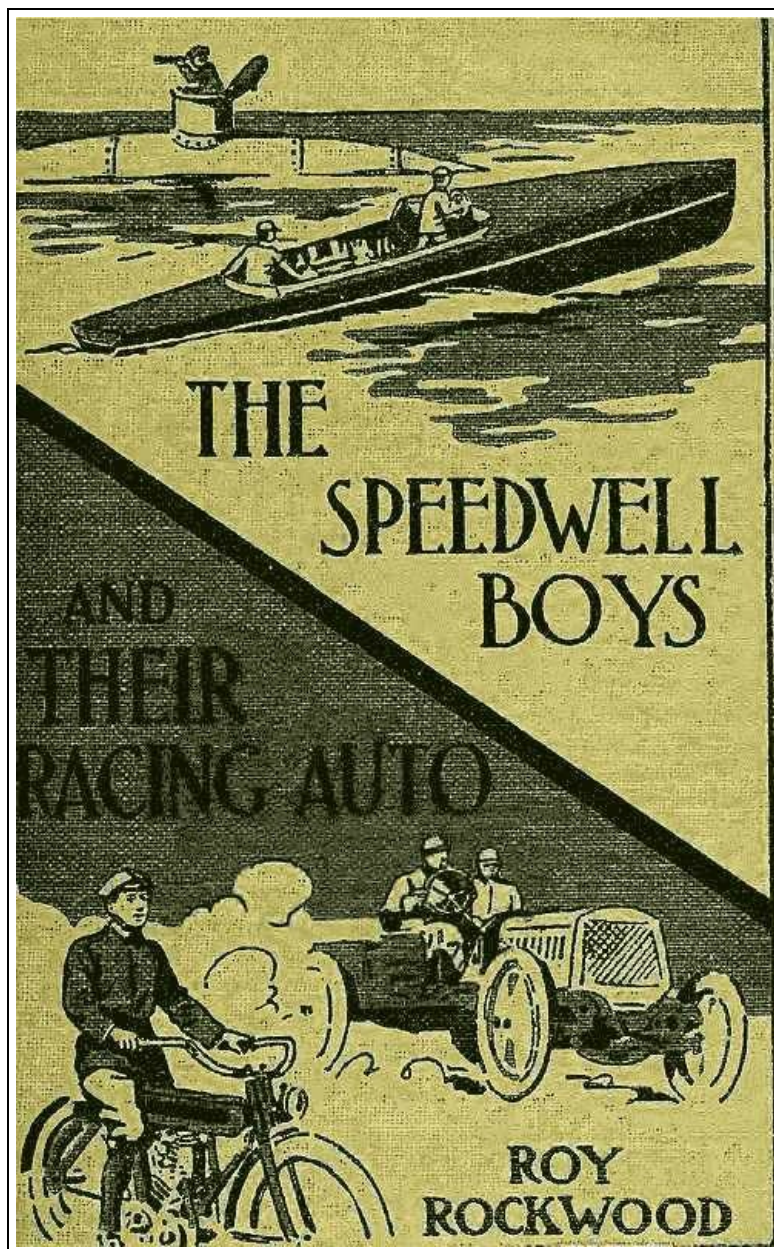
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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE SPEEDWELL BOYS AND THEIR RACING AUTO; OR, A RUN FOR THE GOLDEN CUP ***





THE AUTOMOBILES CAME THROUGH SO CLOSE
TOGETHER.

Speedwell Boys and their Racing Auto Page 161

The Speedwell Boys and Their Racing Auto

Or

A Run for the Golden Cup

BY
ROY ROCKWOOD

AUTHOR OF "THE SPEEDWELL BOYS ON MOTORCYCLES," "THE
DAVE DASHAWAY SERIES," "THE GREAT
MARVEL SERIES," ETC.

ILLUSTRATED

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THE SPEEDWELL BOYS AND THEIR RACING AUTO

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THE SPEEDWELL BOYS AND THEIR RACING AUTO

1

CHAPTER I

THE MANŒUVERS OF MAXEY

"Say, fellows! Look at what's coming!"

"Oh, my eyes! See him wobble! Why, he'll be over the wall into the river, machine and all, if he doesn't watch out."

"Say, Dan, did you ever see a fellow run a car as bad as Maxey? If we didn't know better we'd think he had a fit," declared Billy Speedwell, who sat with his brother, and several of their chums, on a high, grassy bank overlooking the Colasha River and above the road, a mile or two below Riverdale.

"He certainly does make a mess of it," admitted the older Speedwell lad, gazing down the road, as were his friends, at a drab-painted automobile which was approaching them.

They were five boys, all members of the Riverdale Outing Club and all rode motorcycles which just now were leaning, in a row, against the bank. The chums had come out after school for a short spin into the country. It was fall, which fact was proven by the brilliant coloring of the leaves.

Beyond where the Riverdale boys lay on the short turf, and coming toward them, was the erratically-guided car. The drab racer seldom kept the middle of the road for a full minute at a time. It actually "wobbled," just as Jim Stetson said.

And yet the fellow at the wheel of the machine had been driving it up and down the roads for nearly three months.

No instruction, and no practice, seemed to avail with Maxey Solomons, however. His father was one of the richest men in the county, and when Maxey expressed a wish to own and drive a car, Mr. Solomons made no objection. Indeed, the wealthy clothing manufacturer seldom thwarted the least of his son's desires.

But the drab auto seemed aiming for trouble now. It nearly ran up the bank on the inner side of the road; then it shifted to the other side under the manipulation of Maxey at the steering wheel, just grazing the stone fence that separated the highway at this point from the sheer drop of fifty feet or more to the bank of the river.

"As sure as you live," cried Monroe Stevens, "he'll back over the dump!"

The boys with the motorcycles jumped to their feet the better to watch the manœuvres of the drab car and its owner. Shaving the stone wall, Maxey came back into the middle of the road and wobbled along for some rods toward the group of Riverdale youths.

Suddenly the spectators heard the purring of a fast moving car coming from the direction of the town. The road was quite straight for a couple of miles here; but there was a sharp turn behind the group of boys that hid the approaching car.

They knew it was coming at great speed. No warning was sounded on the horn as the car approached the turn. The driver of the unknown auto was very reckless.

Dan Speedwell was first to realize that Maxey Solomons was very likely to get into much more serious trouble than he was having at the moment, if the fast motor car swept around the corner upon him without any warning. It was well known that the only really successful way by which Maxey could pass any vehicle on the road, was by pulling out to one side, and stopping until the other machine went by!

Although moving so slowly, the drab car was steadily approaching the turn in the highway. Maxey was not two hundred yards from where the boys stood upon the grassy bank.

Knowing that he would only startle Maxey by running toward him, Dan leaped away in the other direction. He reached the turn in the road and saw the racing automobile coming in a cloud of dust.

Surely the reckless driver of the machine must slow down to round this curve. Dan Speedwell could see him plainly—a little, goggled-eyed fellow, completely disguised in coat and motor-cap, alone in the driver's seat.

There were two passengers, however, and Dan knew that they must see him as he sprang out upon a jutting tree-root, and waved his cap wildly to attract their attention. One of the men leaned forward and tapped the chauffeur on the shoulder. He pointed to Dan above them on the bank; but the boy's warning motions did not seem to do the least bit of good. The driver of the madly-running car did not reduce its speed.

On came the racing automobile, and the cloud of dust which traveled with it flew down to the curve in the road. The driver shifted his wheel and the machine took the turn on its outer tires, with the others in the air—Dan could actually see daylight between the wheels and the ground.

The boy saw, too, that it was a heavy touring car; that it was painted maroon, and that a blanket, or robe was trailing over the back of the tonneau, fairly dragging in the dust, in fact, and so hiding the plate on which was the license number.

Without a single blast of the horn the car charged around the bend. The group of boys on the bank yelled excitedly at Maxey down below. That erratic youth beheld the maroon car coming and

2

3

4

literally "threw up his hands!"

The road was wide enough so that the racing car could have passed Maxey's machine on the outside. But, unfortunately, it had stopped so that the rear wheels, bearing the larger weight of the car, was on the outer slope of the roadway, which was rounded to properly shed the water. The drab car began to run backward. Maxey did not know enough to put on the brakes. 5

The few seconds that elapsed after the fast-traveling auto came around the bend in the road would not have been sufficient for the chauffeur of that car to stop; and he merely swerved to the outer side of the road, intending to pass Maxey's stalled car at full speed.

Maxey himself was immovable with terror at the appearance of the charging auto. He could not even leap from his seat. And when his own car began to run backward, directly into the path of the other machine, young Solomons only opened his mouth to emit a yell.

The drab car ran back into the shallow gutter. The stone wall behind it needed some repairs, several of the top layer of stones having fallen into the chasm below the road. This left the barrier at the spot scarcely eighteen inches high.

The unguided motor car ran back until its rear wheels came against this broken wall. The chauffeur of the maroon automobile swerved his car again, but only slightly. His heavier machine, running fast, charged down upon poor Maxey and his car like a huge battering-ram. 6

There was nothing the boys on the bank could do to save Maxey, or his car. And, at that late moment, there was little the wheelman of the maroon car could do to avert the catastrophe. His reckless driving of his machine made it impossible for him to stop in time.

The collision stopped Maxey's cry of fright in the middle. The lighter car was flung up and backward by the swiftly moving and heavier touring automobile. The latter passed on in a flash, and practically unharmed. The drab car was flung over the low stone wall and, upside down, with the cushions and other gear raining from it, dropped into space.

DAN SPEEDWELL AT HIS BEST

Billy Speedwell, at the head of the other lads, leaped into the road and sprinted to the spot where Maxey's automobile had been thrown over the embankment. They saw that the unfortunate youth had clung to his wheel; but he had gone out of sight with the wreckage.

Their interest in and sympathy for Maxey blinded them to the further actions of the maroon car and the three men in it. But Dan Speedwell, coming back toward the scene of the catastrophe, noted well the conduct of these men.

The chauffeur had made no proper attempt to avoid the collision; and now he neither slowed down nor glanced back to see what had become of the drab car and its driver.

When Dan Speedwell reached the place where his motorcycle rested beside the road, in company with those of the other boys, the maroon car was a mile away along the straight highway. There was plainly no intention on the part of the three men to stop and inquire as to the damage their car had done.

The other boys thought only of Maxey and his machine. Dan, angered by the indifference of the other automobilists, had no intention of letting them escape if he could help it. His mind was made up on the instant. He seized his wheel and rolled it out into the road.

The balloon of smoke which trailed the flying maroon car was already far down the road. It seemed impossible for a boy on a motorcycle to seek to overtake that flying vehicle. But Dan knew that farther on the automobile could not safely maintain its present pace, and he knew likewise the speed which he could get out of his machine.

Dan and Billy Speedwell had owned their motorcycles a short time only; but within that time they had learned to handle the machines with the best. Both at the Compton motordrome, and in the Riverdale baseball park the Speedwell boys had won high place in trials of speed. These races are narrated in the first volume of this series, entitled: "The Speedwell Boys on Motorcycles."

Their Flying Feathers, the newest model produced by the Darringford Machine Shops, in Riverdale, had been given to the brothers by Robert Darringford whose life Dan and Billy had saved from a fire that had destroyed a part of the machine shop plant.

Their parents were not in circumstances to give the boys such expensive gifts as two hundred dollar motorcycles. Mr. Speedwell owned some dairy cows and a few acres of land on the outskirts of Riverdale, and Dan and Billy delivered the milk to their customers in town, even during the school terms. When this story opened it chanced to be a Saturday afternoon, or the Speedwell brothers would not have been idling here with their friends on the river road.

What Dan knew he could do under favorable conditions with his Flying Feather urged him to start in pursuit of the heartless trio who had left Maxey Solomons and his wrecked car to their fate.

Before the other boys missed him, Dan's machine was popping like the explosion of an automatic gun, and he was several rods away from the scene of the collision. The youth settled himself firmly in his seat, opened his engine to almost its highest speed, and dashed away along the road.

The lad did not sight that car, however, for some time. The river road followed the winding course of the stream itself, and it was fringed with woods for a good part of the way. There were few dwellings on the highway between Riverdale and Upton Falls. The men in the car could have chosen no better stretch of road in the county for escape. There were likely to be few vehicles, and no constables at all at this hour of the day.

It was perilous to run so fast on a public road, even when the way was as smooth and well kept as this highway to Upton Falls. But the act of those men in the racing automobile had roused Dan Speedwell's indignation. For all he knew, Maxey Solomons had met serious injury in the wreck of his auto; the men guilty of the crime must be apprehended.

On this hard track the automobile ahead left no trail; but for the first few miles Dan was positive that the maroon car had not gone into any by-way. In fact, there were no by-ways save into private estates, and those offered no escape for the fugitives.

The youth was quite sure that the men were strangers in the vicinity; he was confident that the car was not familiar to the locality, at least, for he and Billy were so much interested in the automobile game that there was not a car in this end of the county that they did not know.

The three men were strangers. They had deliberately made it impossible for anyone to read the numbers on the license behind the car. They were evidently of that reckless class of automobilists who ride through the country districts with regard for neither law nor safety.

A few moments only had elapsed since Dan started after the car when he reached the first public cross-road—a highway turning away from the river. But this road was macadamized, too, and offered no trace of the automobile's wheels. However, Dan did not believe the trio in the maroon auto would turn aside, and he kept straight on.

Although the distance to Upton Falls was considerable, the pace of the motorcycle ate up the miles speedily. Dan and his steed of steel came soon to the outskirts of the town. The pedestrians he passed looked after the flying boy with wonder. Dan reached the head of Main street and, as he began its descent toward Market Square, and the hotel, he saw an automobile standing before the wide porch of the latter building.

The maroon car! Dan was sure of it even at that distance. The trio of reckless men who had perhaps injured Maxey Solomons had stayed their flight at the Falls hotel.

Even as Dan sped down the street, however, he observed that the men he followed were climbing into their car again. The blanket had been drawn in over the back seat of the car and the movements of the three were leisurely enough. They were probably convinced that there was no pursuit.

The boy saw several men in the square whom he knew. One was a deputy sheriff and this officer stepped quickly out into the street and held up his hand for Dan and his Flying Feather to reduce speed.

Dan shut off his engine. The maroon car was just starting. The short man at the wheel guided the auto carefully out into the road, and turned toward the highway that led to Barnegat.

"Stop them!" cried Dan, waving his hand at the departing auto. "Arrest those men, Mr. Polk!"

"What do you mean, Dan?" demanded the deputy, running along by the boy's side as the Flying Feather slowed down.

"Do as I say! They've perhaps killed a boy up the road. At any rate, they smashed his automobile. Then they drove on, full tilt, and I followed them."

"Nonsense, Dan! Not those men," cried Mr. Polk.

"Yes they did. I tell you it was a maroon car, with three men in it. I was close enough."

"To see the license numbers?" interrupted the deputy sheriff.

"They had the sign covered. But they came this way and I have followed them too closely to be mistaken. Stop them, I say!"

"Dan! you don't know who these men are," gasped Mr. Polk, as the motorcycle came to a halt and the excited boy leaped off.

"I don't care who they are!" declared Speedwell, his righteous indignation still inspiring him. "I saw what they did—"

"Are you sure? Can't you be mistaken?"

"Didn't they just come from Riverdale?"

"Ye-es. They came from that direction."

"And I have been chasing them. There was no other car."

"But the gentlemen are beyond suspicion of any such act as you relate, Dan!" cried the deputy sheriff. "One of them is Thomas Armitage, of Compton, and the other is Raleigh Briggs, who has offered the prize for the cross-country run of a thousand miles which is to be arranged next month—you've heard of it. Why, Dan, neither of them would allow his chauffeur to commit such an act of violence as you relate."

THE MYSTERY OF THE MAROON CAR

Dan Speedwell was completely taken aback by this statement of the deputy sheriff. He knew that Mr. Polk must have surety for his words. The men in the maroon automobile were well known and perfectly responsible citizens.

Indeed, as Dan wheeled his motorcycle nearer to the car he saw that the two in the tonneau of the auto were much different-looking individuals from those he expected to find. The men who had wrecked Maxey Solomons' auto, and perhaps killed the young man himself, would certainly not possess the personal appearance of these gentlemen!

Mr. Briggs Dan knew by reputation. He was the most enthusiastic motorist in Crandall County. The thousand mile endurance test which he had suggested, and to the winner of which he had promised a gold cup, interested Dan and Billy Speedwell not a little, although they owned no automobile, and at this time had no immediate expectation of getting a car.

"What does the young man want, Polk?" inquired Mr. Armitage, a gray-mustached man with a ruddy face and pleasant smile. "He asked us to stop; didn't he?"

"There's a mistake been made somewhere, Mr. Armitage," declared the deputy sheriff, with some hesitation. "Dan is a good boy, and trustworthy. But it seems he has been following you and Mr. Briggs on his motorcycle——"

"What for?" asked the gentleman, quickly.

"Because of something that happened up the road. He says that the automobile he followed wrecked another machine and hurt the driver."

"Our auto?" cried Mr. Armitage.

"Why, Dan says it was a maroon car, like yours, and that it came direct from Riverdale."

"By which road?" asked Mr. Briggs, quickly.

"The river road," said Dan. "I was sure I had followed the right car—there was no other all the way."

"But we did not come to the Falls that way," said Mr. Briggs. "We traveled by the pike, and we stopped at Mr. Maury's place for some minutes."

"Oh, I know it could not have been your machine," said Dan, hastily. "The men who ran down Maxey Solomons have escaped by some means. They must have taken a cross road toward the other side of the county."

"You did not get their number?"

Dan quickly related the incidents which had brought him to this place, and in such haste. The gentlemen in the car were sympathetic and interested.

"Come!" said, Mr. Armitage, "this matter must be looked into. The rascals should be apprehended. They are getting farther and farther away each minute, it is likely. Come, Briggs, what do you say? You have been bragging about the speed of this car. Let's see what Henri can get out of her."

"I am with you, Armitage," declared his friend. "Hop aboard, Polk. You are a county officer. Those men must be arrested, if possible, and held until we learn what damage they have done."

"I'll go with you, Mr. Briggs," said the deputy.

He leaped into the tonneau. Mr. Armitage looked at Dan, who stood by his motorcycle.

"The boy had better go with us," said Mr. Armitage. "He is evidently an observant lad, and he will not be likely to make a second mistake in the automobile."

"Yes! let the boy come," said Mr. Briggs. "If he was a witness to the accident he speaks of, we will need his testimony if we overtake the guilty ones."

"But my machine?" said Dan, doubtfully.

"Lift it right up here," commanded Mr. Briggs. "We'll fasten it on the running board. Then, young man, you get in beside Henri, and we'll be off."

Dan was quick to obey these suggestions. His Flying Feather he stood upright on the running board of the car, and he saw that it was fastened securely. In five minutes they were off, after Mr. Polk left word at the sheriff's office for the officers to watch for the mysterious car and its three occupants.

The auto dashed off along the pike toward Riverdale. There were three cross roads that the offenders against law might have taken, as long as they did not complete their run to Upton Falls. But there were by-roads, too, on which they might have hidden and the deputy sheriff advised stopping to inquire at every farmhouse, and of every teamster whom they met. It was some time, however, ere they picked up the trail of the maroon car, and then they obtained the clue in quite a strange way.

As they came to the lane leading up to a barn, the farmer came running out with a pitch fork in his hand. Before Mr. Polk could speak, the man demanded:

"Ye got 'em, hev ye, Sheriff? Wa'al I'm glad of it! I'll go right down with ye t' th' 'squire's office, an' I guess, he'll make 'em pay a pretty price for their fun. That calf of mine run int' a barbed wire fence an' tore herself all up——"

"Hold on, Mr. Jackson!" exclaimed the deputy. "You're getting your dates mixed, I guess. These gentlemen certainly have done you no harm."

"No harm!" yelled the farmer. "When they come up through the Indian Bridge road not an hour ago, they skeered my heifer into a conniption fit, and come pretty nigh runnin' over *me* when I come out at 'em."

"Not *these* gentlemen," said Polk. "I can vouch for them. One is Mr. Thomas Armitage, whom you ought to know, Jackson."

"I swan!" exclaimed the farmer. "I voted for him for Congress."

"Much obliged to you, I am sure," said Mr. Armitage. "And I hope that you will not think I so illy deserved your vote as to race an automobile through these roads to the endangering of life and limb of good citizens."

"Wa'al!" ejaculated the puzzled Mr. Jackson, "it was a car jest the same color as yours, Mr. Armitage."

"And how many men were in it, Mr. Jackson?" interposed Polk.

"Come to think on't, there warn't but three," admitted the farmer.

"Did you see the license number?"

"Not much! They went so quick I couldn't see much but the color of the car."

"And in which direction did they disappear?" asked the deputy.

The farmer pointed up the side road, away from the river.

"They are making for the railroad," declared Mr. Briggs, in some excitement. "Drive ahead, Henri."

They came to the railroad—the Barnegat & Montrose Branch of the R., V. & D.—and halted long enough to speak to the flagman. He had seen the flying car, too. They were on the right track.

But a mile beyond the pursuing party came to a place where the highway branched in three directions. There was no house in sight. The escaping car might have taken any one of the roads.

"We're stuck!" ejaculated Mr. Polk. "We might as well take one at random and see if we can run down a clue upon it."

"Wait!" urged Dan Speedwell. "Perhaps I can do better than that."

He got out of the machine and ran into the first road at the right. He had noticed that these highways here were not so well made as those nearer the river. There was a chance that he might find some trace of the passing of the strange car which they followed.

And he was right in this surmise, although he did not find it in this first road. Marks of the tires of an automobile—and fresh marks—were visible in the middle road. As far as Dan could see no other machine had passed this way.

He leaped back beside the chauffeur and they drove on again at top speed. A mile beyond they halted at a farm house to inquire. The passing of an automobile in a cloud of dust had been noticed less than an hour before; but the sight was too common to have attracted much attention, and the occupants of the house had been too far from the road to note the color of the machine, or the number of men in it.

Mr. Briggs' car was certainly fast, and Mr. Briggs' chauffeur was the most marvelous manipulator of an automobile that Dan Speedwell had ever seen. And to sit directly beside the Frenchman and observe the skill and art with which he handled the levers and the wheel was a sheer delight to the boy.

He thought to himself:

"Ah! if Billy and I only owned an auto! If we could only take part in this endurance test that Mr. Briggs is going to arrange! If we could handle an auto half as well as this Frenchman!"

But the boy's thoughts were disturbed suddenly by Mr. Polk, who remarked:

"It looks to me as though these fellows were aiming for Port Luther, or even Cadenz. Unless they turn back toward Riverdale and Compton they will be obliged to strike some of the coast towns."

"Quite right, Polk," admitted Mr. Armitage.

"Then, here is Landers Station just ahead. There is a train coming down now. I'll take that train and go on. The railroad is more direct than the highways and I may be able to head those fellows off at Port Luther."

"And we stick to the trail in the car, Polk!" agreed the gentleman. "What do you say, Briggs?"

"It suits me. Henri, shall I take your place for a while?" Mr. Briggs asked his chauffeur.

"The young man here will change with me, Monsieur," returned the kindly Frenchman, who had seen how eagerly interested Dan was in the management of the automobile.

And when they halted at the railroad station to allow the deputy sheriff to take the train, the chauffeur did indeed change places with Dan Speedwell. Once at the wheel the youth proved that Henri had not been mistaken in him. For a lad of sixteen Dan handled the car with great dexterity.

The maroon car was out of sight of the station before the train bearing the deputy was on its way again; but the automobilists were obliged to halt frequently to inquire for the motor car of which they were in pursuit. And there were more autos than one ahead of them now. Sometimes they lost the trail of the maroon car completely; but when they reached the lively little town of Larned they learned that the fugitives had halted at the local garage for gasoline, and that they had left, still following the road toward the coast, but at a moderate pace.

"Half an hour behind them—or thereabout," exclaimed Mr. Armitage, with satisfaction. "We should be able to pick that up."

But even as they started from the garage they met with an accident. A forward tire blew out and the car came down with a solid bump on the roadway.

"Now!" cried Mr. Armitage. "Look at this delay! Isn't it abominable?"

But Mr. Briggs was a man of quick thought. He was observant, too. He spoke to the owner of the garage. There was a good car standing on the floor and it was for hire. In two minutes it had been run out, Henri was at the wheel, and Mr. Armitage and Mr. Briggs in the tonneau of the hired machine.

Dan had expressed his desire to return to Riverdale. It would soon be night, and he and Billy had many chores to do. They were now thirty miles from home, and the boy feared to go farther without permission from his parents.

"And quite right," Mr. Armitage said. "But hold yourself ready to-morrow, my boy, if we have the good fortune to overtake those fellows in the maroon car. We shall need you for a witness."

Dan promised and Mr. Briggs, who had consulted with Henri for a moment, said:

"My chauffeur tells me that you are quite able to run our car back to Holliday's garage at

Riverdale. This man here will put on a new tire and you can get back to town easier in my car than on your machine. Do you want to do me that favor?"

Dan's sparkling eyes and flushed face replied for him before his lips could form the words. It was so decided, and the others got off quickly in the hired auto. Within the hour Dan started the beautiful touring car on the back track, delighted with his charge, and looking forward to nothing more than a pleasant run over familiar roads to his home town.

It was growing dusk, however, long before he reached Riverdale. Indeed he was all of ten miles from the town when he stopped to light his lamps. Before he started the auto again he observed another car bearing down upon him from ahead, its lights blazing in the dusk.

Dan had pulled out to the side of the road and apprehended no danger. But the coming car was braked quickly when a few rods from him, and its driver brought it to a complete stop beside Mr. Briggs' vehicle.

One of the four men in the machine leaped out and, to Dan's amazement, stepped into the front of the maroon car beside him.

"Hold up your hands!" commanded this man, in excited tones. "We've got *you*, at least, if your pals have escaped. Hold up your hands!"

Dan shrank back and demanded a reason for threatening him in this savage way.

"You know what I want," said the man. "You are in the hands of the law. I arrest you, for the robbery of the Farmers' National Bank at Riverdale!"

BILLY ACTS ON IMPULSE

The sight of Maxey Solomons and his automobile tossed over the embankment and out of view—as a mad bull might toss a dog—frightened Billy Speedwell and his mates; at the moment they did not, like Dan, think of bringing the three men in the maroon motor car to account for their rashness.

With cries of fear they ran along the road to the broken place in the stone wall. Motor car and driver had disappeared over the brink of the chasm. The tops of several trees, the roots of which were embedded in the soil of the river bank, were visible above the wall. The motor car had crashed into these tree-tops; but the boys did not dream, at first, that the branches would stay such a heavy object.

When they came to the break in the stone wall and leaned over it, they saw the drab automobile hanging in the air, not more than twenty feet below the road. It was upside down and it had stuck in the crotched branches of two of the tall trees.

At first they saw nothing of Maxey; but of course, they could not see to the ground at the foot of the fifty-foot precipice over which young Solomons and his automobile had fallen.

"He's dead!" groaned Monroe Stevens.

"Crushed to death down there—poor chap!" agreed Jim Stetson.

"My goodness!" said Billy. "Who'll tell his father? The old gentleman will be all broken up. He just about lived for Maxey."

"And the auto isn't worth a cent, either," added Brace Henderson.

At that moment a muffled voice reached their ears, and startled them all.

"Help! Mercy on us—isn't this dreadful? Help!"

Billy cried his surprise ahead of the others:

"It's Maxey! He is under the auto!"

They could not see the owner of the wrecked car—not even his legs dangled into view. But Maxey's voice was unmistakable.

"What you doing down there, Max?" cried Monroe Stevens, loudly. "Why don't you crawl out?"

"I can't!" wailed the voice of the hidden youth.

"Why can't you?" queried Henderson.

"I don't dare," admitted Solomons.

All the cushions of the automobile had rattled to the ground. Its driver was clinging to the wheel, or some other stationary fixture, and not being a particularly brave youth, he could only hang on.

"Somebody's got to help him," declared Billy.

"But we haven't a rope," objected Jim Stetson. "How can we get him up here?"

"Belts, boys!" cried the quick-witted Billy Speedwell. "Buckle 'em together. I can jump into the top of one of those trees, and I'll carry the line of belts down, fasten it to the tree, and then to Maxey, and swing him off."

"You'll fall, Billy," objected Monroe, who was older and felt himself responsible for Billy's safety, now that Dan had gone.

"Not a bit of it!" declared Billy. "Come on with the belts."

There being no better way suggested, the boys followed Billy's plan. They watched him in some trepidation, however, as he let himself over the broken wall and leaped for a swinging branch of one of the trees into which the automobile had fallen.

He reached a limb directly below Maxey. That young man was clinging—as Billy had supposed—to the steering gear. He was afraid to drop upon the limb where Billy stood. Indeed, had he done so, he would have had no means of balancing himself. Billy Speedwell had kicked off his shoes before descending the tree and he was barely able to keep his equilibrium.

"Catch the end of this belt, Maxey!" he cried.

"Oh, I can't!"

"I tell you that you've got to!"

But, although Maxey was usually easily influenced, Billy could not put pluck into him at this juncture. The younger boy had to finally climb into the overturned automobile, cling with one hand and his feet to the car, and buckle an end of the string of belts around Maxey's waist.

The rescuer tossed the end of the line of belts to Monroe and Brace Henderson, and they helped Maxey out upon the roadway again. Billy followed, and when the adventure was over not alone Maxey Solomons, but the boys of the Riverdale Club, felt the reaction. The peril threatening the owner of the wrecked automobile had indeed been great.

"I'm afraid your car is done for, Maxey," said Monroe Stevens, with sympathy.

"I don't care!" sighed the rich man's son. "I wouldn't ride home in it if it was right-side up here in the road. I never want to ride in a motor car again."

"Pshaw!" said Jim. "Now you're talking reckless. It's too bad you've got the car in that bad fix."

"I tell you I don't want the car. If it can be got out of the tree I'll sell it. I won't ever ride in it again."

"You don't mean that, Maxey?" said Billy, earnestly.

"Yes, I do."

"But it's a new machine."

"I'd sell her for half what she's worth," Maxey persisted.

Monroe Stevens laughed, and said: "According to your own tell, Maxey, she isn't worth anything."

"But, if anybody thinks she's worth buying?" began the owner.

"Isn't that just like you?" cried Jim. "I suppose you'd want half what your father paid for her."

"I might want—but would I get it?" returned Maxey, shrewdly.

"Just *what* will you take for the car?" demanded Billy, still in earnest.

Monroe Stevens looked at Speedwell suddenly, and with interest.

"My gracious, Billy! I forgot that you and Dan are capitalists. You *could* buy old Maxey out, couldn't you?"

"So he could," cried Jim. "Billy and Dan banked the thousand dollars reward the Darringfords offered for the apprehension of the fellow who set the shops afire. Now, Maxey, if you really want to sell, you'd better put a real price on your car."

Billy flushed. He was stirred by impulse to buy the wrecked car. He had seen just how badly it was smashed and he knew that if Maxey would sell cheap enough somebody would get a bargain. The drab racing machine was of a standard make and there was good reason why Maxey might have thought of entering it in the thousand mile endurance run. A car of the same kind had won such a contest only the season before.

Young Solomons looked at Billy thoughtfully. Something seemed to be working in his mind.

"You came down and saved me, Billy Speedwell," he said. "Of course, the other boys helped, and I'm grateful to all of you. But Billy came first to my help."

"Shucks!" grunted Billy. "Forget it!"

"No. I'm not likely to forget it," returned Maxey, gravely. "If you want that car—just as it lies there in the tree-top—you can have it for five hundred dollars. She cost twenty-two hundred and fifty. I can show you the receipted bill."

"Whew!" cried Jim. "You don't want anything for it, do you, Maxey? I don't believe you can get it out of the tree."

But Billy had made up his mind already about that phase of the matter. And how he wanted to own that racing car!

He and Dan had watched the auto as it was handled by the professional chauffeur, and knew that it was a wonderfully good machine. But if the car was lifted safely back to the road, it would cost a good deal to rebuild it and put it in running shape again. Still—

"I'll think about it, Maxey," he said, slowly.

"No, Billy," said the owner of the wrecked car, seriously. "If you take time to think about it, so will I take time to think about it. I won't feel the way I do now, to-morrow maybe. You see? You can have it *now* for five hundred dollars. I maybe won't want to sell at all when I think about it a while."

Both Dan and Billy had put their money into the bank untouched. Billy had just an even five hundred dollars. He could not expect Dan to back him up with any of his money in such a wild bargain as this. But there was the car—Billy believed it could be saved and repaired for a comparatively small sum—and one-fourth of its purchase price, for a car less than three months old, was a bargain indeed!

Billy took it.

THE ROBBERY AT THE BANK

Dan Speedwell, in Mr. Briggs' maroon car, was at first badly frightened, and then angry. The pressure of the muzzle of a revolver against his stomach precluded his seeing the humor of the situation.

"Ouch!" he exclaimed. "Take it away!"

"Surrender!" cried the man with the weapon, and then Dan realized that his captor was Josiah Some, one of Riverdale's constables, and a pompous, officious little man.

"Surrender, in the name of the law!" repeated Mr. Some, using the instrument a good deal like a gimlet.

"Oh!" gasped Dan. "Who do you think you've got hold of, Some?"

"Eh? Ye know me, do ye?" growled the constable. "Then, Mr. Bank Robber, you know that Josiah Some ain't to be fooled with."

"I don't want to fool with you when you act so careless with that pistol. Take that gun away!" cried Dan.

"Hold up your hands!" ordered Mr. Some. "I've got to search you."

By this time one of the other men in the strange automobile, had gotten out, and brought a lantern to the side of the maroon car. He flashed the light into the boy's face, and at the same moment Dan recognized Hiram Baird, the cashier of the Farmers' Bank.

"Mr. Baird!" gasped Dan. "Take him away, will you?"

"Dan Speedwell!" rejoined the cashier, in amazement. "Why, how is this?"

"One of them Speedwell boys!" cried Some, glaring into Dan's face, and dropping the pistol's point, to Dan's great relief.

"That's certainly who it is," said the cashier of the bank.

"Wa'al! It's nothing more than I could expect," said Some, shaking his head. "Them boys are always racing around the country on them motor wheels of theirs—huh! Where's the other robbers?" and he grabbed Dan by the collar.

"What do you mean?" demanded the boy, angrily.

"You helped them get away," declared the constable. "The car was seen standing before the door of the bank after hours. They shut Mr. Baird into the strong room and he was almost smothered before the president came back and found him there."

This garbled account of a very interesting happening was sufficient for the moment to explain his position to Dan. He knew now why the trio of men in the first maroon car had refused to halt when they had wrecked Maxey Solomons' automobile.

"You've made a mistake, gentlemen," said Dan, quietly. "I really wish you would put up that gun, Mr. Some. You'll do yourself, or me, an injury."

"Yes, do put away the pistol, Josiah," urged Mr. Baird.

"But this young villain—"

"Nonsense, Josiah!" exclaimed the cashier. "We know Dan is not mixed up in the robbery."

"Then how came he by the car? A maroon car. This is it—I'm positive of it."

"No it isn't," declared Dan.

"But, really, Dan," said Mr. Baird, puzzled, "I saw the car stop at the bank door myself, and this one looks just like it."

"And what happened then?" asked Dan, curiously.

"Two men came in. The third sat where you do—in the driver's seat. It was after three, but the door had not been locked. I was alone. One of the men covered me with a pistol, and the other locked the door. Then they backed me into the vault and locked it. We had not put away the money. They got fifteen thousand dollars in bills and specie. They might have got much more had they known where to look for it. I had to stay in the vault until Mr. Crawley came in at half-past five."

"And they sent for *me*," added the pompous Some, "and put me on the case. I remembered, of course, seeing this maroon car standing by the bank."

"Not *this* car," urged Dan, again.

"Why ain't it?" snapped the constable.

"Because this car is the property of Mr. Briggs—and you don't accuse him of being a bank robber, do you?"

"Mercy!" ejaculated Mr. Baird. "One of our largest depositors!"

"Well!" cried Some. "How came you with the machine?"

Dan repeated the narrative of his adventures that afternoon and evening. Mr. Baird, of course, saw how reasonable it was, and believed him. Some disliked to say he was mistaken.

"I think I'd better arrest him, and take the machine back to town, Mr. Baird," he said.

"Nonsense!" exclaimed the cashier. "Get into Mr. Crawley's machine here, and let us follow the trail Dan has told us of. Perhaps Mr. Armitage and Mr. Briggs have caught up with the thieves."

Dan was much excited by the story of the robbery. To think that the bold thieves had ridden down the river road out of the town, and within a short distance of the scene of their first crime, had committed the desperate act which (so Dan supposed) had brought about Maxey Solomons' serious injury, or death, and the wrecking of that youth's automobile! They were certainly desperate characters. He hoped, with all his heart, that the gentlemen whom he had left in pursuit, and Deputy Sheriff Polk, would apprehend them. But he did not believe Josiah Some would be of much aid.

Dan came safely to Holliday's garage and delivered the maroon car, to be called for by its owner. Then he got upon his Flying Feather and motored home as quickly as possible, for it was already

late and he and Billy had the milk to pick up at Mr. Speedwell's dairies.

His younger brother had arrived at home ahead of him; but before he left town Dan had learned how Maxey Solomons had been saved. Billy, however, had something on his mind, and he even listened to Dan's tale of his "arrest" by Josiah Some without showing very much interest.

"What's the matter with you, boy?" demanded Dan, as they finally finished the chores about the stable and milkhouse and sat down a few minutes on the granary stairs before going into the house for the night. 37

"What makes you think there's anything the matter?" returned Billy, quickly.

"Come on, boy! 'Fess up," laughed Dan. "What's on your mind? If it's anything good, don't keep your brother out of it; and if you're in a fix of any kind, maybe I can help you."

"You're all right, Dan. But I reckon this is something I've got into myself, and I mean to stand by it," admitted Billy. "I expect you'll think I'm crazy."

"Don't know. Can't say. Open up!" urged his brother.

"Well—I've bought an automobile!" blurted out Billy Speedwell.

"You've done *what?*"

Billy repeated his statement, gloomily enough. Dan stared at him in the light of the barn lantern and remarked:

"Well, you don't look any crazier than common. And I expect you're telling me the truth. But I don't understand it. How did you buy it—from whom—what with?"

"Hold on!" exclaimed Billy. "Let me tell you all about it."

"That's right. It don't sound very real to me," said Dan, rubbing his head. "By the way, where's the machine?" 38

"Up in the air," returned Billy, with a grin.

"Huh! in a garage attached to one of those 'castles in Spain' that they tell about?"

"I bought Maxey's wrecked machine. I paid five hundred dollars for it—or, I promised to do so on Monday—and I don't even know whether I can get the thing out of the tree where it's roosting!"

Billy blurted all this out in a hurry. The information left Dan fairly speechless.

A FIRST DIFFICULTY

"For goodness sake tell me all about it, Billy," urged Dan.

His brother did so, relating the particulars of how Maxey Solomons had been rescued from the automobile and the conversation which had followed.

"You know how Maxey is. He changes his mind mighty easily. And, Dannie, I really believe the car is worth a whole lot more than five hundred dollars."

"But it's every cent you've got, Billy!"

"I know it. That's what's bothering me. It's going to cost something to hoist the car out of the tree, and then it'll cost I don't know how much to put it into shape again—as much as fifty dollars, perhaps."

"Is that all, Billy?" queried his brother, in surprise.

"The car isn't damaged much. I found and saved everything that dropped out of it when it was overturned. The thing is wrenched some, I suppose, and dented and marred. That's all. And it cost over two thousand dollars."

"I know," said Dan, nodding. "I know all about it. I rode in the car one day with Maxey, too. It's a dandy!"

"You bet it is!" cried Billy, eagerly, and evidently much relieved because his brother took the news as he had. "Suppose we could fix it up and enter for the gold cup that Mr. Briggs has offered? Wouldn't that be great?"

"That's all right, Billy. I'll go over and look at the car with you on Monday. Perhaps we can get it onto the road without much trouble. But say! I never knew you to be so selfish before, boy."

"How?" grunted Billy, in surprise.

"Why, you might have given a fellow a chance to buy in with you."

"Dannie!"

"Going to have it all to yourself, are you?"

"I thought you'd say I was crazy to do it," explained Billy, eagerly. "I have been afraid to tell mother and father. Of course, they said we could do exactly what we pleased with that money the Darringfords gave us—"

"Don't worry about it. I believe you've made a good investment," declared Dan, confidently. "And if you'll sell me a half interest in the car, I'll draw out half my money, and then we'll divide the cost of repairing the machine between us."

"Bully!" shouted Billy, smacking his brother on his sturdy shoulder. "That will be fine."

"I'd do the same for you, Billy-boy," said Dan. "And I'm just as eager to enter that endurance test as you are."

"And suppose we could win the cup, old boy!"

Dan chuckled. "We'll have an old rival in that run—if we have the luck to get into it."

"Who's that?" demanded his brother.

"Chance Avery. Burton Poole has taken him into partnership in his motor car. You know, Poole's got a good car. Chance has been rather out of conceit with the motorcycle business ever since the races at the baseball park."

"When you walked away from him, eh?" said Billy.

"But I heard him bragging down to Mr. Appleyard's store yesterday that he and Burton were going to have a try for the gold cup—and they expected to 'lift' it."

"It's just providential, then," said Billy, seriously, "that Maxey's machine was wrecked, and I got a chance to buy it."

The Speedwell family numbered but six—besides the parents and Dan and Billy, there were only Carrie, ten years old, and Adolph, who was just toddling around and learning to talk. They were, in spite of their somewhat straitened circumstances, a very happy family. Mr. Speedwell was not a strong man, but was gaining in health now that he worked out of doors instead of in a shop. With the help of his two big boys (Dan was sixteen and Billy a year younger) he was making the small dairy pay.

Although the boys had long ridden bicycles, and still owned their steeds of steel, the motorcycles on which they had taken their spin along the river road that day had been presented to them by Mr. Robert Darringford, and were the best wheels the Darringford Machine Shops could turn out. Now the fact that Dan and Billy were about to own an automobile was indeed a matter for discussion and interest around the evening lamp.

"For a poor man's sons, I believe you two are doing pretty well," remarked quiet Mr. Speedwell. He never went back upon what he said; having told the boys they could do what they pleased with the thousand dollars they had earned, he was not likely to criticize Billy's impulsive bargain.

That afternoon Dan and Billy hurried home on their machines and went at once to the woodlot with their axes. They cut and shaped two white-oak timbers, loaded them into the heavy wagon with such timber chains and ropes as they chanced to have about the barns, and drove back through the town and out upon the river road to the spot where the accident had occurred.

Jim Stetson and Wiley Moyle, both members of the Riverdale Outing Club, and in their same grade at the local academy, saw the Speedwells driving through town, and they climbed into the wagon.

"By gravey!" ejaculated Wiley. "I didn't believe it when they told me. Do you mean, Billy, that you've given up five hundred good dollars to Maxey Solomons for that smashed-up car?"

"Dan and I have bought it," admitted Billy, cheerfully.

"You must both be crazy, then," declared young Moyle. "You'll never get it out of those trees

without smashing it all to bits. What do you want a motor car for, anyway? You've got motorcycles; and it wasn't long ago you were riding bicycles like the rest of us. The club will go to the dogs if all the members get buzz-carts."

"Don't you fret," returned Dan, laughing. "As long as we can keep Captain Chance Avery in bounds, you fellows who ride bikes will not be neglected in club affairs."

"Remember how Dan fought for you at the meeting following the Barnegat run," said Jim. "And he and Billy owned their motors then."

"But an auto is different," grumbled Wiley. "Look at Burton Poole—and the Greenes. They don't care about going on the club runs at all any more because the autos have been shut out."

"Fisher Greene isn't stuck on the things," said Billy, laughing.

"No. There's never any room for Fisher in the car," said Jim Stetson, "and he has to stick to his old bike."

Although Wiley was such a "knocker," as Jim expressed it, he lent a sturdy hand to the unloading of the wagon. Dan had brought tools, and after carefully planning the arrangement of the contrivance he proposed building, the elder Speedwell began digging a post hole beside the road, and inside the wall. There was a turf bank here and the work of excavating was comparatively easy.

While the quartette of boys were thus engaged an automobile came into view from down the road. It approached swiftly, and Wiley Moyle suddenly recognized it.

"See who has come!" he scoffed. "Here's Burton Poole's buzz-wagon with Captain Chance at the wheel. Chance is going to win the gold cup, he says, and he and Poole are in partnership with that old lumber wagon."

Chanceford Avery, who was considerable older than most of the club members, was a dark complexioned, sharp featured young man, not much liked by the boys of Riverdale, but who made himself agreeable to most of the girl members of the Outing Club.

Some months before he had shown his enmity to the Speedwells, and he never let an opportunity escape for being unpleasant to the brothers. When he saw what the boys were about beside the road, he brought the automobile to an abrupt halt.

"Haven't you got a cheek to dig that bank up in that manner, Speedwell?" he said. "You'll get into trouble."

"Guess not," returned Dan, cheerfully. "It never entered my head we'd have to get a permit to set a post down here, as long as we are going to take the post right up again and fill in the hole. I've saved the sod whole, too."

"At any rate, there's one thing sure," snapped Billy, who didn't like young Avery at all, any more than he did Francis Avery, Chanceford's brother, and the superintendent of the Darringford shops; "we haven't got to come to *you* for a permit."

"Aw, stop your rowing, you fellows," advised Burton Poole, who was a good-natured, easy-going chap. "What are you going to do, Dan?"

Dan explained briefly, still keeping on with his work.

"You'll have a fat time trying to get that old hulk of a car up here," sneered Chance Avery. "And after you get it up, what good is it?"

"That we'll see about later," returned the older Speedwell, rather gruffly.

"Max Solomons made a fool of you," declared Chance. "He is blowing around town how he got the best of you fellows. Why, the car wasn't good for much when it got pitched over the bank."

"You'd laugh the other side of your mouth if this old car ever beat you and Poole, wouldn't you now?" demanded Billy.

"I suppose you fellows intend entering with it in the thousand mile endurance run?" laughed Chance.

"Bet your life we are!" cried Billy, before his brother could stop him.

"Listen to that, will you, you fellows?" said Chance. "These Speedwells are the limit!"

"We've been able to beat you before now, Chanceford Avery," snapped Billy. "Now go along! Nobody wants you here."

Chance might have stopped longer to argue the point, but Burton, who was all for peace, urged him on. Their car, which was really a very good one, hummed away toward town. Inside of twenty minutes a carriage rattled down to the place where the boys were at work.

"Hey, you, Dan Speedwell!" exclaimed an unpleasant voice, and Dan looked up from settling the big timber in the ground to see Josiah Some, the Riverdale constable.

"How d'ye do, Mr. Some," returned the youth. "Haven't caught those robbers in the maroon car yet, have you?"

The other boys laughed. Josiah's ability as a detective was a joke about town.

"Well, them other fellers haven't caught the scoundrels, either," snarled Some. "I guess there ain't no medals on Polk, if he *is* a deputy!"

"Wish you luck," said Dan, good naturedly.

"Never you mind about them bank robbers. I ain't here looking for them," said the constable. "I want *you*."

"What!" cried Dan. "Are you going to arrest me again, Mr. Some?"

"I want to know who gave you permission to dig that hole, and clutter up this place with them contraptions."

Dan and Billy looked meaningly at each other. Both boys knew at once that Chance Avery had set Josiah Some after them—and the constable was only too willing to do them an ill turn.

"Come on!" the man snarled. "Hop into my buggy, Dan Speedwell. I'm going to take you before the 'Squire and see what he's got to say about this."

THE HAND IN THE DARK

The three other boys were not a little alarmed by the constable's word and manner; but Dan did not show any fear.

"Just pack the earth and stones well around the post, Billy," he said to his brother, cheerfully, "while I go back to town with Mr. Somes, and get this matter straightened out."

Dan knew a little something himself about the town ordinances; he was aware that a permit was necessary for the opening of an excavation in a public road. But it was a rule often ignored in such small matters as this. Chance Avery had set the officious constable at this work, and Somes was just mean enough to delight in making the Speedwells trouble.

And on the way to the house of 'Squire English they would pass the office of the council clerk. Dan knew this gentlemen very well, and as Somes pulled up his horse to speak to a friend, the boy hopped out upon the sidewalk.

"Hey! where you going?" demanded the constable.

"I'll be right back," said Dan, dodging into the building and leaving the constable fussing in the carriage.

The boy found Mr. Parker at his desk and explained quickly what he and Billy were doing down there beside the river road.

"Digging a hole to set a post? Well, go ahead! I reckon nobody will object," said the clerk. "You'll fill it in all right, Dan?"

"But somebody *has* objected," explained the boy. And he told Mr. Parker of the difficulty.

"Pshaw! Josiah ought to be in better business," declared the clerk, and he hastily filled out a permit, headed "Highway Department" and gave it to the youth. "Show that to Justice English," he advised.

He nodded and smiled and Dan knew that the gentleman appreciated the joke on the constable. The latter was sputtering loudly when Dan returned to the sidewalk. He had got out of the carriage and hitched his horse.

"Here! you come along with me, Dan Speedwell!" cried the constable. "You're trying to run away."

Dan saw Chance Avery grinning widely on the other side of the square. It was plain that the captain of the Riverdale Club congratulated himself that he had got the Speedwells into trouble.

They went into 'Squire English's office. The old gentleman was a crotchety man, stern and brusque of speech, and a terror to the evil-doers who came before him. He did not like boys, having forgotten that he was ever one himself.

"What now? What now, Josiah?" he snapped, looking up from his papers, and glaring under bristling brows at Dan Speedwell.

"This here boy—and some others that I didn't bring in—are digging holes in the turf along the river road, just beyond Mr. Abram Sudds' place. You know that piece of turf there, 'Squire, that the town spent so much to grade and make handsome. Well this here Dan Speedwell was digging a hole in it."

"You're old enough to know better than to do that, young man," said the 'Squire, to Dan. "What did you do it for?"

Dan silently tendered the paper Mr. Parker had given him. The justice put on his glasses, looked at it, and turned on the constable wrathfully.

"What do you mean by bringing him here, when he's got a permit to set his post? Think I've got nothing more to do, Josiah, than to monkey with foolish cases?"

"Why—why—he never told me he had a permit!" cried the chagrined constable.

"You never gave me a chance to tell you," declared Dan.

"Get out of here—the whole of you!" snarled Justice English, as the crowd that had followed Dan and Somes in began to giggle and whisper, just as delighted over the constable's taking down as they would have been had Dan been punished.

The boys, on Dan's return from the 'Squire's office, rigged a clumsy, but efficient, swing-arm for the derrick before they were obliged to go home. But it grew too dark for anything more to be done that night. So they piled into the wagon and started for the other side of town.

As they halted at a certain corner to let Jim and Wiley get out of the wagon, a party of girls came along and hailed them.

"Oh, boys!" cried Lettie Parker, who was a jolly girl with more than a suspicion of red in her hair, and the quick temper which is supposed to go with it. "Oh, boys! you are just whom we wished to see. I don't believe any of you have heard about the candy-pulling out at Stella Mayberry's."

"Stel Mayberry's?" cried Jim. "I knew she was going to have one; but I didn't hear when."

"It's to-night. She wasn't at school to-day, so the word didn't get around. I got a note from her, and so did Mildred," Lettie said. "And we've been around inviting folks."

"Never heard a thing about it," declared Billy.

"But she means for you boys to come," Mildred Kent, the doctor's daughter, said, more quietly. She spoke to Dan. "I hope you can come. We'll go over on our wheels as soon after supper as we can."

"We'll be late getting there, Mildred," said Dan Speedwell.

"But we can all come back together. You know where she lives?"

"Oh, yes. Down the river road."

"We'll hurry along," said Billy, "so as to get over to Mayberry's as early as possible."

The Speedwells drove away. They went around to several other farmers to pick up the evening's

milk before going home. Then, when their chores were all done and they had supper, Dan and Billy mounted their motorcycles and dashed away through the town and out the river road toward the farmhouse which was the scene of the evening party.

While within the immediate confines of Riverdale they had to run moderately; but it was already after half-past eight, they wanted to reach Mayberry's before the fun was all over, and therefore "let out" the motors when they got upon the river road.

The white highway before them was deserted clear down to the bend at which Dan Speedwell had first seen the maroon car of the bank robbers on Saturday afternoon. That trio of criminals had gotten away: all pursuit had been futile.

But as the two boys shot around the bend they sighted an automobile chugging slowly toward them. It was not far beyond where the shadowy outline of their rudely constructed derrick was visible.

An automobile on this road was no uncommon sight; but the attention of Dan and Billy was called particularly to it because it showed no lights!

The boys flashed past the slowly moving machine at racing pace; yet Billy gained some particular knowledge of the car and its single occupant.

"Hey, Dannie!" he shouted. "Did you see him?"

"The fellow at the wheel?"

"Yes."

"I couldn't help seeing him; but I'm not sure who it was. The car I know," responded Dan.

"Poole's?" asked Billy, eagerly.

"That's what it was—Burton Poole's car," said the older brother.

"Then I'm sure I made no mistake. My eyes didn't fool me. That's Chance Avery in the car alone, running without a light. It would be a good joke to report *him* for breaking a town ordinance and have him up before Judge English," cried Billy.

The candy-pull broke up at an early hour, for all hands had to face lessons on the morrow. The girls had come out on motorcycles, too, and they were a gay party that started for Riverdale after bidding the Mayberrys, and those guests who lived near the farm, good-night.

Dan and Mildred Kent got off a little in advance of the rest of the riders, and led the company by several hundred yards. They were very good friends, Dan having dragged Mildred to school on his sled when they were both in the primary grade, and the fact that Doctor Kent was wealthy and the Speedwells were comparatively poor never made the least difference in their friendship.

"I heard the boys saying something about you and Billy buying an auto, Dan," said Mildred Kent. "Is it a joke?"

"We can't tell about that yet, Milly," responded Dan, chuckling. "Just at present it *looks* like a joke, for, as Billy says, the machine is up in the air."

"Do tell me what you have done," urged Mildred.

"Wait until we get along the river road a bit and I'll show you the car."

"You don't mean it's Maxey Solomons'?"

"It *was* his," admitted Dan, cheerfully. "And if we can get it out of the tree where it lodged last Saturday, we'll show some of the folks around here that it is a real flying machine, although we hope to keep it out of the air for the future."

They were wheeling along the road at a fast clip, but easily. Just as Dan spoke there sounded ahead an echoing crash—the fall of some object which made quite a startling noise on this quiet evening.

"What can that be?" demanded Mildred.

"I declare I don't know," said Dan, and quite involuntarily increased his speed.

There followed the sudden noise of a rapidly driven automobile—a car that was just starting ahead of them. In half a minute Dan knew that the car was hurrying toward Riverdale. Before he and Mildred had traveled three hundred yards the motor car was almost out of their hearing.

"What do you suppose has happened?" cried the girl.

Dan did not reply. It was a moonless night, but the heavens were brilliant with stars and their light made pretty plain objects along the road.

Their swift motorcycles had brought Dan and Mildred almost to the spot where the Speedwells had set their derrick in the afternoon. The contrivance had disappeared!

"Stop!" shouted Dan, and shut off his power and leaped from his saddle. He ran to the side of the road. There was the stump of the post he and Billy had set. It had not broken off, but had been chopped down with an axe!

And the whole apparatus had been allowed to fall over the precipice. In the darkness below the wall Dan could not see whether or not the falling derrick had crashed upon the automobile in the tree-top.

ON WATCH

"Oh, Dan! what is it?" cried Mildred, dismounting from her own motorcycle, and running to the gap in the wall through which the lad was leaning, seeking to peer into the gulf. "What has happened?"

"Somebody has knocked down our derrick. I hope the auto has escaped," muttered Dan.

He ran back to his machine, lifted off the storage battery lamp, and came with it to the verge of the precipice again. Its bright ray flashed into the depths revealed one thing at least—the auto was still wedged in the tree limbs. The heavy timbers had missed it in their fall.

"Oh, Dan! the car is there," cried Mildred, "And can you ever get it up to the roadway—do you believe you can?"

"We won't be able to get it up here if many such tricks as *this* are played on us," grunted Dan. "Ah! here's Billy."

The remainder of the party came up swiftly and stopped their cycles.

"What's happened?" cried Billy, first to reach his brother's side.

Dan pointed to the post, chopped off at the ground. All could see it.

"The car—is it hurt?" questioned Billy.

"I don't think so," replied his brother.

"The rascal! I'd like to pitch him over that wall myself," declared the younger Speedwell, in a passion.

"Who is it? Who did it, Billy? Do you know?" were the questions fired at the impulsive lad.

Dan touched his brother's arm, and Billy accepted the warning.

"I won't say anything more—now," Billy said, mysteriously. "But you can see what a mean trick it is—just as we got the derrick in place, too."

"I believe you!" cried Jim Stetson. "I skinned a knuckle and pretty near broke my back helping you. I'd give something to get hold of the fellow who did it, myself."

"Couldn't be old Somes, could it?" asked Wiley Moyle. "He was almost mad enough to bite you fellows, to-night."

"Nonsense! Josiah wouldn't do such a thing. He has too much respect for the law," said Monroe Stevens.

"I think it is very fortunate," put in Mildred Kent, earnestly, "that the person—whatever he was—did not manage to utterly ruin the automobile. Suppose he comes here before you can get the derrick erected again, and throws these boulders down upon the car?"

"He'll not do that!" declared Dan, firmly.

"How do you know?"

"Because either Billy or I will be on this spot until we get the car out of the place. We have too much money invested in the machine to have it wrecked."

"Right, Dannie!" declared his brother. "And I'll stay here now. You go on home, ask father to help you with the milk in the morning, and then come down with the team and another post as early as you can. If there's any way of getting the car up, we'll get at it without further delay."

It was so arranged, and Billy sat down beside the break in the wall while the others motored away. His own machine he carefully hid in a clump of bushes, and proposed to keep awake until morning so that the mean-spirited person whom he suspected of cutting down the pole, should not return and do any damage to the motor car.

Billy heard dogs barking in the distance—they seemed to start far down the road toward the Mayberry farm at which he and his young friends had spent such a pleasant evening. First one dog, and then another, joined the chorus, the sound of which drew nearer.

"Somebody coming along the road," thought the lad. "They're coming fast and stirring up a racket as they come. Somebody is traveling fast, for the houses are a good way apart, and the dogs join each other in hailing the passer-by in one, two, three order."

"Ha! an auto, I bet," pursued Billy. "Coming at a stiff pace. There's the hum of her! No other sound. Gee! she's spinning the miles behind her. Hear her purr!"

Billy rose to his knees and peered down the road. He was still in the shadow and could not be seen. There was a flash of light at the far bend—but it was no lamp. Billy knew a car had turned the corner, but it had not a single headlight lit.

Then, to his amazement, he saw that there were figures in the car—one at the wheel, the other in the tonneau. And it was a somewhat larger car than Billy had expected.

A car without a light had no business on the road in the first place; that fact was suspicious. And when the car halted directly before the crouching boy, Billy was indeed amazed.

"Is this the spot?" asked the man on the front seat, turning to speak over his shoulder.

"I—don't—know," returned the other, in a low voice. "It looks so different by night."

"Hang it! you and I were past here on Saturday."

"Well! we went so fast that I couldn't tell what the place looked like. I know that Sudds lives here somewhere. Ha!"

"What's the matter?" asked the man at the wheel, whom Billy noticed was rather small.

"I believe this is the spot where that auto went over the bank; eh?"

The chauffeur stood up, evidently trying to peer into the darkness beside the road. Billy's heart beat loudly. He was so near that he could have almost reached out his hand and touched the rear wheel of the car.

There was something about this automobile that awoke in Billy Speedwell a feeling of suspicion. It was too dark for him to see the color of the automobile exactly; but he was apprehensive.

"Sudds' place is farther along," exclaimed the chauffeur, sitting down. "*He* ought to be on the lookout somewhere. We'll run on slow, and then back again if we don't pick him up."

"All right," growled the second man.

They were both looking forward and away from Billy. The boy, shaking with nervousness, but willing to risk much to prove to himself that his suspicion was right, crept out of the shadow behind the car. The machine started and Billy leaped lightly up behind, and clung to the back of the large, folded canopy top of the tonneau. 62

The car rolled on smoothly—almost silently; her engine throbbed steadily. They turned the bend and Billy knew that the dwelling of Abram Sudds, a granite mansion set high on the bank beside the road, was in sight, although he could not see it.

The car purred on. Billy clung desperately, afraid to drop off now, for he would be revealed the instant he came out of the shadow of the automobile's folded-back top. Impulsively he had jumped into trouble, and without a thought for the wrecked auto he was watching, and in which his brother and himself had invested five hundred dollars!

But the mystery of this car, and the men in it, had taken hold of him strongly. As they ran slowly past the Sudds property Billy glanced about for the man whom the two in the car evidently expected.

There was no one in the road. They ran on to the next house and there the chauffeur turned slowly. There was a street light here and its dim radiance shone for an instant on the side panels of the car as it turned. Billy, craning his neck around the corner of the car to look, saw the light flash upon the shiny varnish. 63

The car was painted maroon! There had been *two* maroon cars in the neighborhood of Riverdale within the past few days. Billy was very sure indeed that this car did not belong to Mr. Briggs!

THIEVES IN THE NIGHT

The maroon car turned slowly and ran back along the road. At the wrought-iron, ornate gate before the Sudds' front steps it halted suddenly. Billy shot another glance around the car.

A man had stepped out of the shadow of the gate post. The two in the car evidently recognized their comrade.

"Come on!" the new-comer said, commandingly. "You run on around the corner, George, and wait for us. Keep your power on. We may be ten minutes—we may be half an hour; but you wait."

"All right," assented the man at the wheel, and the car moved on slowly while Billy saw the speaker, and the man who had ridden in the back of the car, walk in at the gate and mount the steps.

The Sudds mansion was high above the street, and the door was gained by mounting several terraces. The couple of strangers were up three sets of granite steps when the maroon car slipped around the bend and Billy lost sight again of the house.

Now, Billy Speedwell had not the first idea what he should do. He believed these three men were criminals. He was sure this was the maroon car Dan had chased on his motorcycle on Saturday—the car that had thrown Maxey Solomons and his auto over the embankment. And the men in it had robbed the Farmers' Bank of Riverdale of fifteen thousand dollars!

They had dared come back into the neighborhood. Not only had they come back, but Billy believed they were here for quite as bad a purpose as that which had made them notorious in the neighborhood two days before.

An honest car does not usually run without lights. The river road chanced to be deserted at this late hour (it was now approaching midnight) and standing where the chauffeur stopped it, this maroon auto could scarce be seen until one was right upon it.

But Billy dared not climb down behind. The throb of the slowly running engine shook the car and made noise enough to drown any slight sound he might create. But the chauffeur, George, was standing up and looking all about him. He would spy a rat running across the road, let alone a boy.

But, if the other two came down to the automobile, would not they see Billy clinging behind the car? The thought gave young Speedwell courage to make a change of base, and make it quickly.

He lifted himself up carefully, sliding his legs into the bag of the collapsed tonneau top. There he lay stretched out, perfectly invisible in the half darkness, but able to see all that went on behind the car, at least.

What he intended to do, Billy had not thought. His jumping on the machine was one of those impulsive, thoughtless acts for which he was noted. He very well knew now that Dan would not have done this without having seen his way clear to escape!

He heard the chauffeur moving about for a few moments. He undoubtedly looked over his machine; but this scrutiny did not bring him near the hiding Billy. Then George got into the car and sat ready to speed up the moment his comrades joined him.

It seemed to the lad in the back of the car that much more than half an hour had passed. He grew very weary with waiting.

Then suddenly, shattering the silence of the night, came a sound that startled Billy like a pistol shot. A heavy window went up with a bang.

Billy heard the chauffeur utter a sudden exclamation. Then a voice in the distance began to shout; but it was so far away that Billy could not distinguish the words uttered.

It was an alarm, however. He heard a policeman's rattle, as the householder who had opened the window swung the loud-sounding contrivance with a vigorous arm. A woman shrieked, too; then followed the quick bark of a pistol—a sound that dwarfed the other noises.

Footsteps pounded on the road behind the car, and the two men for whom it was waiting appeared. One carried a bundle; the other held onto his arm and seemed to be in pain as he stumbled on.

"He winged me! he winged me!" cried the wounded man.

"Get in and stop your howling!" commanded the other, who seemed to be the leader.

He pushed his comrade into the tonneau, leaped in himself with the bundle, and said to the chauffeur:

"Go to it, George! This is getting to be too hot a neighborhood for us to linger in!"

As he spoke the car leaped ahead. Billy gasped, and then lay still. Wherever the criminals were aiming to go, it seemed that the boy was forced to accompany them!

The maroon car sped along the straight stretch of two miles to the next bend in the road. Billy, looking out behind, saw no pursuit. Around the curve the car whipped, and they were safe! Or, so it seemed, for there was no pursuit. Probably there was no suspicion that the thieves had gotten away in an automobile, for the purring of the car was scarcely audible, she ran so easily.

The boy could hear nothing that was said by the trio. Sometimes the sound of voices drifted back to him; but he could distinguish no words. The machine kept up a swift pace and ran boldly down to Upton Falls. Billy knew the locality well; but until the car stopped he could do nothing toward either his own escape, or raising an alarm.

Remembering how Dan had chased this car before on Saturday, and the fact that the men had cut across country toward the coast villages, Billy was surprised that they did not follow the same route again; but he soon discovered that the thieves were afraid of the machine running out of gas.

As they spun quietly down into the square, Billy peered ahead again, and saw the flaring electric sign in front of Rebo's garage. Although they had not passed another car on the road, Upton Falls was one of the roads to Barnegat, and there was a good deal of night travel. Mr. Rebo advertised to

cater to the trade twenty-four hours in the day, and Billy knew there would be at least one man on duty here.

The trio of robbers knew this, too, it was evident. One of them hopped out of the car the moment it stopped and rapped on the office window. A sleepy voice replied, and the door was quickly opened.

By this time the two men in the back of the automobile, as well as the chauffeur, were coated and masked. The dust masks and great goggles completely hid their features.

Billy had hoped that there would be more than one man at the garage, or that somebody would stroll along whose attention he might call. He feared to leap out of concealment and reveal himself to the trio of thieves.

He knew that one of the Upton Falls constables was supposed to patrol the streets of the town at night; but he did not show up at this juncture. The man on duty at the garage went about his work sleepily enough. It was plain by the muttered conversation Billy overheard from the gang, that they were impatient, but dared not show how hurried they were.

"We'd never ought to have had to run down here," growled the leader, who was a big, aggressive man, and seemed to have the other two under his thumb.

"I tell you we burned a lot of gas running up and down, waiting for you," was the chauffeur's reply.

"Well! It's the back track for ours, anyway. If they look for a car at all, it won't be running *toward* Sudds' house."

"You'll not take the river road!" exclaimed the third man, earnestly.

"The pike," growled the other.

The man came out with the gasoline can, and there was no more discussion. But Billy had heard something of importance. He dared not show himself, for the glare of the garage lights would betray to the robbers just where he had been hiding.

Nevertheless, he made up his mind to make some good use of the information he had gleaned. He swiftly drew a letter from his pocket, tore a blank page from it, and with a bit of lead-pencil scribbled a line on the paper. The chauffeur was already cranking up the maroon car. The machine quickly began to throb.

Billy waited until the car had started. He saw that the chauffeur was making a turn in the square, preparatory to taking the back track as he had been instructed.

The garage man stood gaping on the walk, and staring after the maroon car. Billy thrust out his hand and waved the paper in the air. The man's jaws came together with a snap. The boy was almost certain that he had observed the waving paper.

Therefore Billy let it float back into the road. He even had the satisfaction of seeing the man step into the roadway to pick it up before the motor car struck a very swift pace. The next moment the shadow of the trees and houses shut out Billy Speedwell's view of the spot.

JOSIAH SOMES ON THE WARPATH

Dan Speedwell had gone back to Riverdale with his young friends in a much disturbed state of mind. That anybody should be mean enough to have tried to utterly ruin the racing car which he and Billy had bought of Maxey Solomons, not only angered Dan, but hurt him. Like his brother he suspected who the person was who had chopped down the derrick, and sent it crashing over the edge of the cliff to the bank of the river.

It was eleven o'clock when he reached home. He and Billy were usually astir before three each morning, and with the younger boy absent Dan would have all the milking and other chores to do by himself. He did not propose to arouse his father until about time to start with the milk wagons for Riverdale.

He put away his motorcycle, took his axe and a lantern, and started for the small woodlot that was a part of the Speedwell farm. That day, when cutting the two timbers that had now fallen over the cliff beside the river road, Dan had marked several other oak trees of practical use in this emergency.

"We'll not go to school in the morning," decided the older brother; "but we'll rig another derrick and get that car out upon the road before more harm is done."

Dan went along the county road to the bars and climbed over them into the few acres of timber Mr. Speedwell owned. He had been hunting 'coons and 'possums on many a night and was not afraid to fell a tree by lamp-light. He cut away some of the brush, chose the direction in which he wished the tree to fall, and set to work with the axe.

The reverberating blows rang through the wood, and the chips flew. Dan was not alone a sturdy youth; he was a good woodsman. In five minutes the tree fell with a crash that could have been heard afar. And as the echo of it died away our hero was aware of a swiftly approaching sound along the highroad. It was the throbbing of an automobile, and now a horn sounded:

"Honk! honk! honk!"

"Joy-riders," muttered Dan, preparing to trim the tree. "Hello! they're slowing down."

The throbbing of the car ceased. The boy was near the edge of the wood and heard voices in a moment. Some of the occupants were getting out of the car.

"Hello in there!" shouted a voice. "What luck have you had, brother?"

"They think I'm hunting," exclaimed Dan. "And I declare! I believe that is Mr. Armitage. It sounds just like his voice."

Dan Speedwell picked up his lantern and walked toward the road. For a second time the jolly voice hailed him:

"Hello! Who's there? Where's the dogs?"

"I haven't any dogs, and I'm not hunting," explained Dan, coming out to the bars.

"Hullo!" rejoined the same voice. "Isn't that young Speedwell?"

"I thought I recognized your voice, Mr. Armitage," said Dan.

"And Mr. Briggs is here. This is the car you took a ride in Saturday night, young man," and the gentleman laughed. "How are you? I hear Josiah Somes tried to mix you and Mr. Briggs' car up with the robbery of the Farmers' Bank."

"He did indeed," admitted Dan.

"I'm glad to see you again, boy," said Mr. Briggs, likewise leaning out of the tonneau. "Some of our boys and hired men started out an hour ago after 'coons. Have you heard or seen anything of them?"

"No, sir. I reckon they went over toward the swamp. We only own a small piece of these woods, and the 'coons and 'possums have been driven all away to the swamp side."

"There!" exclaimed Mr. Armitage, "I told you I was sure we were taking the wrong road, Briggs."

"And we've got to go clear around by Meadville to find a road fit to drive this machine over!" exclaimed his friend.

"No, sir," said Dan, quickly. "You can go into town and turn at Peckham's Corner. There's a good road going into the swamp which branches from the Port Luther turnpike."

"I know it!" cried Mr. Armitage. "I remember now."

"Sure you can find it, Tom?"

"We—ell—"

"Do you know the way, Henri?" asked Mr. Briggs, of the Frenchman at the wheel.

"No, Monsieur," replied Henri, quickly. "I am not what you call familiar with the ways."

Dan could not help offering. Besides, his whole body tingled for another ride in the swift, easy-running car. And Henri might let him run the machine again!

"I can go with you, Mr. Armitage," he said, quickly. "We can run around to the swamp in half an hour—at night. You won't mind traveling fast. And the road back here passes within half a mile of our house, although there is no cross-road—not even a wood-team path. I can walk from the turnpike to our house in less than ten minutes."

"Say, that's kind of you, Speedwell," said Mr. Briggs. "But it's late. Your folks will expect you home."

"They're abed. I wasn't really expecting to go to sleep to-night," said Dan, laughing. "You see, we have to milk early, and Billy is away. I have his share of the work to do, too."

"I am afraid we are imposing on you," said Mr. Armitage.

"No, sir."

"Perhaps the boy is itching to get in Henri's place again," laughed the owner of the maroon car.

"Yes, sir; that's it," admitted Dan, with a broad smile.

"Jump aboard, then," said Mr. Briggs. "If Henri wants you to show him how to properly handle a six-cylinder Postlethwaite, why you may do so."

The Frenchman's little, waxed mustache shot up toward his eyebrows in a smile, and he slid over and allowed Dan to take the steering wheel of the motor car. The boy laid his axe on the footboard and turned down his lantern and put that in a secure place, too. Then, with a hand on the gear lever and another on the wheel, and his foot on the clutch pedal, he brought the beautiful car into motion as easily as Henri himself could have turned the trick.

"You are going to make one fine chauffeur," whispered Henri, in Dan's ear. "That was magnificent!"

There was nobody else on the road. They came down into Riverdale as swiftly—and almost as silently—as a cloud shadow chasing across a wheat-field. The town street lights were quickly in view. They came within sight of Peckham's Corner, just above the Court House.

And there—right in the roadway—suddenly flashed a lantern. It gyrated curiously, as though the bearer of the lamp was dancing from side to side. And those in the car heard a raucous voice shouting.

"What's the matter here?" demanded Mr. Briggs, as Dan began to reduce speed.

"Look out, Speedwell!" warned Mr. Armitage. "There's a rope stretched across the road."

"It's right at Josiah Somes' house," exclaimed Dan.

"Is that fellow going to hold us up?" demanded Briggs.

"Josiah must be on the war-path," chuckled Mr. Armitage. "He's out holding up automobilists so as to fill the coffers of the local 'Squire and his own pockets."

Dan was obliged to shut off power and brake hard. The heavy car barely stopped in season.

"Surrender!" yelled the voice of Mr. Somes. He bore the lantern in one hand, and a revolver of the largest size in the other, and he waved both of these indiscriminately.

"What's the matter with you?" demanded Mr. Briggs, wrathfully.

The constable evidently did not recognize the gentleman. He continued to paw the air and make threatening gestures with his weapon, as he shouted:

"Hold up your hands! Pile out of that car! I swear I got ye now, ye robbers, you! Move lively!"

"Say! who do you think you are speaking to?" demanded Mr. Armitage.

"You can't fool me," declared the constable wildly. "They jest telephoned me to stop ye. Ye robbed Colonel Sudds of jewelry and money this very night. But I know ye done more than that. You are the fellers that robbed the Farmers' Bank on Saturday, and I'm goin' t' march ye t' jail for it!"

ON A HOT TRAIL

The first thought Dan Speedwell had was for Billy. Mr. Sudds' residence was the nearest house to the spot where Maxey's automobile had been overthrown, and where he had left Billy to watch over the wrecked auto for the night.

If Colonel Sudds had been robbed within a short time, did Billy know anything about it, and had he got into any trouble? Dan knew his impulsive brother so well, that he feared at once for his safety.

But Mr. Thomas Armitage, and Mr. Briggs burst into a shout of laughter.

"Oh, Josiah! you're the only man who could possibly make the same mistake twice, hand-running. When *will* you ever wake up?" demanded Mr. Armitage, when he could speak for laughter.

The constable's face lengthened enormously and he put away the big pistol with much haste and chagrin.

"I—I don't s'pose you know anything about the robbery of Mr. Sudds, gents," he muttered. "But see here! 'Twarn't half an hour ago they telephoned to me from Sudds' house that they'd been robbed; then come another message saying to stop a maroon car; that the men in it had robbed Mr. Sudds, and was also suspected of being the bank robbers. I remembered that them robbers had a car like this——"

"And *that* fact ought to earn them a term in jail alone," growled Mr. Briggs. "I have a good mind to send my car back to the factory and have it repainted."

"Tell me!" interrupted Dan Speedwell, eagerly, "who telephoned you, Mr. Sudds?"

"Man at Rebo's Garage," said the constable, shortly.

"Rebo's! That's at the Falls," observed Mr. Armitage.

"Sure enough!" agreed Mr. Briggs. "What did they say about it?"

"Why—I was some flustered," admitted Sudds, doggedly. "Ye see, I was sound asleep when I heard from the Sudds' of the robbery there."

"When did this happen?" asked Dan, quickly.

"Not half an hour ago, I tell ye!" snapped the constable. "Ha! you're Dan Speedwell, ain't ye?"

"Yes."

"Well, your brother's mixed up in this thing, now I tell ye!"

"Oh, how?" cried Dan. "What do you mean?"

"Surely not in the robbery of Mr. Sudds' house?" said Mr. Armitage.

"Wa'al, it's mighty funny," snapped Josiah. "As I tell ye, they telephoned me that two men had entered through a lower window, opened the library safe, and took jewelry and money—ten thousand dollars' wuth. One of the men had been in the house early in the evening—so they thought. He was a stranger, and made out he had some business with the colonel."

Mr. Sudds was a "colonel" by courtesy, having at one time served on the Governor's staff.

"So I scabbled on me clothes, meanin' to start right down there to see about the robbers. My telephone rung agin, jest as I got to the door, and Mrs. Sudds called me back. It was the man at Rebo's."

"In Upton Falls? Yes?" said Dan, eagerly.

"He says a maroon automobile had just stopped there for gasoline——"

"Yes?" urged Dan.

"And he says," pursued the constable, "that when the car started away, somebody dropped a piece of paper out of it. He says he believed somebody was hangin' onto the back of the car, and threw the paper so he'd see it. He ran and picked it up, read it, and then telephoned me. Of course, he knew I'd 'tend to it," said Josiah, pompously.

"Yes, yes!" agreed Dan. "What did the paper say?"

"Why, as near as I can remember, it said: 'Telephone authorities at Riverdale to stop maroon car, headed that way. Men in her have robbed Mr. Sudds and I think they are the ones who robbed Farmers' Bank.' And your brother's name was signed to it. Now, Dan Speedwell, either it's a hoax, or your brother is mixed up in these robberies," declared the constable, with a tone of satisfaction that made Dan angry.

"Well, well, Josiah!" said Mr. Armitage. "You'd better let us by. If you are going to try to catch the real robbers' automobile, you'll want some help, won't you?"

"Wait!" cried Dan, again, as the constable dropped the rope. "Tell me one thing."

"Wal, what is it?" returned Josiah, grudgingly.

"How long ago did the man at Rebo's 'phone you?"

"Jest now."

"What does *that* mean?" cried Dan. "Ten minutes ago, or more?"

"I jest got word, and ran out of the house, heard you comin' and stopped ye."

"Ten minutes it would be, then, Speedwell," said Mr. Armitage. "What's on your mind?"

"And did the man say the other car had just left the garage?"

"Yes he did," drawled Josiah.

"I see!" cried Mr. Armitage. "If the maroon car is coming this way it has not yet reached Riverdale."

"But it must be near," urged Dan, anxiously. "Oh! I believe my brother is really with the robbers—perhaps as a prisoner. Can't we head them off?"

"Does it seem reasonable that they would come back this way, having robbed Mr. Sudds within the hour?" queried Mr. Briggs.

"It would be a shrewd move," said his friend.

"It's a hot trail, I believe," cried Dan.

"Run through the town, and onto the pike," advised Mr. Armitage, "Perhaps we may meet with them."

Dan shot the car ahead without further word. Everything else was forgotten by the lad but his anxiety to learn the truth about his brother's connection with the other maroon automobile. Dan was deeply worried.

A GREAT RUN

Instead of turning at Peckham's Corner, as they had intended had the party kept on after the 'coon hunters, the swift automobile ran on into Riverdale. They passed the Court House and shot through the public square. The town was asleep and nobody challenged them.

A little beyond this was the brick structure in which county prisoners were kept, and the sheriff lived in a wing of the prison. Mr. Armitage touched Dan's shoulder lightly and the boy slowed down.

"We'd better speak to Midge," said the gentleman. "We can't wait for him, but he had better know what's afoot. If there's a deputy here——"

"Why didn't Mr. Sudds telephone *here*, instead of to Constable Somes?" queried Mr. Briggs, as his friend got out of the automobile.

"It was Mrs. Sudds who telephoned. To the women-folk, Josiah is bigger than the president. That tin star he wears is what gets them."

Mr. Armitage went up the steps of the sheriff's house, chuckling. He rang the bell, and almost immediately the door opened. There was a light in the office; connected with the jail, and there was usually one or two deputies on watch in the office all night.

"Why, Polk you're just the man for us," said the hearty voice of Mr. Armitage. Then, in a low tone he explained what was afoot. The deputy, whose turn it was to be on duty at the Riverdale jail, spoke to his partner inside, got his hat, and came back with Armitage to the car.

"Evening, Mr. Briggs. Hello Dan!" he said. "I've been dead sore ever since those fellows escaped us on Saturday night. If there's a chance of catching 'em, I want to be with you."

"Hop in," said Mr. Briggs. "If they are coming directly to town, we ought to meet them on the pike in a very few moments."

Dan had already started the motor car again and they ran swiftly out of town. Passing the Darringford Machine Shops they could see the gaunt skeleton of the new office building being erected on the site of the old one that had been burned in the summer. As they shot into the straight pike, the road seemed deserted.

They came soon to the first cross-road—a lane which cut over the country and joined the Port Luther highway. Polk shouted to Dan to stop.

"What is it now?" demanded Mr. Briggs, quickly.

"Let me get out and see if a car has recently turned into this road from the direction of the Falls. It's sandy here," said the deputy.

Before he could put his suggestion into words Henri, the Frenchman, was out in the roadway in his stead. He carried Dan's lantern with him, and turned the wick up so he might see.

"There is no marks of a tire, Monsieur," said Henri, confidently. "The car has not turned this way ——"

"Hark!" exclaimed Dan.

The humming of a fast-driven machine in the distance suddenly came to their ears. It was approaching from the right direction—and its approach was speedy.

"Let me back into this road and wait till she passes," suggested Dan. "We'll put the lights out and they won't see us as they go by."

"Good!" exclaimed Polk. "Do it."

The strange car came on like the wind. A bend in the pike had hidden it thus far; but suddenly the increased volume of sound proved that it had darted around this bend into the straight stretch of road leading to the Darringford Shops.

Then the flickering rays of their lamps came into view. The members of Dan's party leaned forward, straining their eyes to catch the first glimpse of the car. Was it the mate to this one which Mr. Briggs owned?

And then, with surprising suddenness, the sound of the other car showed that its power was being reduced. Dan had stopped the engine of their auto, and Henri stooped in front of it, with his hand on the crank, ready to start the instant the other car was past.

Suddenly the Frenchman uttered a yell of fright. The lights of the strange car swerved, and in a breath it had dashed right into this lane where the silent car stood!

Had Dan not backed well into the side of the road, there would surely have been a collision. The lamps of the turning automobile revealed at the last moment the standing car, and the chauffeur of the other swerved well to the right hand.

Henri leaped aside, and the guard of the other auto just shaved him. The two vehicles escaped each other by a narrow margin. Only Mr. Armitage kept his head. He leaped up with a shout, and held the lantern which had been turned low again, so that its light fell upon the passing car.

It was painted maroon.

"There they go!" yelled Polk.

They saw the three men in the car—the small man at the wheel and the two in the tonneau.

One of these latter stood up, and something glittered in his hand. But no shot was fired.

But Dan Speedwell was seriously troubled. *Where was Billy?*

For a moment the older boy forgot what he was doing, and he sprang to his feet, too.

"Billy!" he shouted, his voice sounding high and shrill above the sudden puffing of the car he was in. Henri had grabbed the crank at once and turned over the flywheel.

The fugitive car was already gathering speed again; but something white fluttered from the back of the racing automobile.

"I saw him, Dan!" cried Mr. Armitage. "He's lying there in the slack of the canopy. I don't believe the scoundrels know they are being spied upon."

"Turn around, boy, and get after them!" cried Polk. "We'll rescue him!"

It was not yet one o'clock. The leading machine had raced to Upton Falls and back again. Without much doubt, it was now headed across the county, aiming for the same section in which it had escaped pursuit on Saturday night.

But as Dan Speedwell felt the car he drove throb and shake under his manipulation, and realized that it responded to his will and touch, he could not but believe that his was the better one.

On and on the cars tore along the road. The red spark of light ahead seemed to draw nearer. Dan knew that he was gaining upon the other machine.

Suddenly the spark of light ahead vanished. Dan did not reduce his speed, but he wondered for a moment if the rascals, becoming wary of pursuit, had put out all their lights again.

They could observe the lamps on Mr. Briggs' car and Dan dared not run dark in this narrow road. One collision they had escaped by a hand's breadth; he was not likely to risk another right away.

But before he could comment upon the disappearance of the rear light of the fugitive automobile, Polk cried from the tonneau:

"There she goes around the corner. They've struck the Port Luther turnpike."

"And turned toward the coast?" demanded Mr. Armitage.

"Don't know. Too far away for us to be sure whether she turned right or left," said the deputy.

"Slow down when you get there, then, Dan," said the proprietor of the motor car, understanding what Mr. Armitage wanted. "There must be some mark of her tires in the earth. The Port Luther road is not macadamized."

But Dan did not reduce speed yet. He could see the roadway very plainly in the strong radiance of the car's lights. If the tires of the machine they were chasing made as plain a trail at the corner as they did in certain soft spots in this lane, there would be no need for them to reduce speed, save to make the turn in safety.

Henri saw this, too. He shrugged his shoulders and held up a warning hand as Mr. Armitage leaned forward to shout in Dan's ear.

"Wait!" cried the Frenchman, eagerly.

They were at the corner. The glare of the lights revealed a wide patch of the road. The wheel-marks of the fugitive car had swerved to the right hand. The robbers were racing on to the north—were, in fact, running around Riverdale, and away from the coast.

But, as Dan brought Mr. Briggs' car out of the lane, and shot her into the broader highway, he looked ahead in vain for the tail-light of the other maroon automobile. He knew that the pike here was straight for five miles; there wasn't a light upon it!

This was the road Dan had first agreed to drive his party to, had they taken the turn at Peckham's. But they were several miles below Peckham's road. The fugitive car could not have turned into this last highway, for it could not, running at top speed, have covered five miles, even, before the pursuing auto took the turn into the pike.

"Running without lights," was Dan Speedwell's quick decision. "And why can we not do the same on this broad road? At least, those fellows cannot so easily gage our speed," and he suggested the idea to Henri. The Frenchman spoke to his employer and then shut off the lights in front. The tail lamp they allowed to show, to warn any vehicle behind—although so far they had discovered no car on any of these roads, save the machine run by the bank robbers.

They skimmed along this wider way at fast speed. Indeed, Dan believed that he had never traveled so fast before save on the racetrack with his Flying Feather motorcycle.

Dan felt that before them, flashing in and out of the shadows as they, too, were, was another car, running likewise without lights and at top speed. The noise of their own machine drowned all other sounds. Suppose he should bring this great vehicle crashing into the rear of that other flying car?

With Billy in the back! The thought shook Dan Speedwell. For an instant he was tempted to pull down—to reduce speed—to take no further risk in this wild chase.

But then, the thought that Billy might need him—that the robbers might have already discovered that they carried a spy with them—urged the brother to cling to the trail like a hound on the scent of game.

They shot around a curve in the road. Henri held up his hand. Some sound—a noise louder than the roar of their passage—had come to him.

"What is it?" shouted Dan, but not reducing speed.

"A blow-out!" cried the Frenchman, and pointed ahead.

"It's the other car!" shouted Polk, leaning over the back of the front seat. "We're going to catch 'em. They've burst a tire!"

A SHARP TURN

Billy Speedwell, in the hood of the robbers' car, speeding over these lonely roads at this late hour of the night, had many sensations. He had his own anxieties and fears—nor were they much connected with the wrecked automobile in the tree-tops; nevertheless, they were poignant troubles.

Billy was much shaken as the motor car bounced over the way. The pace was not quite so wild, however, as it had been on the run down to the Falls. George was handling the car with more caution. Billy could hear a low murmur of voices—now and then a little cry. The man who had been shot, and who had kept perfectly still while at Rebo's garage, was having his wound dressed, without doubt.

Nothing occurred to alarm Billy, or to spur his wit to any action, until the car suddenly took the turn into the lane, where the second maroon machine was in hiding. The short turn surprised Billy quite as much as it surprised his brother and those with him.

Billy heard the shouting, saw a light flashed, and realized that the car he was with had barely grazed another touring automobile standing without lights in the narrow roadway. Then he recognized his brother's voice as Dan shouted his name!

Billy could do nothing but wave his hand—and he did not know that the signal was seen. He realized on the instant, however—as did the three robbers—that they were pursued. Somehow, Billy's written information had reached Dan Speedwell's ear, and he—with others—were out to catch the men who had looted the Sudds' house and who (so Billy believed) had robbed the Riverdale bank.

Billy knew quite well the direction in which he was traveling. In a very few minutes they would pass a spot in the big swamp which lay less than half a mile from his own home. And Billy Speedwell very much wished that he was safe in his home at that moment!

Lights flashed beside the road, but at some distance ahead. Billy knew that they were already in the thick woods lying behind his own home. The flaring of the lights assured him that they had come upon a hunting party.

Indeed, as George shut off the power, and the noise of the engine ceased, the yelping of the dogs could be plainly heard. They had treed something right beside the highway.

"Switch on the lights quick!" whispered the man who seemed to command the trio. "They are too busy to have seen us yet."

"But can't we take some side road?" asked the wounded one.

"There is none, I tell you; I know the country like a book. We have got to pass that crowd of fools."

The lamps were already alight; the chauffeur spun the flywheel and the car moved on. It might have seemed to any of the party of hunters, who noticed at all, that the automobile had only then flashed around the curve in the road.

It leaped ahead again, but not before Billy heard the approaching purr of the car in pursuit. Dan and his friends were close behind!

"Hold on!" yelled somebody. "Look out for the dogs."

The thieves uttered exclamations of anger, but George slowed down. The excited canines were leaping about in the roadway. The 'coon had taken to a tall, straight tree, directly on the line of the highway. The branch on which the animal crouched overhung the road.

The torches and lanterns flashed in front of the car. The chauffeur brought it down to a creeping pace. Those beside the road obtained a good view of the car, and of the men in it. This was in all probability not to the liking of the latter. Beside, there was the license plate behind—no dragging robe covered those numbers now.

Already a man with an axe was at the base of the tree. He struck a blow, or two, before the motor car crawled past. They were going to fell the tree so as to get their quarry.

The maroon car passed. Billy heard the sound of the pursuing auto, growing louder and louder. He decided that the moment had come for him to escape from the car, for the hunters would protect him from the vengeance of the criminals.

And even as he was about crawling out of the canopy, and dropping to the lighted roadway, the boy was startled by a sharp detonation—followed by the shaking of the automobile as it was brought to a sudden stop.

"A blow-out!" thought Billy.

The car was stalled. He heard the three thieves express their fear and anger. He knew he would be less likely to be observed by them now than at any time. He leaped down and scuttled into the bushes in a moment.

"Hullo!" shouted one of the men of the hunting party. "A breakdown?"

Then another hunter heard a fast-approaching car, and uttered a cry of warning:

"Look out for the dogs! Here's another of those plaguy autos."

Billy was aware, from his place of concealment, that the three robbers were extremely busy men. They soon had a lantern beside the burst tire, and tools spread about the road. George and the wounded one were jacking up the car so as to get off the old tire and replace it with a new one.

With a sudden shout, the leader of the trio of robbers left the car and bounded toward the 'coon tree. He passed Billy so near that the boy shrank back with an affrighted cry. He thought he had been discovered.

But the man did not stop for Billy Speedwell. Indeed, he probably did not hear the lad's cry. He had seen the lights of the pursuing automobile at the turn in the road.

He dashed in among the hunters who, with their flaring torches and lanterns and dogs, were gathered about the tree in which the 'coon had taken refuge. The man with the axe had already cut

half through the tall trunk.

Without a word, but giving the axeman a strong push to one side, the leader of the thieves seized the axe, wrenching it from the other's hands. Then, with mighty blows, he set upon the work of felling the tree. The hunters were amazed. They did not know whether it was a joke, or not. But suddenly one observed the object of the stranger.

"Look out, there!" he cried. "You'll have that tree down across the road."

And, even as he spoke, with the second motor car still some rods away, and slowing down, the event he had prophesied occurred! With a crash the tree fell. The motor rascal was an excellent woodsman. He had known just how to slant his axe to make the tree fall in the right direction.

As it came down to earth the yelping dogs made a dash for the 'coon, and for some moments there was a lively scrimmage in the brush across the highway; but nobody had paid any attention to this event.

The pursuing car stopped in bare season to escape collision with the fallen tree. It had been completely blocked from further pursuit.

"Stop them! Hold them!" shouted Mr. Briggs and Mr. Armitage.

"Are you there, Billy?" yelled Dan Speedwell.

The leader of the party in the first maroon car leaped back toward that crippled machine. At the moment one of his mates whistled a shrill signal, while George, the chauffeur, shouted:

"All ready! We're off!"

Mr. Polk, as well as several of the hunters, made for the man. He eluded them with ease, sprang into the middle of the road, and sprinted for the forward car. There was only Billy Speedwell between him and escape.

A FAILURE AND A SUCCESS

But Billy was a factor to be counted on. There was peril in any attempt to halt the leader of the bank robbers. The lad knew that well enough. He would have tackled either of the others with a better liking for the job; he knew them to be less desperate.

He shot out of the shadow of the bushes, still on hands and knees, and threw his body across the track of the running man. The fellow could neither dodge, nor overleap the boy; the latter had timed his intervention too well. So he tripped upon Billy, and sprawled like a huge frog in the roadway.

Billy was not hurt. He sprang up, saw that his antagonist was down, and immediately jumped upon his back, shouting:

"Come on! Come on! I've got him! Help!"

The fellow struggled to get up. He was able to lift the boy's weight with ease. In half a minute Billy knew he would be shaken off. Why didn't some of those 'coon hunters take a hand in the proceedings?

Billy heard the sound of running feet behind him; but it was a long way behind. Then came an answering shout from Dan:

"Hold to him, Billy! Hang to him!"

Billy did his best. But he was light weight for the leader of the motor-robbers. That individual got to his feet, reached behind him, and shoved the lad loose, pushing him far from him upon the road.

Fortunately he did not stay to punish the boy, but bounded on. Dan was beside his brother in a moment, leaning over him and seizing Billy's shoulder in an anxious grip.

"You're not hurt, Billy? Say you're not hurt?" he cried. "Did that man——"

"Oh, ouch!" gasped the younger boy, getting his breath. "Never mind me! Get him, Dan!"

But with a loud blast the robbers' automobile shot ahead. They were off.

Mr. Briggs wanted to run back and take the Speedwells home; but there was a path through the woods right here to their house, and the boys refused to cause any trouble. The hunters cut up the tree and cleared the roadway so that the maroon car could go on; but the automobile driven by the men who had robbed Mr. Sudds and the bank was then far, far out of reach.

Everywhere in town there was talk of the robbers. Mr. Sudds had lost anywhere from ten to a hundred thousand dollars' worth of jewelry, so gossip said. But the Speedwell boys did not add to it, although they might have told some interesting particulars of the robbery and how the thieves had gotten away.

Josiah Somes, having been able to do nothing but annoy Mr. Briggs and his friends, was discreetly silent regarding the telephone message he had received from Rebo's garage at Upton Falls. So nobody stopped Dan, or Billy, to ask them about the midnight race of the automobiles.

The boys hurried home and begged permission to remain away from classes that morning. They would make the time up on their lessons later; it was quite important that they should get the car out of the tree before further trouble ensued. Billy's motorcycle was hidden down there on the river road, too.

The brothers got the new post Dan cut at midnight, and another stick for the arm of the derrick, hurried to the place, and raised a new lifting apparatus. The auto and the motorcycle were both safe, nor did anybody come to trouble them while they worked.

There was a steep path down to the shore of the river, and up this Billy lugged the tangle of rope and chain, with the hoisting tackle, that had fallen with the derrick when their enemy had cast the apparatus over the precipice.

Meanwhile, Dan dug a hole for the new post, and it was set up, and the derrick re-rigged. It was Billy who climbed down to the overturned auto again. He fastened it in a strong sling, brought the ends of the rope in a loop over it, and hooked the falls into it, which Dan pulled taut.

The latter had already unhitched the horses from the wagon, and now had them rigged to the second pulley, ready to start the weight of the wrecked car out of the tree. Billy refused to come up.

"I must see her start, Dan. Perhaps something will catch—we mustn't break or mar it any more than possible," declared Billy, quite nervously.

"Look out for yourself, old man," Dan returned, and then spoke to the horses.

Bob and Betty strained to their collars; the rope taunted; the motor car began to squeak and the tree branches to rustle.

"She's coming!" yelled Billy.

He stood on a limb, clinging to another with one hand. The car started, stuck a little, and then came loose with so sudden a jerk that the bulk of it was dashed against the boy!

"Whoa!" cried Dan; and it was well he stopped the team. Billy was flung off his unstable footing; but he had presence of mind enough to seize the car itself, and so hung on, his body swinging with the auto.

"Are you all right, Billy?" demanded Dan, anxiously.

"Right—oh!" returned the younger boy. "Let her go! I'm coming up with her."

And he did. In five minutes the scratched automobile was hoisted out of the gulf, and the boys worked it over the farm wagon body. Upon that they lowered it carefully.

It was safe! And as far as Billy and Dan could see, it was not much damaged—not materially so, at least.

They dismantled the derrick and let the posts fall over the cliff, with those that had been cut down in the night. Then Billy went down below again and got the fisherman to help him up the path with the cushions and the rest of the automobile outfit, Dan meanwhile filling up the holes in the bank, and replacing the turf.

Everything once loaded on the wagon, the boys drove away. In passing through the town several people remarked upon the condition of the wrecked vehicle which the boys had purchased of Maxey Solomons, and more than one intimated that the Speedwells had spent their good money for something that neither they—nor anybody else—could make use of!

The boys knew that they would have to take the wrecked car to the Darringford shops to have it rebuilt and put in running order; but first they wished to assemble the parts as well as they could in their own workshop. Upside down as the car lay, Dan and Billy could see several bad breaks in the mechanism. The boys were not altogether sure that they would be able to put the wrecked car into good condition with the five hundred dollars that remained of their savings-bank hoard. But they said nothing to each other regarding these doubts.

SECRET SERVICE

Mr. Speedwell possessed some little ingenuity in mechanics himself, and perhaps Dan had inherited his taste for the same study. The boys knew they had a hard task before them when, on getting the wrecked car out of the farm wagon, they turned it over and ran it in upon the shop floor. Their father's opinion was anxiously awaited by the brothers.

He was not a man who grew enthusiastic without cause, and was slow in forming his judgment. It was not until he had been able to thoroughly go over the wrecked car that he told Dan and Billy what he thought of their bargain.

"If we had the tools here, we three could put that car in as good condition as she was when she came from the shop," he finally said, wiping his hands on a bit of waste. "As she stands she is worth three times what you gave for her, I am sure. And after we have made all the repairs we can make, the expense of putting her in first-class shape and repainting her—if you are content with a plain warship drab color—ought not to be above seventy-five dollars."

"Bully!" shouted Billy, flinging his cap into the air.

"And can you help us at once, Dad?" asked Dan, eagerly. "We want to enter for that thousand mile endurance test if we can. It will come in Thanksgiving week, and we sha'n't have to miss school."

"I will go to work on it this very day," returned Mr. Speedwell, smiling at their enthusiasm.

But he pointed out again that there would be many things besides the repainting of the car that they could not do. And so, after school the next afternoon, Dan and Billy went over to the Darringford shops to see what kind of an arrangement they could make for the repair of the drab car.

The boys had a friend in Mr. Robert Darringford, who was really the head of the concern; but they did not wish to seem to ask a favor of him, so went directly to the overseer of the department in which the wrecked car would have to be repaired. This overseer was the father of one of their fellow-club members, "Biff" Hardy, and Biff himself worked in the shop.

"Fred was telling me about the car you boys got hold of," said Mr. Hardy. "I guess he knows something about it, and he saw it in the tree."

"What does he say?" asked Billy, quickly.

"Says we can fix it up like new."

"And you can do it at once?"

"Don't see any reason why we shouldn't. Of course, Mr. Avery can tell you better than I," said the foreman.

Dan and Billy looked doubtfully at each other. They did not like to ask any favor of the superintendent of the shops, for Francis Avery, Chanceford's brother, was not their friend.

"You know of nothing now that will be ahead of our job?" asked Dan, gravely.

"Not a thing. I was just going over the order book. There is very little outside repairing to be done just now."

"Then, if we get the machine down here to-morrow it's likely that you can go right to work on it?"

"Guess so," said Mr. Hardy, confidently.

As they walked up town the brothers chanced to pass the Farmers' National Bank. Through the barred window Mr. Baird, the cashier, saw them, and beckoned them to enter.

"Boys, I have a very serious proposal to make you," the cashier said. "We have just had a conference with Mr. Briggs, one of our big depositors. He has told us of the race he had with the car of those robbers who broke into Mr. Sudds' house, and whom we are sure are the same that robbed this bank."

"And I am positive they are the same men," said Dan.

"Me, too," agreed Billy. "And they've got some automobile! It's as good a car as Mr. Briggs' new one."

"Well, as to that I cannot say," returned the cashier. "But Mr. Briggs has told us of the connection of you two brothers with the thieves, and he has put a thought into my mind."

"And that is?" asked Dan, seriously.

"That you boys—at least, Billy, here—will be able to recognize and identify those robbers."

"I should say I would!" declared Billy. "At least, the fellow who bosses them, and the man who was wounded at Mr. Sudds', were both without masks or goggles for part of the time. I'd know them anywhere. And the chauffeur, George, I believe I should know by his figure."

"I couldn't be sure myself," said Dan, doubtfully. "I made a mistake in that matter of identification once. I took Henri, Mr. Briggs' own chauffeur, for one of the thieves."

"Well, we will say, then, that Billy is the only one who can positively identify the men; but you both know the car."

"If I ever see one like it it will either be the robbers' car or Mr. Briggs'," laughed Dan. "They can't spring a third one on me."

"Well. You see what I am getting at," said Mr. Baird, impressively. "It is in your power to aid the bank. I understand that you boys have bought a motor car?"

"Yes, sir."

"And you will be riding around the country in it a good deal."

"We hope to," declared the brothers, in chorus.

"Then, it is my firm belief, boys, that you will some day run up against those three men, either with or without the maroon car," declared Mr. Baird, impressively.

"Oh, do you think so?" cried Dan.

"They have been successful in at least two robberies. Of course, the whole county—half the state,

indeed—is awake to their actions now, and they will have to keep quiet for a while. But, having been so successful in this manner of work—this automobile-highway robbery—they will wish to try it again.”

“That seems reasonable,” admitted Dan.

“And if we could only find them!” cried Billy.

“That is the idea,” said Mr. Baird. “If you find them, bring about their arrest. The bank will back you up in it, no matter how much it costs, in time, trouble, or money. And, boys, you will lose nothing yourselves if you bring about the arrest of the thieves.”

The Speedwells went forth considerably excited. “I tell you, Dan!” Billy whispered, “wouldn’t it be great if we came across those three rascals?”

“It would give me a whole lot of satisfaction to see them put where the dogs wouldn’t bite them!” agreed the older boy. “But I’d like to have their car.”

“Do you suppose it is a Postlethwaite, like Mr. Briggs’?” asked Billy.

“It’s a six-cylinder car without doubt, and looks enough like Mr. Briggs’ to be own sister to it. Hullo! Here’s Burton Poole and his car,” Dan added.

“Come along!” said Billy, shortly. “Chance Avery is with him. I could give that fellow a piece of my mind.”

“It wouldn’t do any good,” admonished Dan. “We don’t know that he chopped down our derrick.”

“Well, I’m pretty sure. Who else would be mean enough? We haven’t many enemies, I hope.”

“No. Hullo, Burton!”

The car Dan had mentioned came to a halt right beside the Speedwell boys, and its owner hailed Dan. Therefore the latter had to speak. Chance Avery, who was driving it, had shut off the power, and now he got down and took out the gasoline can. They were all in front of Appleyard’s store.

“I hear you got Maxey’s car out of the tree, all hunky-dory,” said Burton, heartily, “and I’m glad of it.”

“You don’t suppose your partner will offer us his congratulations; do you?” asked Billy, significantly, as Chance went off, scowling, to buy gasoline.

“Oh, well, he has a grouch,” laughed Burton Poole. “But, he’s making this old car hum! I never could get such speed out of her.”

“You don’t give her enough attention,” laughed Dan, as Burton got out lazily, and opened the gasoline tank.

“Never mind; I add weight to her when we’re racing,” chuckled Poole.

He turned carelessly away from the open tank as he spoke and suddenly spied a youngster standing on the curb—a little fellow of not more than ten years with a lighted cigarette stuck in his mouth! Poole suddenly grew angry.

“Ted Berry! What are you smoking that thing for?” he demanded, sharply.

Little Berry was Burton’s nephew, and in spite of Burton’s haughtiness and laziness, he was rather a decent fellow, and took an elder-brotherly interest in his sister’s boy.

“G’wan!” returned Teddy Berry, who had begun to run with a pretty rough set of youngsters, and resented his young uncle’s interference. “You didn’t pay for this smoke.”

“Let me get my hands on you!” began Burton, in wrath, leaping for the saucy little fellow.

Ted, however, was as elusive as an eel. He dodged under Burton’s arm and would have got away had he not slid on the mud in the gutter, right behind the automobile.

“Now I’ve got you!” cried Burton, leaping again and catching the little fellow by the shoulder.

Ted had withdrawn the cigarette from his mouth. It was in his hand as his uncle grabbed him. The next instant it flashed through the air—both Dan and Billy saw it—and there sounded a deafening explosion and a tongue of flame leaped from the auto’s gasoline tank!

INGRATITUDE OF CHANCE AVERY

There had been enough gasoline—rather, enough of the vapor—left in the tank to ignite the instant the lighted cigarette fell into it. And the flames spread with surprising rapidity.

A crowd ran toward the square, where the auto stood; but nobody seemed to know at first what to do. Some shouted for water, others merely yelled "Fire! Fire!" at the top of their voices. And one fleet-footed youngster made for the hose house, intending to arouse the volunteer firemen.

Burton Poole let his small nephew escape and turned with a startled visage toward his car. Chance Avery had heard the explosion, too, and dashed out of Appleyard's store to see the car burst into flames. He grabbed a pail of water from a man who was running with it, and was about to dash the fluid upon the flames when Dan Speedwell shouted to him to stop.

"Not water, Avery! You'll only make it spread!" cried Speedwell. "Here, Billy! Get me that shovel."

Billy obeyed on the instant. The shovel was in the idle hands of a laborer—a man who did not know enough to use it in this emergency.

There was a heap of sand in front of Appleyard's, where the cement walk was being repaired. Dan seized the shovel from his brother, and began heaving the sand in a shower upon the blazing car.

Wherever the sand landed the fire was snuffed out. A well aimed shovelful quenched the flames which flared from the opening of the tank. In a very few moments every spark was out—and thanks to Dan Speedwell, and to Dan alone.

But only one of the partners thanked Dan. Burton Poole wrung his hand and clapped him on the shoulder, and told him he was "a good fellow." But Avery kept his face averted and examined the damage done to the automobile with lowering brow.

"It will have to go to the shop," growled Chance, and would say no more.

Dan and Billy went home on their motorcycles and found that already Mr. Speedwell had put in several hours upon the auto. They were able to hitch Bob and Betty to a truck and drag the car, on its own wheels, down to the Darringford shops. There they delivered it to Mr. Hardy with the expectation that in a day or two, at the latest, they would be riding in their own machine.

They were busy making up lost recitations for several days. And when they went down to the shops to inquire about the machine they found nothing done to it. A big rush of extra work was on, they were informed. The repair gang couldn't get at the drab racer.

This began to bother the Speedwells after they had called twice and found nothing done. Then they saw Chance Avery and Burton Poole running about town again in their machine. It had been repaired, and repainted, and was as bright as though new.

The brothers noticed this fact about Burton Poole's machine one evening when they attended a business and social meeting of the Riverdale Outing Club. Chance Avery, who was still president and captain of the club, despite his unpopularity with the majority of the members, seemed to feel amused on this evening whenever he looked at Dan or Billy Speedwell.

During the social hour Jim Stetson and his sister, Ruth, invited a few friends to run up to their uncle's cottage at Karnac Lake. The last time the Stetsons had had a party at the lodge it was something of a failure because of certain incidents that attended the run.

"We certainly are not going to chance the risk of being chased by elks and letting Mildred get lost in the Big Swamp," chattered Ruth, with her arm around the waist of the doctor's daughter. "We're going in cars. The Greenes will go, and we depend upon you, Burton, to bring a part of the crowd. And let's see—oh, yes, you, Dan Speedwell! You and Billy have a car?"

"So we suppose," returned Dan, rather ruefully. "It's being put in shape now; but your party isn't until next week Friday, is it?"

"That is the time," said Ruth Stetson. "I am going to ask you to bring Milly here, and Lettie Parker, and Kate O'Brien and Maybell Turner, beside two of the boys. Can you do it?"

"Why, the car will hold that number," said Dan, quietly. "I think we shall not fail you."

Chance lounged near, with his hands in his pockets and there was a sneering smile on his face.

"Aren't you counting chickens before they're hatched, Speedwell?" he suggested. "You don't know whether that broken-down car of yours is going to run at all, do you?"

"Oh, I guess she will be all right when they get through with her down at Darringfords," returned Dan, easily.

"That car will never be fixed in those shops," remarked Chance.

"Who says so?" demanded Billy, hotly.

"I say so," snarled Chance. "I know all about it. The car isn't worth repairing in the first place. It's too badly wrecked. You Speedwells might as well go down and take your ramshackle old car home again."

"Biff" Hardy caught Dan by the sleeve as he and Billy were going out.

"What is it?" asked the older Speedwell.

"You'd better mark what Chance told you, old man," whispered Hardy.

"What do you mean?" asked Dan, in surprise.

"You just think he's gassin', do you?"

"What else can it be? What has he to do with the Darringford shops?"

"Well, you must admit," said Biff, with a broad grin on his freckled face, "that Frank Avery has something to do with the shops."

"Naturally. He's superintendent."

"And I only know what father said. He's worried about it. Burton Poole's car came in to be repaired and repainted after your car was on the floor. Dad had to drop everything else and fix up

Poole's car. But the Super forbade his touching your machine. It stands right there yet, and Avery says that no more outside repairing can be done for a month."

"Not until after the thousand mile run!" gasped Dan.

A FRIEND IN NEED

The Speedwell boys went home in no very pleasant frame of mind. Heretofore they had experienced sufficient trouble through Chance Avery and his brother to know that the superintendent of the Darringford shops was quite capable of giving Chance great help in his attempt to "get even" with anybody whom he disliked.

And neither Chance nor Francis Avery could ever forgive the Speedwell boys for beating Chance in the manufacturers' motorcycle races held at the Riverdale Baseball Park not long before. Chance had been picked by the superintendent of the Darringford shops to ride a Flying Feather, and carry the colors of the local shops to victory. But at the last moment Dan Speedwell, likewise riding one of the Darringfords' machines, had beaten out the field and left Chance sadly in the rear.

"And they are going to make it impossible—if they can—for us to do anything to Chance and Burton in this endurance test of autos that Mr. Briggs is financing," grumbled Billy. "Oh, pshaw, Dan! What makes folks so mean?"

"I don't know. We'll ask Doc Bugs," laughed Dan, referring to one of the academy instructors who was very much inclined to harp upon the microbe theory, and bacilli. "There's something mean got into Chance, and his brother's caught it. That's all I know about it."

"But we're not going to let them beat us so easy," growled Billy.

"Not so's you'd notice it," agreed the older brother.

"What will we do?"

"First we'll go over to the shops to-morrow and find out just where we stand."

"But if they won't fix the auto there, what will we do? We can't cart the machine clear to Compton, and it would cost a mint of money to have men from the manufacturing plant come here to make repairs."

"We'll see," said Dan. "Let's sleep over it."

That was like Dan; he always thought a thing out by himself. Billy, more impulsive and ready to discuss a point, found his brother sometimes exasperating. It kept him "guessing," he complained; he never knew just what Dan would finally do.

He was not surprised, however, the next afternoon after the second session, that Dan should head for the Darringford shops instead of taking wheel for home. They came to the small gate in the stockade-fence that surrounded the machine shops, spoke to the gate-keeper, and went in to the repair department. When Mr. Hardy saw them in the doorway he looked slightly discomposed. In truth his somewhat smutted face changed color.

"Sorry, boys," he said, hurrying toward them; "we haven't had a chance to touch your machine yet. Hurried to death."

"Of course, your outside jobs take their regular turn, don't they, Mr. Hardy?" asked Dan, smoothly.

"Oh, of course! Er—that is—it's the general rule."

"Then no other outside job has been put in ahead of ours?"

"Why—now—"

"What do those fellows want?" asked a sharp voice suddenly, and Dan and Billy turned to see the superintendent of the shops eyeing them with disfavor.

Mr. Hardy waved the boys toward Mr. Avery.

"You'll have to talk to him, boys," he said. "I haven't anything to do with it."

"What are they bothering you about, Hardy?" demanded the superintendent.

"We have been waiting some days for our automobile to be fixed, Mr. Avery," said Dan, firmly.

"And you'll wait a few days longer, I guess," said the man, unpleasantly.

"But we are in a hurry, and the understanding was—"

"With whom did you have any understanding when you brought that car here?" interrupted Avery.

"Mr. Hardy."

"And if he told you that he could put aside our regular work for outside jobs, he overstepped his bounds."

"He told us nothing of the kind," said Dan, quickly. "He only said our car should have precedence over other outside work that might come in."

"Well, it will," said Avery, with a laugh.

"It hasn't," exclaimed Dan, sharply.

"What's that?"

"Since our machine was brought here Burton Poole's has been repaired and repainted. Ours hasn't been touched."

"Look here, young saucebox!" exclaimed Avery, in a passion, "Who told you to come here and tell me my business? Your car will wait its turn—"

"You gave its turn to Poole's car," declared Dan, stubbornly. "You know you did. You do not mean that our car shall be repaired."

Somebody had stopped quietly behind them. A stern voice said:

"What's the matter, Avery?"

"Mr. Robert!" exclaimed Billy.

Robert Darringford stood there, his automobile coat thrown back, his Norfolk jacket unbelted, and cap and goggles pushed back from his pleasant face. He was just drawing off his gauntlets.

"What's the matter, Mr. Avery?" he repeated, as the flaming face of the superintendent was turned toward him.

"These young rascals have become impudent!" declared the superintendent. "I've told you before,

Mr. Robert, that I consider your attitude toward these Speedwells as utterly wrong——”

“Come, come,” said the younger Darringford, good-naturedly enough, yet with a tone of voice that halted Avery in his headlong speech. “Let’s get at the trouble. Of course, Dan and Billy are my friends. I have told you that several times.”

“And they presume upon your notice of them,” declared the superintendent. “Your undignified treatment of them gives them a license which they abuse.”

“And how have they abused my kindness now?” queried Darringford, gravely.

“They have brought us an old, ramshackle car here to be patched up. You know Hardy’s department is working overtime. All outside work must take its chance. We cannot do this now.”

“And the boys are impatient, are they?” demanded Darringford, smiling, however, quite kindly upon Dan and Billy.

“When we brought our car here, the shop was not so busy,” said Dan, interrupting. “Mr. Avery knows that. He has had a car repaired here since ours has stood on the floor.”

“How is this, Avery?” asked Mr. Robert, sharply.

“The boy tells an untruth,” snapped the other. Then, thinking better of it, he added: “Or, at least, I know nothing about it. I only know that Burton Poole had a machine here to be fixed, and I ordered Hardy to get it out of the way.”

“And why not this one?” queried Mr. Robert, pointing to the drab car.

“Well——”

“Chance is driving Poole’s car, isn’t he?” asked Mr. Robert, with marked emphasis.

“Well, sir! You know yourself we are over-driven here!” cried Avery, in despair of clearing his skirts completely of the ugly charge of favoritism.

“Quite true. We will excuse you, Mr. Avery. I will attend to the Speedwells’ car,” said the young proprietor of the shops.

He turned his back on his superintendent—not without a little bow, however—and said pleasantly to Dan:

“Now, young man, as spokesman for you and your brother, tell me how you came in possession of a Breton-Melville car, this year’s type, racing rig, and apparently one that has been misused, at that?”

Dan laughed. Mr. Robert’s keen eye was not to be mistaken. One would not have thought that he had more than glanced casually at the wreck of Maxey Solomons’ automobile.

But between them (for Billy was bound to put in a word here and there) the Speedwells told him of their good fortune in obtaining possession of the wrecked car. Mr. Robert grew more and more interested. He began to take off his coat, and his cap and auto-goggles followed. Mr. Avery waited in the near distance, covertly watching the “young boss.”

“It’s a great chance for you, boys!” declared Mr. Robert. “Why, do you know, I’m going to enter for Briggs’ endurance test myself. I believe I’ve got a car that can even beat out a Breton-Melville,” and his eyes twinkled. “But it would be too bad if your car wasn’t ready in time, so that we could find out just how good a machine it is.”

“We mean to get it repaired somehow,” said Dan, firmly. “If not here——”

“And why not here?” demanded Mr. Robert. He glanced quickly around and began to strip off his Norfolk jacket. “Hey, Hardy! Have you got an extra suit of overalls anywhere about? I want ‘em.”

“Sure, Mr. Robert,” declared the foreman, coming briskly forward.

“What Mr. Avery says is quite true, boys,” declared young Darringford, seriously. “This department is driven to death. But then—I’m sort of an outsider and I’m not driven to death. I’m going to shuck my coat, and get into these duds—that’s it, Hardy! thank you—and then we’ll see what is the matter with the vitals of that machine. Mr. Avery,” he added, with a humorous twist of his lips, “won’t mind if I use the tools here to repair your machine. I am rather a privileged character myself about the shops. But you know, Dan and Billy, we always back up our foremen and superintendent; and it is quite true that the men are too busy to do your work at present.”

ON THE ROAD TO KARNAC LAKE

The Speedwell boys could have imagined no better outcome of this affair. Yet they were both too independent to have courted Mr. Robert's attention and complained to him of the unfair treatment they had received at the hands of the superintendent of the shops.

As for the car itself, the boys knew very well that they could leave their Breton-Melville in no better hands. Mr. Robert, though college-bred, had put on overalls and worked every summer in the shops since he was fifteen years of age. He was a finished mechanic. That is why his men respected and liked him so much.

Dan and Billy retired, full of glee over the turn matters had taken. Their car would be put in order—in first-class order—and they need have no fear but that the work would be done promptly. In fact, the first of the week Mr. Robert sent word to them that they could take the car home.

They settled their bill at the office like any other customer, and it was no small one. They doubted if Mr. Robert had charged them much for his own time; but the repairs cost over eighty dollars. When they ran the car out of the yard the enamel paint was scarcely dry. But the mechanism worked like that of a fine watch!

Were they proud as they sped swiftly through the Riverdale streets? Well!

There was nothing beautiful about the drab car, saving her lines. She was neither a touring car nor one built for show. But Mr. Robert had assured them that he had never gone over and assembled the parts of a finer piece of auto work than this same Breton-Melville car.

"I shall have to look out for my own laurels, I very well see," laughed the acting head of the Darringford shops. "And Mr. Briggs himself will have to get the best there is out of his Postlethwaite if he expects to beat you boys in that endurance test."

So Dan and Billy had reason for feeling proud of their car, although it had few of the attractive qualities of the usual auto. It was plainly furnished, and there was not so much brass work as on most cars. As it sped along, to the observer from the sidewalk it had the appearance of being stripped down to the very skeleton of a car.

The Stetson's run to Karnac Lake was arranged for Friday afternoon, immediately after the close of classes. Dan and Billy were hard-working boys, both in school and on the dairy farm; they had to arrange their schedule, as Billy said, with considerable care to be able to accompany their friends on this run to the cottage in the woods.

Karnac Lake was a beautiful spot, some fifty miles up the river, and the road was a good automobile path all the way. Burton Poole and Chance Avery were boasting of having "done it" in an hour and a half.

"If they can do it in that time, in that machine of Burton's," declared Dan Speedwell, after they had tried out their Breton-Melville car for two evenings along the county pike, "we can do as well. Take my word for it, Billy."

"I believe you," agreed his brother.

"Then we won't leave it all for dad to do on Saturday morning," Dan said. "We can run back, help him milk, take our routes as usual, and then race back to Karnac and get there by mid-forenoon again."

"Agreed!" said Billy. "I wish we had motor-wagons to use in distributing the milk, anyway. Wouldn't that be a great scheme?"

"All to the good. But one motor-wagon would do it. We could get over both routes in less time than it takes us to deliver one route with a horse."

"It's us for a motor-truck, then," cried Billy.

"I've got a scheme," said Dan, slowly. "Maybe it won't work; and then again——"

"What is it?" asked Billy, eagerly.

"I don't know as I'll tell you just yet," said Dan, grinning at him.

And just then something called Billy away—some duty or other—and he forgot later to ask Dan to explain his tantalizing statement.

The Speedwells made their preparations well in advance, and between sessions Friday noon ran home on their Flying Feathers and came back to town in their Breton-Melville car. They backed it into Holliday's garage, where it would come to no harm during the afternoon, and as soon as school was over they ran to the garage, filled up their tank, strapped a spare five gallon can of gasoline on the running board, as well as a pair of extra tires (that had cost them a pretty penny) in their enamel-cloth covers, and ran out on the street.

Dan guided the car around to Mildred's house, where the girls and boys who were to ride with them had agreed to assemble. The doctor's daughter with Lettie and Kate and Maybell were already there and Wiley Moyle and young Fisher Greene soon arrived. Fisher was always being crowded out of the auto belonging to his family; but he had objected so strenuously on this occasion that room had to be found in one of the machines and he had elected to come with the Speedwells, for he and Billy were pretty good chums.

Fisher sat beside Dan on the front seat; four of the party squeezed into the rear of the tonneau and the remaining two—Wiley Moyle and Katie O'Brien—faced the latter quartette. They were comfortably seated, their possessions stowed away, and Dan ran the car out into the Court House square just as the clock in the tower struck four.

They had not long to wait for the rest of the party. Chance Avery shot the Poole car into the square from a by-street, narrowly escaped running over Rover, Mr. Appleyard's old dog, and very much frightened old lady Massey, who was about to cross the street. And he brought the car to an abrupt stop with a grin on his face, while his open muffler allowed the exhaust to deafen the whole

neighborhood.

"For pity's sake, close that muffler, Chance!" shouted Monroe Stevens, who was riding in the Greene's car, and which now came into sight with Perry Greene at the wheel. "We can't hear ourselves talk."

"I hope the Town Council puts a stop to that," declared Fisher Greene, in the Speedwell car.

"Puts a stop to what, young fellow?" demanded Chance Avery, in no pleasant tone.

"They're going to fine those automobilists who run through the streets with their mufflers open," said Fisher. "Just to show off, you know—make other folks notice that there's an auto running by. It's a good deal like little Ted Berry smoking cigarettes. It makes him sick, and his uncle punishes him for it; but Ted thinks it's making a man of him. I reckon that would-be chauffeurs who run with their mufflers open, figure it out the same as Teddy."

Everybody laughed but Chance; he only scowled and demanded of Jim Stetson:

"Well, are you folks ready?"

"All right, girls?" asked the master of ceremonies, standing up in the Greenes' car.

Even Lettie Parker had forgotten that she was seated beside Billy and Mildred in the tonneau of the smallest and least showy of the equipages. They were all so anxious to be off.

"Do go on, boys!" cried Miss Parker. "And, oh dear me! I do want you to get outside of town where you can race. I never did go fast enough yet in an automobile."

"Lettie's fairly gone on autos," drawled Billy. "And if she ever gets a machine of her own——"

"Which I intend to do some day, Mr. Smartie!" cried the bronze-haired girl.

"Oh, I believe you!" responded Billy, who was nothing if not a tease. "And then we'll see her riding around town with her nose in the air—worse than even Nature ever intended," he added, with a sly glance at the tip of Miss Parker's pretty nose, which really was a little tip-tilted!

"All right for you, Billy Speedwell," Miss Parker declared. "You shall never ride in my car when I do get it."

"No. I sha'n't want to. I'd rather be somewhere up near the head of the procession," said the teasing Billy.

"Say!" cried Lettie, in a heat, "you don't call this being at the head of the procession, do you? We're number three, all right, and there are none to follow."

"Run her up a little, Dannie!" begged Wiley Moyle. "That Chance Avery is pulling ahead as though he was already running for the golden cup."

"I didn't know this was to be a motor race," laughed Dan, quietly putting the lever up a notch. "I thought we were out for pleasure."

"Well, it's no pleasure to be behind everybody else, and taking their dust," complained Lettie Parker.

"Be careful, Dan, no matter what they say to you," said Mildred Kent, warningly, in her quiet way. "You know, our mothers all expect us to get safely home again."

The Greene automobile, which was a heavy, practical family touring car, was being put to its best pace. Chance Avery was running away from the party, being already half a mile, or more, ahead of the Greenes.

Dan's advancing the speed lever was not noticeable in the throbbing or jar of the car; the Breton-Melville was one of the quietest-running automobiles in the market. And this speed was nothing to it—as yet.

But in a very few moments they were running directly behind the heavy car of the Greenes. The dust was choking.

"Oh, do get out of the wake of that old lumber wagon!" cried Lettie, not very politely. "This dust will smother us."

"And you wouldn't be contented to run far enough behind to escape the worst of it," grunted Billy.

"Well, Billy Speedwell!" snapped the council clerk's daughter, "there's only one comfortable place in an automobile run—I see that plainly."

"Where's that?" asked the innocent Billy.

"A place in the first car," returned Lettie. "Let the other people have your dust."

Suddenly the girls uttered a startled and chorused "Oh, my!" Dan Speedwell had sheered the car to the left, it darted ahead as though suddenly shot from a gun, and in a flash had rounded and left behind the heavy touring car, and they were running second.

"Oh, Dannie!" gasped Mildred. "How did you do it?"

"Perry must have run backwards," grunted Billy, with scorn. "Of course! We can't get any speed out of this old wreck of a car. Ha! shoot it to them, Dan!"

The Breton-Melville was humming like a huge top. The road flowed away beneath the wheels as though it traveled on a great spool in the direction opposite to their flight. The girls caught their breaths and held on with both hands.

In half a minute, it seemed, Dan had brought his car up till it was nosing the rear of Burton Poole's automobile. Wiley Moyle uttered a startled cry:

"What you going to do, Dan? Jump her?"

AN EXCITING RUN

Wiley had shouted the joke so loudly that those in the forward car heard him, and it was repeated to Chance Avery. As Dan swerved to the left a bit, preparatory to running out beside Burton Poole's car, Chance glanced around. They could not see him scowl, for his mask and goggles covered his face.

But it was plain that the captain of the Riverdale Club was not going to be beaten so easily. He forced the Poole car ahead, and Dan immediately gave up all intention of passing the first automobile.

"Go to it, boy!" shouted Fisher Greene. "Show 'em what's in this car."

"No," said Dan, easily. "We're not out for a race, but for a pleasant run."

"You're afraid!" mocked Wiley.

"Perhaps," returned Dan, cheerfully.

Even Billy kept his temper and grinned at the gibes of Wiley and Fisher. The Breton-Melville car had shown what she could do for a few moments, and that satisfied Billy, as it did his brother. The Speedwells knew that of the three cars, their drab machine was running the smoothest, with less cost, and was as easily governed as any.

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They ran on for the rest of the distance to Karnac Lake in the same order, letting Chance, in the Poole car, keep the lead, while the Speedwell and Greene machines ran close together and the occupants were sociable.

They arrived at Stetson Lodge, as the lake cottage was called, in ample season to remove the dust of the journey, and become acquainted with other folk of the cottage colony invited in for supper. It was a merry evening for all, the Stetsons being people who knew very well how to make their guests feel at home.

At eleven o'clock, or a little later, the party broke up. The neighboring guests went home and the members of the party sought their several rooms. Dan and Billy had already explained to Jim Stetson that they intended to run home in their car and return soon after breakfast, or even before, Saturday morning.

"You can't do it, fellows," said Jim, as he went out with them, and held the lantern while they ran the drab car out from under the shed and lit the lamps, both fore and aft. "Fifty miles each way—huh! something will happen to the machine as sure as shooting."

"If she can't run a hundred miles in twelve hours without going to the repair shop," snorted Billy, "there isn't much use in our entering for the thousand mile run."

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"You're right there, Billy-boy," said Dan, as he cranked up and the engine began to whirr and pop.

"Well, good luck!" exclaimed Jim, as he closed the shed. "We have to keep these doors locked. You see, that M'Kim chap—Harrington M'Kim—is just crazy about automobiles and uncle doesn't know what he might do next. He came over here one day last summer and borrowed uncle's car without saying 'by your leave', and started off with it. They caught him, however, in time."

"What's the matter with him?" asked Billy.

"Why—I'm not sure that there's much the matter with him, if his folks wouldn't watch over him so close and nag him all the time. The poor chap is epileptic——"

"Has fits?"

"Yes. Dreadful ones sometimes. But he'll outgrow them, the doctor says. Only his folks are rich, and they hire maids, and governesses, and tutors and such folk, to watch him all the time. They don't dare have him play like other boys, or with other boys. He's in bad now, I tell you."

"But running an automobile is no job for a fellow who may have a fit at any moment," said Billy.

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"I believe you," said Jim. "Well, you're off!"

"Bye-bye!" shouted Billy, as Dan whirled the car out of the yard. But before they were a mile on the road the brothers changed places. Billy slipped to the wheel and Dan sat beside him.

"Now, youngster!" chuckled Dan, "let's see what you can do to her. We have a clear road before us. Up hill and down dale—just about what we'll have for the thousand mile run. And we've got no weight behind. Let her go!"

The drab car climbed the hill without a break, slid over the summit, and coasted down the other side at a pace which made the brothers stoop to get a breath. Their lights showed a long, clear stretch of road ahead; but when they came to a bend they went around it so quickly that Dan was obliged to fling himself far out from the car on the inner side to keep the tires on the ground. And his weight was barely sufficient for that.

At racing speed they came down into Riverdale. The town was silent and only the street lights winked at them as they roared through the streets and out past Josiah Somes' home. That watchdog of the public welfare was not on hand to stretch his rope for them, and in a very few minutes they ran quietly into their own yard—time from Karnac, one hour and thirteen minutes.

But as soon as the engine had cooled off they had to go over the entire machine, tighten bolts, replace some, clean thoroughly, oil the bearings, and otherwise give the Breton-Melville a thorough grooming.

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"That's all right," said Dan. "She can do fast time—there's no doubt of it. But that isn't the way to win an endurance test of a thousand miles, Billy."

"I expect not," agreed his brother.

"Fast traveling will shake the best car to pieces. And we are not up in the mechanics of the automobile yet—we can't stop anywhere on the road and repair the vitals of our craft, as these professionals do."

"We've got to learn," said Billy, thoughtfully.

"That's the checker! If we are going in for mechanics—motorcycles, motor cars—perhaps, Billy, power boats—"

"Ouch! you're treading on a sore corn," grunted Billy, but with a grin. "I was watching those scooters running up and down the river under the bridge the other day till my tongue fairly hung out of my mouth! My goodness me, Dannie! what couldn't we do with a motor boat—eh?"

"We couldn't plow for corn with it, I reckon," laughed the elder brother. "But it would be fine to own a launch like the *Pedoe*, or the *Mainspring II*."

"And how about John Lovell's *Blue Streak*?" exclaimed Billy. "I saw her on the Fourth. Why, she cut the water like a shark going to dinner!"

"Well, to get back to what I was saying," Dan observed. "If we are going in for these things, we must have some technical training. We can't think of going to school after next year. Father can't afford to send us. But we must get in somewhere—into some shop where we can learn mechanics."

"The Darringford Shops, for instance?" suggested Billy.

"One of us might; but the other ought to take up the electrical branches, I believe."

While they were talking, they were at work upon the body and mechanism of their Breton-Melville. Before it was time to do the usual chores they had put the car in fine shape again, got an hour's nap which did them a world of good, and they were loading up the wagons when their father came out of the house.

"Aren't you boys paying rather dearly for your fun?" he asked, good-naturedly. "I hardly expected you'd get back here. Your mother and I did not hear you come in. And how does the car run?"

"Dandy and good, Dad!" cried Billy, while Dan said:

"Now, there wasn't any need of your getting up so early. We're not going to let you pay for our fun, that's sure. When Billy and I get our schemes to working right, we'll deliver this milk in half the time it takes now—and, naturally, at half the expense."

"Yes," interposed Billy, giggling. "Dan's going to take the bottles around to the customers in a motor launch!"

But Dan only smiled quietly at this. They got off with the milk wagons in good season, and were back betimes, also, and without mishap. Mrs. Speedwell had a good breakfast ready for them, and they ate and were off again in the car at a few minutes past seven o'clock.

The run back to Karnac Lake was a more moderate one than that they had taken at midnight; nevertheless they arrived at the Stetson cottage about nine o'clock. They put their own car into the shed which did service as a garage and found the whole crowd out on the drive along the lakeside—a fine macadamized piece of road sixty feet wide and following the lake shore for nearly ten miles.

Chance Avery had Poole's car out and was driving up and down, "doing stunts," as Wiley Moyle called it.

"Why don't you fellows bring out your bunch of scrap iron and show that chap some fancy running?" Fisher Greene demanded. "Perry won't get our car in the ring. I hate to see Chance Avery always carrying off the honors."

"No," said Dan. "We've just taken fifty miles at a good clip and we'll have to overhaul her again before we go back to-night. Let Chance do his monkey business without any rival."

But the girls thought that Avery was really a remarkable chauffeur. He did handle Burton Poole's car with some dexterity; nevertheless, Dan was quite decided in his own mind that the Poole automobile was by no means as good a machine as their own Breton-Melville.

Burton, however, had his car furnished nicely. There was little wonder that the girls preferred to ride in it. They all became tired after a little while, however, and either joined in, or stood to watch, a doubles' set at tennis. Chance left his car, and joined Mildred Kent beside the tennis court.

Suddenly Jim Stetson began to shout. He was one of the players and had just started service when he dropped ball and racquette and started on a run for the road, yelling:

"Get out of that, Harrington! Drop it!"

At the moment the car began to pop and they all saw it move away from the curb. A slight fellow in a blazer coat, and without a hat, was at the wheel. He was a pasty-faced fellow, thin, unhealthy-looking, and with a pronounced squint in his eyes.

He grinned over his shoulder at Jim, and stuck out his tongue. Meanwhile he put the car up to a good speed and fairly flew away up the drive.

"It's Harrington M'Kim!" cried Ruth Stetson. "Oh, that boy will do some damage to that car!"

"He'll wreck it, or break his own neck," declared Monroe Stevens. "Why did you leave it so it could be started by the first chap that came along, Chance?"

But there was no use in scolding the captain of the Outing Club. Poole's car was sailing up the drive at a pace which made pursuit afoot a futile game.

"Somebody get out another car and give chase!" cried Jim.

"But then Harrington will only run faster," objected his sister.

Suddenly they saw the car describe a graceful curve and return toward them. The reckless youth handled Poole's auto like a veteran.

"We've got a chance to stop him when he comes by," declared Avery.

"How?" sneered Jim Stetson. "He'd run right over you. He wouldn't care. I tell you he doesn't act as though he had good sense."

"What do they let such a fellow go loose for, then?" cried Chance Avery.

As he spoke they were all startled by the change which they saw plainly flash into young Harrington M'Kim's features. His countenance writhed, he fell back in the seat, let go of the wheel and his body was convulsed in the grip of the epileptic seizure. The automobile was running wild!

OFF ON THE ENDURANCE TEST

The boy was a sad sight himself; but the peril which menaced him and—incidentally—Burton Poole's auto, moved some of the onlookers more than did the pitiful condition of young Harrington M'Kim.

The car was rushing down toward the Stetson cottage, which was the last house in the row before the drive turned abruptly away from the lake. At this corner a low wall guarded the path; but the bricks were built up only two feet high, and that wildly running auto would mount the sidewalk and this brick wall, too, and be dashed into the water which here lapped the foot of the embankment.

It was a sad predicament for M'Kim. But to one of those who saw the car flying down the drive, the fate of the machine seemed more important than the fate of the boy!

"Stop it! The car will be wrecked!" yelled Chance Avery, and he fairly danced up and down in his excitement. But he did not make any reckless attempt to halt the career of the automobile.

Fortunately the car had been headed straight down the middle of the road before M'Kim's seizure. It came at fast speed, for the reckless youth had set the gas lever well forward. It swept down upon the horror-stricken group.

It was Dan Speedwell who made the first move. He cleared the sidewalk in three strides and dashed into the road directly in the path of the flying car. The girls screamed again. Mildred Kent called to him.

"Dan! Dannie! You'll be killed!"

And it did seem an utterly reckless and useless thing for Dan to do. He was putting his life in jeopardy, so it seemed, without there being a possibility of his either aiding the boy in the car, or stopping the auto itself.

The writhing figure on the front seat attracted less attention now than did Dan. They saw him stand, unmoved, directly in the track of the car. The heavy machine rolled down upon him and—it seemed—would crush him in an instant.

It was then that Dan Speedwell leaped aside. The automobile flashed by, but Dan was quick enough to catch hold with both hands.

He was whirled off his feet and was dragged for several yards. Then he got a knee upon the run board, then raised himself, slipped to the wheel, and as the car came to the sharp turn, he threw back the lever, cast out the gear, and guided the fast-flying auto so that it would take the bend in the road on a long curve.

It was all over, then. Dan turned the car about and came easily back before his excited friends reached the corner. M'Kim lay still, the paroxysm past. Dan ran the car in toward the curb and halted.

"Dan! you dear fellow, you!" shouted Burton Poole, first to seize his hand. "I suppose I'm selfish to not think more of M'Kim—but the car! You saved it for us."

"You're all right, Dannie," cried his brother, pumping away at his other hand.

Jim and Fisher Greene raised a more or less familiar chant:

"Dan! Dan! He's the man! Dan! Dan! Dan Speedwell!"

They were all shouting the chant in a moment—all but Chance Avery. Chance looked the car over to make sure that it was not injured. But he never gave the lad who had saved it a word of thanks. Friends of M'Kim cared for the unfortunate youth.

The pleasant day by the lake passed without incident after that. They rode home in the evening, a merry party indeed. Mildred Kent elected to sit beside Dan in the front seat. There was a new moon riding above the tree-tops, and the stars were brilliant.

"Dannie," said the girl, laying her friendly hand upon his jacket sleeve, "I want to tell you how proud I am that you stopped that car and saved it from going over the wall. I know Chance Avery has treated you meanly, and it must have taken some effort on your part to jump in and save the car he has boasted is going to beat yours for the golden cup. It was real noble of you—you heaped coals of fire on Avery's head."

But Dan and Billy both had occasion to think a good deal about Burton Poole's automobile before Thanksgiving week came around. Chance Avery allowed no opportunity to pass wherein he could belittle the Speedwells' drab car, or cast doubt upon the possibility of our heroes getting a hundred miles on the trail laid out by Mr. Briggs for the endurance test.

The circulars containing the rules of the road and other information were studied more than the school text books those final few days before the Thanksgiving vacation. Even Dan, who was particularly faithful to his studies, found it hard to keep up to the mark.

He and Billy had bought maps of the states through which they hoped to travel. The course was laid out as a rough triangle, making Compton the starting point and touching two large cities, bringing up finally at Compton again as a finish. The measured distance over the route chosen was exactly a thousand and eight miles.

They knew that they could easily comply with all the demands Mr. Briggs made, and with all the conditions of the race. They had learned by this time the minutest particulars about their car. Either of the Speedwells could have taken the Breton-Melville auto apart and assembled the parts again perfectly.

Among the Riverdale Outing Club members the interest lay in the rivalry between the local cars, more than in the general outcome of the race. There were to be several contestants from the town in the endurance run, but it was generally acknowledged that none of them had much chance—if the result of the run was governed by speed—saving Burton Poole's car and that of the Speedwell boys.

And the owners of the Breton-Melville car knew that the speed possibilities of their auto was only a part of the game. It would never do to race over the roads at the pace they had come from Karnac Lake at midnight. No machine, no matter how well built, could stand many miles of such work without shaking to pieces.

The boys had gone over the route by map, and planned just where they would halt for their meals and for necessary sleep. They had read accounts of former runs, and knew about what to expect on the road. Although the run was well advertised, there would doubtless be many obstructions on the route, and the weather, of course, could not be arranged to suit the contestants.

The rules were that any contestant could run ten hours in each twenty-four—consecutively, not otherwise; time lost on repairs or stoppages beyond the automobilists' control, not allowed. The cars were to be started within ten minutes of each other, and their time would be registered at each station. Stoppages for refreshment, or sleep, had to be reported exactly, too.

One week before the starting of the race there were entered sixty-five cars in the endurance test. Then came the drawings, and Dan and Billy found themselves to be forty-eighth on the list. The first car would be started out of the Compton Motordrome at four o'clock in the morning, and, allowing ten minutes for each car to get under way, the Speedwell boys would not be sent out until ten minutes before noon. Their first day's run, therefore, would end at ten minutes to ten at night.

The rules allowed them to make the nearest station at the end of a day's run; but any extra time had to be subtracted from the following day's schedule. It was a much discussed question as to how long it would take the best car to get over the route under Mr. Briggs' rules; Dan and Billy believed that it would take between four and five days.

"Twenty miles an hour, on an average, will be mighty good time," Dan said to his brother. "Of course, we read about sixty, and seventy, and eighty and even ninety and more miles an hour, in automobile racing. We've traveled at the rate of ninety miles on our motorcycles—for a mile, or so. But that isn't what counts."

"Just the same, if a fellow could get ahead and keep his lead—" began Billy.

"Yes! Keeping it is what counts. But if any of these fellows start racing over the sort of roads there are between Greenbaugh and Olin City, for instance, they'll shake their machines to pieces inside of five miles. Remember, we've got to climb a mountain chain twice during the run, and it will be a stiff pull each time."

"Don't you fret. You're the doctor," grunted Billy. "I'm not going to put in my oar. I'll trust to your judgment every time, old man."

"Well, I may make a mistake," admitted Dan. "But I'm glad for one that Chance and Burton are not near us."

"No, they're lucky to get away among the first—seven will be tacked onto the hood of their car," said Billy, who had been studying the advertised list of entries. "And do you notice where Mr. Briggs' maroon Postlethwaite is? He's running near us—forty-one."

"We'll have good neighbors, then," chuckled Dan.

"I don't suppose the cars will remain long in the order they start, do you?"

"I don't know. We can leave when we please on the second day's run. I want, if possible, to make the Holly Tree Inn at Farmingdale on our first day."

"Whew!" ejaculated Billy, after consulting his guide. "That's three hundred miles—nearly. Do you think we can do it?"

"I don't know. I mean to try."

"And you were the one who said that racing wouldn't pay."

"And it won't; but the roads are as good as any we shall have during the entire run. Our car will be—is now, in fact—in perfect shape. If we have any mechanical trouble, Billy, it won't be on the first day. She can stand thirty miles an hour. We'll carry our eats with us, and our biggest load will be gasoline. I don't propose to stop but once a day to buy juice—make up your mind to that, Billy-boy!"

There was an element of chance in the race, however, which lent zest to it. An accident might make even the best of the cars fail to win laurels. Down to the evening before the start, and on the arrival of all of the contestants at the Compton Motordrome, no one could say surely which automobile, and which team, had the better chance of winning the golden cup.

The motordrome was gay with lights and red-fire. There were races, and speeches, and a big crowd assembled and remained all night to see the starting of the first cars. There was an all-night bicycle race for amateurs in which Biff Hardy and Wiley Moyle carried off the honors for the Riverdale Club; but although there were motorcycle races, too, the Speedwells decided to keep out of them. They could not afford to risk an accident.

And there was another thing Dan did not risk. When they left their Breton-Melville under the shed, to go to the big gate and watch the first cars get under way, Dan left somebody to watch the drab auto—and somebody whom he could trust.

The Speedwells stood in the crowd and saw the first cars get away in the light of the search-lamps. It was a cloudy morning and the string of autos up the straight road soon looked like so many glow-worms. When number seven rolled down to the starting line and the big placards were fastened on, fore and aft, Dan and Billy made off for a house where they had engaged a bed. They got five hours refreshing sleep and then had a most excellent breakfast.

When they went back to the motordrome at a few minutes past eleven, they found their father and mother and the children waiting for them. Mr. Speedwell had driven over and brought his boys a great box of lunch to carry in their car. He had engaged a man to help him with the milk routes while Dan and Billy were absent.

There were plenty of Riverdale folk to cheer for the Speedwells as they got away, too. Mildred Kent and Lettie Parker were in the Greenes' auto and the girls wished the team handling number forty-eight the best of good luck as the drab car started.

The boys waved their caps as the Breton-Melville slid smoothly out of the motordrome gate and

over the starter's line. There was a big crowd in Compton now to watch the remaining cars get under way. The police kept the street open for some distance; then the road broadened and the houses became few and far between.

The shouts of the onlookers grew distant. The drab car began to purr like a great cat. Behind they saw number forty-nine thrusting its battleship prow out of a balloon of dust that traveled with it. Dan advanced the spark. Right before them was number forty-seven, that had started ten minutes earlier. The Breton-Melville, like a drab rocket, curved out for this car and passed it as though forty-seven was at a standstill!

The great race had begun, and Billy, in his heart, secretly counted the passing of this car as the first milestone on their way to victory.

THE FIRST TEN HOURS

This road race was much different from the usual test of speed on the open highway. There were no guards lines, or men with flags at cross roads to warn the unwary drivers of horses, or pedestrians. The cars in this endurance run had to take all the chances, and suffer the delays usual to an automobile run in the suburban districts.

The Speedwells in their forty-eight were less than five miles out of Compton when they passed forty-seven. On the edge of Pachusett, half a mile farther on, they found forty-six in the ditch! A big load of hay was overturned across the road, and the hay wagon had lost a wheel.

How this wreck had occurred the Speedwells did not stop to ask. There was a crowd of a couple of hundred persons around the scene of the wreck, and it was plain that neither the automobilists nor the farmers needed any help.

There had been frost enough the night before to make the fields hard, and this was a cloudy day. Dan made up his mind instantly to go around the obstruction. He and Billy got out and removed a section of the roadside fence and steered their drab car out into a turnip field.

Number forty-nine was then in view; but the Speedwells got away quickly and ran through Pachusett as fast as they dared. Two stern-looking constables, with big tin stars on the breasts of their coats, held their Waterbury watches on number forty-eight as it sung along Main Street; but they evidently could not figure out just how fast the boys were going.

It had not rained for some time, and the roads were very dusty in places. Where the roadway was lightly built the autos ahead of the Speedwells had already cut deeply into the surface. It was soon hard traveling, and the dust and sand sifted over them, and over the car, until they looked like millers.

"This is why the faster we get ahead this first day, and the more cars we put behind us, the better off we will be for the rest of the run," said Dan.

"I guess so! Lettie Parker hit it right the day we went to Karnac Lake. The best place in a run of this kind is right up ahead," agreed Billy.

According to the road map there was a splendid piece of macadamized highway between Bannister and City Ford, and it was thirty-eight miles long. It was a piece of road greatly favored by automobilists, and it was always well traveled. But this run had been so well advertised that ordinary motor car drivers out for pleasure on this stretch of road would give the right of way to the racing cars.

It was a wide road and almost level. There was not a bridge or a railroad crossing for the entire thirty-eight miles. When the Speedwells struck the head of this piece of highway, Dan slipped out of the chauffeur's seat, and allowed his brother to get under the wheel.

Billy was eager to feel the throb and jump of the mechanism under his hand. They had stopped a few moments before, too, tried certain bolts, filled the gasoline tank, and "watered her." Everything seemed as taut as when they rolled out of the Compton Motordrome.

"Now, boy, go to it!" his brother said. "Show them what you can do."

And Billy was not backward in doing this. He had an ambition to be a fast driver and all the conditions were in his favor. Number forty-eight began to travel immediately, and soon he had brought her up to such speed that—as Dan yelled in his ear—the telegraph poles beside the road looked like a picket fence!

They had passed number forty-five before this, and now, in quick succession they overtook forty-four, thirty-nine and seventeen—the latter having been held back by some slight breakage. But this was too early in the game to be sure that they had passed these cars for good!

Billy, however, gave his dust to several other cars in the race before they traversed that thirty-eight miles of beautiful, hard road. And their time was forty-three minutes!

"Good boy!" cried Dan, as they slowed down to a twelve-mile speed as they struck the head of Market Street in City Ford. "We have run a hundred and five miles and our time is three hours and ten minutes."

"Why, at this rate," cried Billy, "we'll be able to get beyond the Holly Tree Inn to-night. Don't you think so?"

"I have my doubts about it," said Dan. "There is no other piece of road like that we've just come over. There'll be little racing for the rest of the day, but just steady plugging along. And we've got to eat, old man!"

"Let me stick to the wheel while you take a bite, Dan," begged the younger boy, "and then I'll eat. I wonder how far some of the head cars will get to-day? Where's Mr. Briggs' car?"

"Haven't seen it yet. We haven't passed that maroon baby, you may very well believe!"

"And Mr. Darringford's car?" queried Billy.

"Why, he's behind. Didn't you notice? His number is fifty-three."

"And number seven?" said Billy. "That's the car I want to give the dust of the road."

"You'll wait a bit for that," said his brother. "Chance and Burton started too far in advance for us to think of passing them yet."

"You never can tell," Billy observed, shaking his head. "Maybe they'll break down."

"I hope not," returned Dan, quickly. "If we beat them I want them to have the best chance possible."

"Say! I'd like to show 'em up right around Greenbaugh," said Billy, quickly. "You know, Chance went to Greenbaugh Seminary one year—before his brother came to the Darringford shops."

"Well?"

"Chance has been blowing around that the Greenbaugh Seminary fellows will give him an ovation

when he goes through the town. Of course, he'll want to be clear ahead of most of the crowd, so as to show 'em what a great driver he is. I don't care how far ahead he is of the other cars, but when he parades down Greenbaugh's High Street, I want him to be taking the dust of number forty-eight," concluded Billy with energy.

"My! but you're right vicious!" chuckled Dan, as they rumbled out upon the river bridge and left City Ford behind them. 161

Our heroes climbed hills and descended short, sharp runs; they passed through forest and field; the "slow down" signs faced them frequently and Billy chafed as they ran through the hamlets at what he considered a snail's pace.

At some places crowds had gathered to watch the contestants pass. Then again other automobiles joined in the procession and kept up with some of the entries for miles. These incidents retarded speed, if anything. The road race was much different from the track trials Dan and Billy had seen.

In some small towns there was little order as the automobiles came through so close together. The constables were more interested in seeing that the motorists did not exceed the speed limit than in keeping the streets clear. Reckless boys would run back and forth across the roadway. It was perilous even to travel at the legal rate.

The Speedwells had passed several more cars. At one big, well-lighted roadhouse there were a dozen of the contestants in the race, having put their cars under the sheds for the night. Mr. Briggs' big Postlethwaite was just being backed into a stall as the Speedwells shot by. Henri waved his hand to Dan and called good luck after them. It was some satisfaction to the boys to know that they had gotten the best of at least twenty of the other cars. They had then won on them from half an hour to two hours in time. 162

They had only an hour of their own time remaining, however, and the Holly Tree Inn at Farmingdale was still forty miles away. The roads were reported only fair. But comparatively few cars had been over them and they would not be so badly cut up as were many which lay behind.

And within that forty miles the map showed but two hamlets where it would be necessary to slow down. Both were liberal towns—twelve miles an hour was the limit.

The Breton-Melville car was running smoothly. Not an hour before they had oiled up and groomed her nicely. There was a possibility of making the Holly Tree within the time stipulated.

"And if we don't, we'll have to stop at Sharpe's Crossroads to register and stay for the night," said Billy, nervously. "That's the ticket, isn't it, Dan?"

"That is the result of failure," smiled his brother. "*But we're not going to fail!*"

They had interchanged these remarks at a spot where they had to run slowly. Once free again Dan let the car out with a suddenness that made the machine leap like a horse under the spur. They shot along the country road, overhung with trees which made the darkness deeper, their headlamps parting the gloom before them, and displaying objects with clearness. The Speedwells had fitted their car with good lamps; but no headlight will reveal an obstruction in the road far enough in advance for a car to be brought to a stop, if it is running at top speed. 163

They were taking chances, that was a fact. Dan Speedwell was not usually reckless; but he had a double incentive in thus "running on his luck." Not alone did he desire to make the Holly Tree Inn within the ten-hour limit; but car number seven had not yet been passed!

Burton Poole's auto was still ahead. Dan believed that Chance Avery would drive Poole's car at top speed this first day. And Billy himself longed to beat car number seven no more than Dan did, although the latter said less about it.

When the clock, screwed under the wind shield, showed twenty minutes after nine they had traveled seventeen of the forty miles. And right ahead was the second village. For three miles and more they would have to reduce speed—or, were supposed to.

But it is a nice problem to run one of these racing cars at a twelve mile an hour gait!

When number forty-eight came to the head of Main Street, the lights revealed a straggling row of houses on either side, a general store, or two, a postoffice, and a clear street. If Dan reduced speed at all, Billy never noticed it!

They roared through the little town like a limited express going by a flag station. There may have been constables in that town; but they were not on hand. At least, Dan and Billy Speedwell never saw them as they shot along the main thoroughfare and out into the country on the other side. 164

Faster and faster the machine seemed to fly. When they took the curves Billy threw his weight upon the other side, leaning far off from the step and doing his best to keep the tires on the ground.

They flashed past the little collection of houses as Sharpe's Crossroads. The clock pointed to twenty minutes to ten. It was nine miles to the Farmingdale Inn.

The car took a curve and the wheels skidded; but Dan did not reduce speed. He got back into the center of the road before they reached a covered bridge over the river.

The bridge was well lighted. Good fortune in that!

As the car rushed down to the covered way Billy suddenly uttered a frightened yell. There was a car stalled right in the path!

The covered bridge was divided by a partition into two driveways. The stalled machine was in the right-hand track—the way the Speedwells should take according to all rules of the road. Its rear lamp was shut off and the Breton-Melville would have crashed into it had not the bridge lights revealed the danger. 165

And even then it is doubtful if Dan could have braked in time. Indeed, he did not try to. He swerved to the left and saw that that side of the bridge was clear.

The drab car shot across the bridge at terrific speed. The boys could not halt to see what was the matter with the stalled auto. A few moments only did they have to run into Farmingdale. And they would have to reduce speed on the outskirts of the town.

For several miles they had traveled more than a mile a minute!

The day's race was done, however; the lights of the Holly Tree Inn were in sight. They rolled into the yard, where several autos were already standing, with two minutes to spare. It was twelve

minutes to ten.

But as Dan and Billy threw aside their coats and got out to stretch their legs, the younger boy said:

“What car do you suppose that was in the bridge, Dannie?”

“Give it up. Didn’t see any number on it.”

“I know. And Mr. Briggs’ car is behind us—we passed it.”

“Sure,” declared Dan, in surprise.

“Well, that car in the bridgeway was a maroon auto; I didn’t know there was more than one maroon car in the race; did you?” queried Billy, seriously.

UNDERHAND WORK

Before Dan Speedwell could let this statement of his brother's fairly penetrate his mind the younger lad said, sharply:

"And here's another!"

"Another what, Billy?" asked Dan. "Not another maroon auto?"

"Bosh! no! But another car, just the same, that we're interested in."

"Number seven!" cried Dan, seeing Burton Poole's car standing under the inn shed.

"Chance is here, all right, all right!" exclaimed Billy. "We've caught up to them."

"It doesn't seem possible," murmured Dan.

"Golly! won't Chance be sore!"

"They must have met with an accident," the older Speedwell declared.

"We've made as good a run as anybody, I bet," said Billy, joyfully.

"We don't know that," remarked Dan, shaking his head.

"Come on in! Let's see what they've got to say about it."

"Now Billy," urged Dan, stopping his younger brother, and speaking seriously. "Don't you stir up a rumpus. If Chance Avery turns up, you let him alone. No heckling, mind!"

"Aw, well——"

"If we are running as good as he is we can afford to keep still about it," said Dan, wisely. "And if we're not——"

"Pshaw!"

"If we're not," continued Dan, smiling, "he'll know it fast enough. Let's not wrangle with him. I want to beat him as badly as you do—and I hope we'll beat him a plenty; but there's no use crowing over him——"

"Hullo!" exclaimed a voice behind them, and the brothers turned swiftly to see Burton Poole arm in arm with Chance himself. By the look on Avery's face Dan feared that the fellow had heard at least a part of what had been said.

"How under the sun did you get here, Speedwell?" demanded Poole, in vast surprise. "Is that a flying machine you've got? I declare, you have beaten some of the best cars in the race!"

"We don't know that they are beaten yet—except one," said Dan, quickly. "That one's in the ditch."

"But I don't see how you could have got so far——"

"But you got here," snapped Billy. "I don't see why you should expect to run so much better than we do."

"Well, my car is a much better auto," said Poole, with conviction; "and we had a daylight run. What time did you get away? Almost noon, wasn't it?"

"Ten minutes to twelve," said Dan.

Poole and Chance looked at each other quickly, and the former said:

"I told you you were wrong, Chance. They got here on time."

"And with two minutes to spare," said Billy, tartly. "Oh, I saw the man taking our time on the inn steps as we came in. We'd have heard about it before now if we had run over the schedule."

Chance growled something in Burton's ear and they walked away.

"Ha!" ejaculated Billy. "They both thought it would be a walk-over for them. They never expected to see us during the run."

"Well, they've seen us now. Let's get to work, Billy-boy. We've got to overhaul this car before we sleep."

"If you say so, Dan," said Billy, yawning wearily.

"It's best. We want to get away bright and early—by seven o'clock at least. No running after dark again for us. The cars that started late had that handicap."

"I know," admitted Billy.

"Now, in the morning, those cars that we have passed, and that have put up short of this place, will be out on the road in good season. We want to keep ahead of those we have already passed."

"And show some of those that are still ahead of us, our dust, too!" interposed Billy.

"Exactly. Therefore," concluded his brother, "let's put our car in proper shape to-night."

And they did that, although it took them until nearly one o'clock in the morning. But then Dan and Billy had the satisfaction of knowing that their car was again in as good order as it was when it rolled out of the motordrome at Compton the previous noon.

They were weary enough when they went to bed. All the other contestants who had put up at the inn were long since asleep; but some of them would be obliged to spend an hour or two in the morning overhauling and grooming their cars.

Dan and Billy were eating an early breakfast—the clock stood at 6:15—when Burton Poole came into the dining room, yawning.

"And here's two more of 'em!" Poole cried. "My! but I didn't want to get up at all. Chance has been out an hour or more."

"Your car ready?" asked Billy, with his mouth full.

"Yep. You know, we got in at three o'clock and had plenty of time."

"Then you'll be getting under way soon?" suggested Dan.

"We'll give you a rub on the road, I reckon," said Burton, lazily. "See what Chance says about it. Oh! here he is."

Avery came in and, as usual, scowled at Dan and Billy.

"We want to start when the Speedwells do, don't we, Chance?" asked Burton. "I'd like to see how

that old car of theirs runs."

"We'll start when we're ready," growled Chance. "I don't want to know anything about the Speedwell's car—or when they start."

"Well!" began Billy, but Dan reached over and put a hand on his arm.

"Drop it, youngster!" he commanded.

Billy conquered his anger with an effort, and the brothers were very soon done. They had their gasoline to get and they had already taken the cans around to the nearest supply depot. They proposed to pick them up after leaving the hotel.

Dan reported their time after running the car out of the stable yard. Chance and Burton could easily have been ready, but it was evident that the former deliberately delayed their start until after the Speedwells should get under way.

The Breton-Melville car had sufficient gasoline in her tank to run forty or fifty miles; so they stopped at the fuel station only long enough to strap on the extra cans. It was exactly seven when the car left the Holly Tree Inn, and they could run until five in the afternoon—practically ten hours of daylight.

It was a warm morning, and there was a fog in the valleys. The frost of overnight had turned to patches of black damp upon the ploughed fields. The roads were just moist enough to be treacherous.

There was no car ahead of number forty-eight within sight, and she steamed away from Farmingdale in fine shape. Dan did not try to get any particular speed out of her. Beyond Farmingdale the roads were rather bad for some miles and there were many turns and twists in the way. He feared to travel fast, for the wheels of the drab car could easily skid, and bring them to grief.

Nevertheless, they beat out fifty-three miles in the first two hours. Then they had to stop to feed her gasoline, and while Billy attended to this duty Dan looked her over a little.

"See who's coming!" exclaimed Billy, looking back as he tipped the contents of the can into the tank.

"I see them. Chance has waked up. He's going to pass us, I reckon, and show us some fancy running."

"Oh I don't know," grunted Billy. "They're slowing down."

"Huh!" said Dan. "All right there?"

"Yep."

"Open her up a little more and we'll see what we can do ourselves."

He cranked up and then got into the car. Billy was already there. The car started slowly. Then she stopped!

"What's the matter now?" gasped Billy.

They heard the exhaust of number seven behind them. Billy leaped out on one side; Dan on the other. They could find nothing the matter, but it was a fact that the Breton-Melville had stopped dead.

Dan cranked up again and they were getting in when the car run by Chance Avery and Burton Poole passed them slowly. The former was at the wheel; the Speedwells could see his wide grin as he turned his begoggled face toward them.

"Want a tow?" shouted Burton.

Dan waved his hand. He knew that there wasn't an ounce of meanness in Burton Poole.

"Let's show those fellow—" began Billy and then—to their amazement—their engine stopped again.

"Well, isn't that the limit?" cried the younger Speedwell. "She never acted so before."

"That's no reason why she shouldn't begin," said Dan, grimly. "We've been lucky heretofore."

"But what's the matter with her?"

"If I knew I'd tell you," returned Dan, and went to cranking again.

But this time the engine wouldn't start at all. It was dead.

"Do you suppose anybody got at this machine while we were away from it?" cried Billy.

"No. There were watchmen at the stables. I saw to that."

"Chance was up and out mighty early," said the unconvinced Billy.

"If he'd done anything to the mechanism it would have shown up before now," declared Dan.

But that there was something wrong there could be no doubt. They were stalled for fifteen minutes, and then one of the other racing cars went by.

"Get a horse!" the chauffeur yelled at them.

Billy was getting anxious. But that would not help them. For some reason the engine would not work. They were stalled between towns and—as far as the Speedwell brothers could see—there was something the matter with their car that they could not correct.

"We might as well kiss our show for the gold cup 'good-by'!" wailed Billy. "And that Chance Avery will have the laugh on us. Did you see him grin as he sailed by?"

Dan was thoughtful. He began to pay more attention to his brother's suspicion of Avery. The fellow did go by them as though he had expected the breakdown and knew it would be a fatal one!

And Chance had held back in starting. It seemed that he wanted to be behind the Speedwells and so overtake and enjoy their discomfiture. Dan was not sure but that Billy was right.

What could Chance have done to the machine? Nothing! Dan was positive of that. Not alone were there watchmen in the stableyard, but the young fellow knew from his own examination that no part of the mechanism of the car had been tampered with.

Yet Chance—

Dan suddenly turned on his heel and went to the gasoline tank. He opened it; he looked in, he dipped in a stick and smelled of it. Then he opened an auxiliary tank faucet, and let the fluid run upon the ground.

It was water mixed with gasoline!

Billy ran to him when he heard his cry of rage.

"What is it, Dan?" he asked, amazed by the look in his brother's countenance.

Dan was not often in a rage. When he was really angry it was well to "stand from under," as Billy expressed it.

And just now Dan was almost beside himself with sudden passion. He shut off the faucet and sprang to the cans strapped on the running board of the car. One after the other he opened. All water!

"The scoundrel! The blackguard!" cried Dan. "If I had him here I'd make him drink the stuff. Oh, the rascal!"

Billy very quickly was made aware of the catastrophe. They were ten miles from any gasoline supply station, without an ounce of the fluid, and there was not a farmhouse, even, in sight. They could neither telephone for a new supply, nor hire a wagon to bring it to them.

"It will take till noon to get any—noon at the earliest," groaned Billy. "Dan, we've lost all chance of winning Mr. Briggs' trophy."

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Dan stood silently, his teeth on his lower lip, his face heavy with thought. Billy continued:

"How ever did Chance do it?"

"That's where he went when he got up so early this morning at the inn. He went to the gasoline station, bribed somebody there, and got the cans filled with water. One thing is sure, we'll make whoever helped him suffer for it."

"But what good will that do?" demanded Billy, "when we have lost the race?"

"We haven't lost the race!" snapped his brother.

"We're stalled here, I tell you!" cried Billy, waving his arms excitedly.

"I know it."

"What are you going to do for power? How you going to get to the next station—fly? You say the word and I'll run all the way to the nearest town and buy the gasoline, and bring it back in a wagon. But it will take oceans of time."

"I know it," gritted Dan. "We've got to have it quicker than that—listen!"

"Another car coming. Another set of joshers," complained Billy, who did not like being made a target for fun.

The car they heard was coming at full speed. Dan hesitated, and then stepped around the drab car and looked up the road. The running automobile appeared.

"Hooray!" yelled Billy. "It's Mr. Briggs' car. He'll help us."

The huge "forty-one" was plain upon the hood of the automobile. As it came on, however, the chauffeur showed no intention of reducing speed.

This was not a bad bit of road where the Speedwell boys were stalled. Car forty-one was evidently striving to make up some of the miles it had lost on the previous day. It came on like the wind!

Dan and Billy both waved their hands. The car did not swerve, nor did the chauffeur pay them the compliment of pulling down in the least.

The huge Postlethwaite swept on, was guided around the stalled car with skill, and rushed past and on around the next curve in the road—and all so quickly that the boys were speechless for a moment with surprise.

"Did you ever?" finally gasped Billy.

"Henri never even winked at us," growled Dan.

"And if he had, you wouldn't have seen that wink," observed his brother, with a nervous gasp. "Say! that was mean!"

"Of course, they didn't have to stop."

"No. But it wouldn't have hurt Mr. Briggs to pull down for a moment."

"He never even looked at us."

"No. He sat in there beside Henri, ready to help him take the curves. I never thought he'd be so mean," complained Billy.

"Here's another!" exclaimed his brother.

They turned to see a second automobile come around the bend in the road. It was not going so fast. It was numbered thirty-seven.

Before it reached the Speedwells it slowed down and the man at the wheel demanded:

"Did you see that maroon car just now?"

"Of course!" exclaimed Dan and Billy together.

"It was number forty-one, wasn't it?" demanded the chauffeur of thirty-seven, and he seemed very angry.

"Yes."

"Well, we're going to report that car. It ought to be barred out of the race," sputtered the man.

"What's that?" gasped Dan, while Billy looked, open-mouthed, at the angry automobilist.

"I tell you, it ought to be barred out," cried the stranger, and his companion agreed with a vigorous nod. "They come pretty near taking a wheel off of us. Look at that scratch along the side of our car; will you?"

"I see it," admitted Dan, vastly puzzled.

"That maroon car did it," cried the man. "It ought to be——"

"But say!" blurted out Billy. "That was Mr. Briggs' car—Mr. Briggs who started this endurance test—the man who offers the gold cup!"

"Mr. Raleigh Briggs!" cried the angry man.

"That's the number of his car—forty-one," Dan interposed, quickly.

"Well, he ought to be spoken to," said the man, more mildly. "We were giving him the right of the road as fast as possible; I never saw a man drive so recklessly in all my life!"

The angry automobilist was driving on, when Dan said:

"By the way, can you let us have a gallon of juice? We are stalled——"

"Haven't any to spare!" snapped the man, as he threw on his speed.

"Ha!" ejaculated Billy. "I wish Mr. Briggs had tipped him into the ditch!"

"If it was Mr. Briggs," muttered Dan, but his brother did not hear him.

"What'll we do?" queried Billy again. "You don't mean to stay here and beg of every car you see, do you? They'll all turn us down."

"All these cars aren't driven by such fellows," growled Dan.

"But say! When Mr. Briggs himself would act so mean——"

"Here's another!" cried Dan, and this time he leaped into the very center of the road, determined to make the coming car slow down, at least.

When it shot into sight Billy gave a sudden cheer.

"Number fifty-three! Oh, Dannie! that's Mr. Robert!"

But at that word his brother stepped quickly out of the way. He could not hold up Darringford, who had already been so kind to them. But the young proprietor of the Darringford Machine Shops began to slow down as soon as he saw that the drab car was in trouble.

"What's the matter, boys?" he shouted, craning his head out of the car to see them.

"Oh, Mr. Robert!" cried Billy, boldly. "Can you lend us a gallon of gasoline?"

"What! gone stale between towns?" laughed the young man. "I am surprised at you, boys."

"It was not our fault, I assure you," said Dan, quietly. "Somebody played a trick on us. They filled our cans at Farmingdale with water instead of gasoline."

"Why! that's a despicable trick," declared Mr. Robert, as Dan opened one of the cans and poured the water into the road.

"It has lost us nearly an hour already," said Billy.

"It shall lose you no more time. Give me that empty can," said Mr. Robert, quickly. "Take one of our full ones. That's right. Now, come on, boys, and show me what your Breton-Melville can do!" and, the exchange being made, he waved to his chauffeur to go on again.

And the Speedwells were not far behind him. They filled their tank after draining out the water. They had to start slowly, and it took them nearly an hour to run the next ten miles. Then they reached a gasoline station and were very sure that the right fluid was run into their cans.

The Breton-Melville worked like a charmed car after that one accident. On the long grade which they struck about eleven o'clock—the climb over the mountain range—she acted perfectly. But eighteen miles an hour was her best speed going up.

At the summit (they reached the Tip Top House at three) the boys halted to overhaul their gear and oil up. They hoped to make Greenbaugh, in the valley, before the end of their ten mile run; but they were eighty-seven miles away. They had traveled already a hundred and forty-two miles from the Holly Tree Inn. The trick Chance Avery had played them certainly had set them back in this day's running a good many miles!

But several of the early cars to start—the small numbers—had been passed by the Speedwells; as they figured it coming up the mountain there were only fifteen cars ahead of them, including number seven.

"And Mr. Briggs' car," added Billy. "She must be tearing down the mountain already. Hey!" he called to one of the men working around the stables, "has number forty-one passed on? Of course it has! How long ago?"

"Number forty-one?" repeated the man, referring to a list of the cars he carried in his pocket. "No, sir. She ain't showed up yet."

"Why, she passed us miles back!" cried Billy, and Dan looked up from his work in surprise, too.

"No. She hasn't come," said the man, with confidence.

"Why—why—what does it mean?" gasped the younger Speedwell. "It can't be possible that we passed Mr. Briggs anywhere, and missed him."

"He must be ahead of us," agreed Dan.

"I know my list is right," said the man. "I been noting every car that's in the race. You see how I've put a star against those that have got by. Number forty-one ain't one of 'em."

"A big maroon car—a Postlethwaite," suggested Dan.

"No, sir. Ain't no maroon car gone through. I'm mighty sure of that!"

"Well, what do you know about that?" murmured Billy, staring at his brother. "Think that was a delusion back there on the road? Maybe we didn't see Mr. Briggs' car, either?"

"Maybe we didn't," replied Dan, gravely. "But I guess that man in thirty-seven wouldn't agree that it was a delusion that scratched up his panels."

"Whew! I should say not."

At that moment the hostler with the checked list broke in on their conversation.

"How far did you come to-day?" he asked.

"Hundred and forty miles," grunted Billy. He wasn't proud of their speed.

"Then you slept at Farmingdale?"

"Yep."

"Hear about the robbery of the postoffice there before you started?"

"No!" cried Billy. "Last night?"

"Yes. Cleaned it out. Three or four thousand dollars' worth of stamps, registered mail, and thirteen hundred dollars in cash. Nice little haul for some band of robbers," said the hostler.

He went away and Dan and Billy stared at each other for a moment. Billy put his thoughts in words first:

"The maroon car stood in that bridge over the Farmingdale River last night, when we came through. No honest car would have hidden there."

"Where is Mr. Briggs and the real forty-one car?" demanded Dan.

"Oh, Dan! that couldn't have been him who drove by us so fast this morning."

"And scratched number thirty-seven, too," said Dan.

"It's the other maroon car," declared Billy, excitedly. "It's the bank robbers."

"But where is Mr. Briggs?" demanded his brother, again.

"Goodness only knows. Those thieves are onto the fact that their car is the mate to Mr. Briggs' auto. It's plain they are using that fact to hide their tracks."

"And meanwhile," repeated Dan, for the third time, "what has happened to Mr. Briggs?"

"I give it up!"

"I'm going to find out," declared Dan. "Here! you 'tend to this. I want to telephone."

But when he ran in to the hotel office he found one of the racing timekeepers there and from him he learned that Mr. Briggs' car was reported about fifty miles back on the road. It had suffered a breakdown.

"Are you sure it's his car?" demanded Dan. "I tell you that there is another maroon car on the road."

"Not in the list of racers," said the timekeeper.

"No, sir. But are you sure it is Mr. Briggs that has broken down?"

"I just spoke to him over the telephone. I know him personally. I know his voice."

"Then there can be no mistake. But I believe that there is another maroon car running under Mr. Briggs' number," and Dan explained briefly what he knew about the car belonging to, or used by, the men who had robbed Mr. Sudds and the Farmers' Bank.

"This robbery of the postoffice at Farmingdale last night," continued Dan Speedwell, "looks very much like the work of the same crowd, too. Besides, my brother and I are quite sure that these men passed us on the road this morning. It was not Mr. Briggs in that maroon car, that is sure. He would have stopped and spoken to us when he saw that we were stalled."

"I'll send your information up and down the line," promised the timekeeper. "But there certainly has been no maroon car past here—in either direction—to-day, or yesterday."

When Dan got back to the car, Billy already had her cranked up. They ran swiftly out into the highway, reached the down grade, shut off power, and began to coast. For some ten or fifteen miles the map showed that the road into the valley was very crooked; they dared not put much power to their car. And sometimes when she merely coasted, the speedometer showed a forty-five and fifty mile an hour pace!

Eighty-seven miles in an hour and three-quarters—that was the work cut out for them. Half of it was down grade, at least; but it was only when they were within twenty miles of the foot of the mountain that the Speedwells were able to let her out and show just what the Breton-Melville car could do on a gentle slope, and on a good road.

They took that stretch of twenty miles in seventeen minutes!

At the end of that sharp run Billy counted on his fingers and declared that there were but eight cars ahead of them.

It was four o'clock when they drove through New Hapsburg at a twelve mile an hour rate. Suddenly they came upon a car around which there was quite a crowd. It was one of the contesting machines, Dan and Billy knew, and as they shut off their engine they heard several wrangling voices in the crowd.

"I tell ye I don't care anything about no race!" cried one harsh voice. "You're under arrest for exceeding the speed limit through the streets of this here city."

"Another Josiah Comes!" chuckled Billy. "What car is it that's pinched?"

"My goodness, that's Burton Poole standing up there and waving his pocketbook," cried Dan.

"Oh, glory!" shouted Billy. "It's number seven."

Then they saw Chance Avery. His face was red, and he was too angry for words. He saw the Breton-Melville car sliding past and he undoubtedly had heard Billy's joyous exclamation. If looks could burst a tire, Dan and Billy would have had a bad blow-out right there!

"It won't hold them long," said Dan, as their car pulled past the crowd. "Burton will pay the fine and they'll come after us. Their time isn't up, it's likely, before half-past five. They will reach Greenbaugh if we do."

"And we're going to reach it," acclaimed Billy, cheerfully. "Here's the town line, Dannie. Let her go!"

AN OBSTACLE RACE

They reached the station on High street, Greenbaugh, with a few minutes to spare. There were four cars already standing at the Carpenter House, the best hotel in the place. It was too expensive an inn for the Speedwell boys, however, and they drove around to another hostelry on a side street.

Besides, the Carpenter House veranda, and the yard, and the street in front of the hotel, were full of shouting, chaffing students from the seminary. Whether Chance Avery was so very popular with his former fellow students, or not, there was a great number interested in the motor car race.

"We want to keep away from them. Then we'll be sure to escape trouble. I don't want to talk with Chance just now," said Dan Speedwell. "For I'm sore and I might say something I'd be sorry for later."

"He played us as mean a trick as ever was played," declared Billy.

"He did indeed. But we have caught up with him again. He won't get past the Carpenter House to-night."

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Which was a fact, for after Dan and Billy had cleaned up their car and had put their next day's supply of gasoline under lock and key this time, to be sure of it, they went out on High street and saw Chance and Burton Poole with a crowd of college fellows, going to one of the students' boarding houses for supper.

The Speedwells ate their own supper, and then walked about the town quietly. They learned that forty of the racing cars had reached Greenbaugh during the evening. The streets were crowded with sight-seers. Late in the evening the seminary boys made a demonstration.

They had fireworks on the campus and then paraded the streets in autos and afoot, Burton Poole's car in the lead with great placards on it.

Red fire and a noisy demonstration accompanied the parade; but the town police kept good order. There was a big, six-seated car that belonged in the town, and was hired by the seminary boys. This had a prominent place in the parade, and the next morning, when Dan and Billy got out at daybreak, they saw this machine, loaded with noisy but sleepy-looking fellows, rolling down to the High street.

"They've made a night of it!" exclaimed Dan. "And I bet Chance and Burton have been with them. They'll feel just like running an auto to-day—I don't think!"

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"All right. If they want to give themselves a handicap," returned Billy, "I won't complain."

"Let's hurry and get away. I don't want to see Chance Avery to-day if I can help it."

"You mean to keep ahead of him, then?" chuckled Billy.

"I'd like to."

But when they ran their car out to the front of the Carpenter House, several of the contestants had already gotten under way, and among them was Burton Poole's machine. The big automobile crowded with students accompanied it out of town. Number seven had nearly half an hour's start of the Speedwells' car.

But the Breton-Melville ran very easily. No cars passed the boys for the first five miles. Then they saw a cloud of dust ahead and realized that they were catching up with the students—and probably Poole's car.

The six-seated observation car could not run very fast, and it was so broad and heavy that it occupied more than a fair share of the road. Dan and Billy could not see beyond this elephantine car, and did not know how near number seven was.

The road was good and their motor had been running very nicely. As the big car, with its cheering crowd, continued to fill the road, Dan was obliged to pull down a little.

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"Hoot again," said Billy. "We want to get by. If Chance and Burton want to play horse along the way, let them. We're out for the gold cup."

At that moment an auto came up behind them and slid by swiftly. It was number twelve. When this car came up with the big omnibus, one of the students on the back seat yelled something to the man managing the car, and it swerved out just enough to let number twelve by.

Dan tried to follow. But before he could get the nose of number forty-eight into the opening, the omnibus swung back into the middle of the road again. The highway was narrow. There was no sidewalk on either hand. It was a typical country road and on either hand was a steep bank down to a barbed wire fence. To go into the ditch would finish any car!

"Hey there!" yelled Billy, standing up. "Let us by. Don't hog the road, fellows."

"Who are you, sonny?" returned one of the smart boys on the back seat.

"Let 'em sit up and beg proper," suggested another of the seminary youths.

"Take your turn, brother," advised another of the students. "We've got the road now and we mean to keep it."

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"Be still, Billy," advised Dan, quickly. "They can hold us back but a little way. The road widens soon!"

But Dan was not a good prophet that time. The students evidently intended to hold back Chance Avery's rival at any cost. Within five minutes, after guying the Speedwells unmercifully, and holding them down to a snail's pace, the chauffeur of the heavy car suddenly brought it square across the road, backed a little, and then halted. His car was an effectual barrier to all traffic, going in either direction!

"Oh! Oh! Oh! Some-thing's-bust-ed!" yelled the gang in chorus.

Dan and Billy then got a sight of the road ahead. It was empty. Chance was perhaps ten miles ahead, or more. And the Speedwells were stalled. The driver of the students' car could claim that he could not move his auto. There were no policemen about. The following contestants might be held

here for an hour, or more.

Dan and Billy were helpless. And the students were having a fine time at their expense. Dan had to fairly threaten his brother to keep Billy silent; to enter into a wordy discussion with the fellows would only have pleased the scamps too well. They were primed to make sport of the Riverdale boys and undoubtedly would have handled them roughly had Dan allowed Billy to loosen his tongue.

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For ten minutes the big car stood there, the chauffeur making believe fumble with the mechanism. Then suddenly there sounded a warning automobile horn from the direction of Greenbaugh. A car, in a cloud of dust, was dashing over the road toward them.

"Now, by jings!" exclaimed Billy, "they'll have to do something."

"No reason why they shouldn't hold up the whole string of contestants for a while," muttered Dan. "Wait."

But this car did not seem to be one of the racers. At least, it had no placard on it. Suddenly Billy exclaimed:

"Isn't that Mr. Briggs' car? He's caught up with us!"

"It's not numbered," objected Dan.

"I don't care! It's maroon—and a big car——"

Meanwhile the students on the omnibus did nothing toward pulling out. The maroon car reduced speed abruptly. There were three men in it—a small one at the wheel and two others in the tonneau. All were coated and masked with dust goggles.

"What's the matter with you?" demanded one of the men in the tonneau, standing up.

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Billy caught Dan by the hand, and whispered:

"It's him!"

Dan needed no explanation. He knew what his brother meant at once. This was the leader of the trio of bank robbers—the motor thieves. Billy knew the fellow's voice.

A chorus of contradictory explanations were shouted by the seminary boys. It was plain that they proposed to hold up this car, too, rather than let the Speedwells by.

"You can't move your car, eh?" snapped the man in the maroon auto.

He sprang out fearlessly and strode to the side of the huge machine. As he started to climb up to the front seat one of the fellows tried to push him back.

That particular seminary student was instantly treated to the surprise of his life. The man reached out, seized the boy's collar, and ripped him from his hold on the car. He pitched him bodily, with one fling, into the ditch beside the road.

He then vaulted into the chauffeur's seat, seized the lever, and started the machine. The engine was still running. Instead of starting it ahead, the man deliberately backed the car into the ditch on the other side of the road, and leaped down, leaving it there with its forward wheels in the air!

Half the students had tumbled off when the car bounced into the ditch. The maroon machine was brought by the chauffeur past the disabled omnibus, and the man who had wrecked it leaped into his own machine again.

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"Quick, Billy!" whispered Dan. "We'll get after them."

Their own car was ready. They ran right around the big machine, in the wake of the maroon auto. The latter was speeding away along the narrow road.

"We must catch them, Dan!" cried Billy, as number forty-eight began to hum again.

"We will indeed," agreed his brother. "It's the robbers' car—no doubt of it. We must hang to them until we find an officer to make the arrest. Whatever happens—whether we win the race for the golden cup, or not, we must not let that maroon car escape this time!"

THE CAR AND THE CUP

The Breton-Melville car, driven by the Speedwell brothers, was not forty seconds behind the big maroon automobile at the start. The latter was perhaps five hundred yards ahead; but she never gained on the Speedwells a yard during the run that followed.

Olin City was somewhere about a hundred and eighty miles from the spot where the Greenbaugh Seminary boys had obstructed the road. The two cars—the maroon and the drab—raced over the highways to Olin City in just four hours.

Just before reaching Olin City the two flying autos passed a machine that had suffered a blow-out. It was number seven. Chance and Burton Poole were out of the car working as rapidly as they could to adjust a new tire.

Billy had something else to think of, and he did not even yell at Chance. The fact that they had passed number seven, after all Chance had done to try and retard them, was a small matter now.

The three desperate criminals ahead must be apprehended. They came to the Olin City line and the maroon car still kept on with but slightly reduced speed. The first policeman they saw held up a warning hand to them. Then he leaped into the middle of the road as Dan and Billy roared down upon him.

"Get him aboard—quick, Dan!" advised the younger brother. "Then we'll see if we can't overtake those scoundrels."

Dan was already shutting down. The car had not quite stopped when the police officer leaped aboard.

"Say, you boys! We'll have to stop you if you can't obey the law," declared the officer.

"How about that car ahead?" demanded Dan.

"They got away from me."

"We can catch it for you, if you say so," said Billy, grinning. "And it will be a great catch, too. Those fellows, I believe, robbed the postoffice at Farmingdale night before last."

"You don't mean it!" exclaimed the policeman.

"Indeed I do," said Dan, earnestly. "At least, my brother and I are positive that they are the men who robbed the Farmers' Bank of Riverdale and committed another robbery in that town."

"The motor car thieves!" exclaimed the policeman. "You don't mean it?"

"We do. We're sure of it."

"Wait! Let those two other men get aboard," said the officer, beckoning to two brother officers standing on the corner. When the men had hopped into the tonneau, the first officer said:

"Now let her go. If you can catch that big car, do it. Never mind the law—smash it to flinders!"

The maroon automobile had slowed down a good bit. The criminals were not desirous of getting arrested for breaking the speed law. And when Dan brought his car close up behind the maroon painted machine, and the biggest policeman leaped into the thieves' car, the latter believed they were arrested merely for an infringement of the city ordinance.

"We will fix this up all right with the judge, officer," said the leader of the gang. "The court is sitting—yes?"

"I reckon so," said the cop. "But we'll run over to the chief's office first. I shouldn't be surprised if *he'd* like to see you."

The three criminals exchanged glances. They might have shown fight there on the public street, but Dan steered his machine around the maroon car and headed it off. The chauffeur had to stop. The three officers each seized their man and—the arrest was made!

It then became necessary for the boys to go to the office of the chief of police, too. The delay was considerable, but after hearing the story of the Speedwells the commander of the Olin City police force worked quickly.

He called up the Riverdale Bank over the long distance 'phone and Mr. Crawley and Mr. Baird went sponsor for the Speedwell brothers. They were therefore allowed to depart, for the criminals would have to be extradited from this state to the one in which the first crime had been committed.

Burton Poole's car—and others—had gotten ahead of the Speedwell boys by this time and they had but an hour more to run that day. They whirled out of Olin City, however, in a cloud of dust and made Breckenridge Station, thirty-two miles on the road, in that hour.

When they registered with the timekeeper in Breckenridge they were seven hundred and forty-nine miles over the course. There were two hundred and fifty-nine miles between them and the Compton Motordrome.

"And the worst of the running yet to come," said Dan. "How many cars did he say were ahead of us?"

"Thirteen have gone on, having from fifteen minutes to two hours to run on to-day's record. And here comes a slew of them up the street," said Billy.

Indeed, there was a larger number of cars in Breckenridge that night than there had been at Greenbaugh at the end of the previous day's run.

In the morning the cars had to be started ten minutes apart as they were at the beginning of the endurance test. And it was raining—a fine, penetrating drizzle—that made the traveling most unpleasant. The wheels skidded, too, and the best car in the race could not make time over the slushy roads.

Besides, the second climb of the mountain chain was just ahead. The Speedwells struck it an hour before noon. Half way up the steep ascent they passed number seven—stuck in the muddy ruts. Chance and Burton were floundering around, trying to pry out their heavy car.

"This isn't any fun!" shouted Poole, recognizing the Speedwells. "But how did you manage to

catch up to us again?"

"We never would have escaped Chance Avery's friends outside of Greenbaugh if he'd had his way!" cried Billy in reply. "But now I tell you what it is, Burton: It looks to me as though we were seeing you for the last time in this race. Fare thee well!" he added with a mocking smile.

"You'd better not crow too loud, youngster," growled Dan. "We don't know what may happen to us yet."

But nothing could convince Billy now that they hadn't got Poole's car beaten. Their own lighter machine worked much better on the heavy road. 202

There were ten cars in advance of them when the Speedwells reached the pass through the hills and started down the incline which ended at the plain on which Riverdale, Compton, and neighboring towns were built. With seven of these cars they caught up at Lorillord at the end of their fourth day's run. They were then seventy-two miles from Compton. The three cars ahead were respectively sixty-eight miles, fifty-nine miles, and fifty-six miles from the end of the endurance run.

"If it clears off before morning, we're beaten," said Dan, with confidence. "But our car is a regular mudlark. If it keeps on raining we may plough through and catch up to all three of those other cars."

"Suppose they wait till it clears off before they start to-morrow?" suggested Billy.

"If you'll read your little book you'll find that isn't allowed. There's only fifteen hours' recess allowed between the end of one day's run and the beginning of another."

The boys were first up in the morning. The weather bureau reported no hope of a change in the falling weather; but the other autoists at the hotel hesitated to set forth early. 203

Not so, however, Dan and Billy. They had overhauled their car as usual the night before. They were well acquainted with the stretch of road before them. At seven o'clock they wheeled out before the hotel, took the time from the starter, and whirled away, spraying the mud on either side from under their wheels, in a wide fan.

Only one of their rivals was on the road before them, and Dan and Billy raced and passed that car within the first fifteen minutes, and did not see it again until it reached the Compton Motordrome.

There was one car, however, that kept close on their trail. They heard it frequently and sometimes caught glimpses of it; but it was so far away that neither Dan nor Billy could identify it. They, however, feared this speedy car. Indeed, although they knew now that they would arrive first at the end of the run, they were not sure that they would have won this glorious race.

It was with fear and trembling that they passed over the line, ran into the big arena and saw their time marked up on the board: A thousand and eight miles in forty-three hours and four minutes.

The car behind them shot into the motordrome and proved to be Mr. Darringford's.

"I believe I've beat you, boys!" he cried, leaping out of his car. 204

But the time keeper announced his time as forty-three hours, fifteen minutes, twenty-four seconds.

"I declare!" laughed the gentleman, "it will be nothing to brag of, no matter who wins the gold cup. The weather was against fast running yesterday and this morning. Here comes another!"

It was number seven. The heavy car rolled in beside the Speedwells' and came to a groaning halt. It was nearly shaken to pieces. Chance had certainly punished his partner's auto hard during those last few miles.

But to no purpose. Their time was forty-four hours flat, and there were several cars that beat number seven. Burton came and shook hands warmly with Dan and Billy, while Chance sneaked away.

"I just found out about what Chance did to you back at Farmingdale," Burton said. "I want you to know that I had nothing to do with any such mean business—nor did I know he put his friends at the seminary up to holding you back on the road. Mr. Briggs was at the hotel we stopped at last night and he had the whole story—and about your capturing the motor car robbers, too. I hope you've won the race. I'd like to have beaten you if I could have done so fairly; but Chance and I get through with each other right here and now—believe me!" 205

It was some time before the uncertainty regarding who had captured the race was over. Finally however, it was shown beyond doubt that the Speedwell boys were the winners. The nearest car to their record had made the distance in forty-three hours, nine and one-half minutes. Among the first few cars it had been a remarkably close race.

Dan and Billy went home by train and carried the handsome gold cup with them. The little speech Mr. Briggs made, praising their pluck, and particularly their bravery, made the ears of the boys burn. Their capture of the motor and bank robbers had been printed in the papers and Dan and Billy were lionized not a little when they got home.

The Riverdale *Star* again had a long story in it about them. And the editor ran a picture of their Breton-Melville car, too. The boys could have sold the auto at a fancy price had they so desired.

"I don't know but we're foolish not to take the offer," said Billy. "We might get a cheaper car, and own a motor launch beside. And I would love to have a launch by next spring."

But one day Mr. Baird, the bank cashier, sent for them. The boys learned that the three motor thieves had been convicted of the robbery of the bank, and had received sentences aggregating thirteen years. 206

"The Farmers' Bank has put to your joint account, boys, the sum of five hundred dollars," the cashier told them. "We do not claim that that entirely repays you for your work in identifying the robbers and causing their arrest. Mr. Crawley and I both feel we are still your debtors," and he shook the boys' hands warmly.

This unexpected windfall perhaps explains why our readers who have become interested in the adventures of Dan and Billy can follow their history further in the next volume of this series, to be entitled, "The Speedwell Boys and Their Power Launch; Or, To the Rescue of the Castaways."

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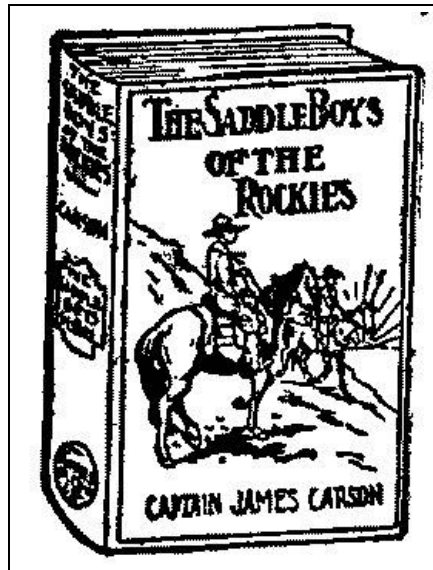
fortunes on the water. And having proved themselves to be courageous, industrious and honorable we may believe thoroughly in their future success.

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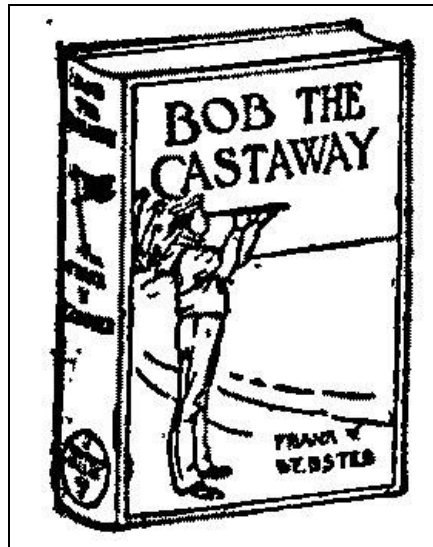
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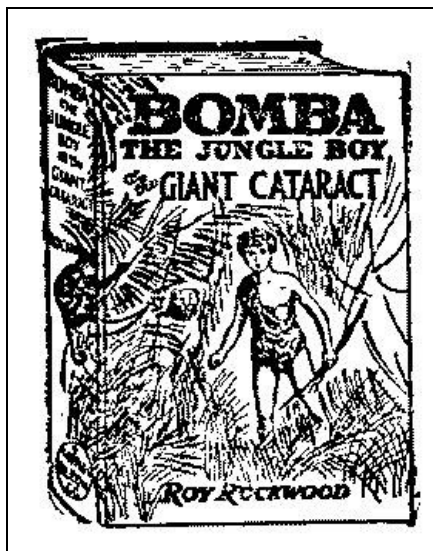
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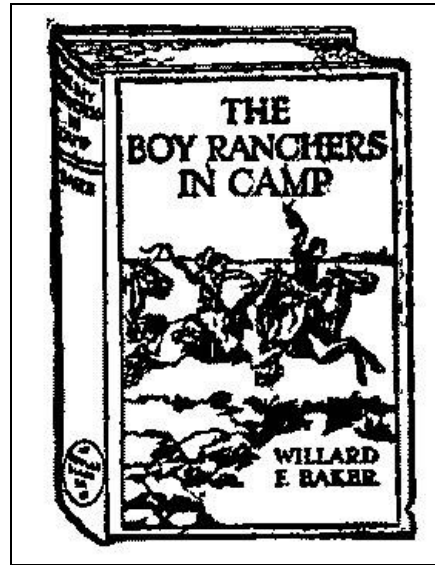
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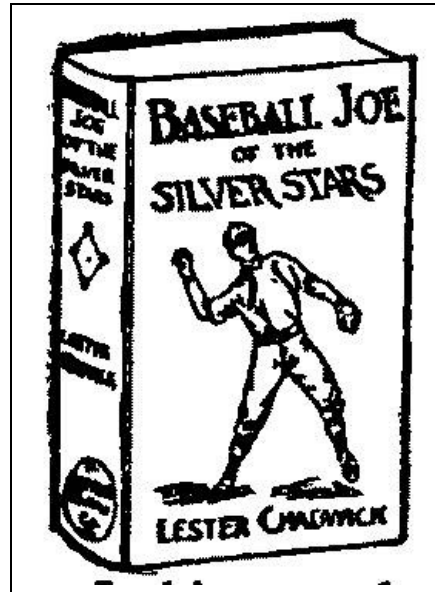
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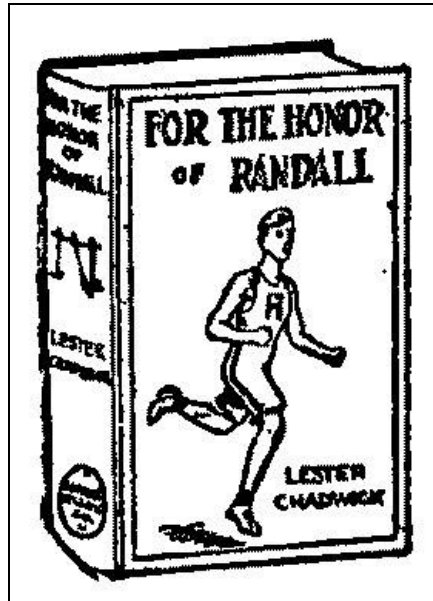
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Transcriber's Notes

Punctuation has been standardized. Minor spelling and typographic errors were corrected silently, except as noted below.

Table of contents, chapter 1 title - changed "Manoeuvres" to "Manœuvres" to be consistent with other usage in the book

page 28 - changed "re-action" to "reaction"

page 80 - changed "re-painted" to "repainted" to be consistent with other use of "repainting" and "repainted" in the book

page 167 - changed "XII" to "XXII"

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