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Title: Motor Matt's Make-and-Break; or, Advancing the Spark of Friendship

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Release date: May 9, 2016 [EBook #52025]

Language: English

Credits: Produced by David Edwards, Demian Katz and the Online Distributed Proofreading Team at <http://www.pgdp.net> (Images courtesy of the Digital Library@Villanova University (<http://digital.library.villanova.edu/>))

*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK MOTOR MATT'S MAKE-AND-BREAK; OR, ADVANCING THE SPARK OF FRIENDSHIP ***



MOTOR STORIES

THRILLING
ADVENTURE

MOTOR
FICTION

NO. 26

AUG. 21, 1909.

FIVE

CENTS

MOTOR MATT'S OR ADVANCING THE
MAKE-AND-BREAK SPARK OF FRIENDSHIP

BY THE AUTHOR
OF "MOTOR MATT"

MOTOR STORIES THRILLING ADVENTURE MOTOR FICTION
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*Issued Weekly. By subscription \$2.50 per year. Copyright, 1909, by STREET & SMITH, 79-80
Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y.*

No. 26.

NEW YORK, August 21, 1909.

Price Five Cents.

Motor Matt's "Make and Break"

OR,
ADVANCING THE SPARK OF FRIENDSHIP.

By the author of "MOTOR MATT."

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CHARACTERS THAT APPEAR IN THIS STORY.

Matt King, otherwise Motor Matt.

Joe McGlory, a young cowboy who proves himself a lad of worth and character, and whose eccentricities are all on the humorous side. A good chum to tie to—a point Motor Matt is quick to perceive.

Ping Pong, a Chinese boy who insists on working for Motor Matt, and who contrives to make himself valuable, perhaps invaluable.

Amos Murgatroyd, the unscrupulous broker whose fight against the Traquairs and Motor Matt finally results in complete disaster to himself.

Prebbles, Murgatroyd's old clerk, who resurrects the skeleton from the family closet, fights a good fight, and, with the help of the king of the motor boys, finally banishes the skeleton altogether.

Newt Prebbles, for whom Motor Matt undertakes to advance the spark of friendship; a youth who has erred, but who comes to a turning point and takes the right path.

Lieutenant Cameron, an officer in the Signal Corps, U. S. A., who proves to be the cousin of an old friend of Matt, and who nearly loses his life when the aëroplane is tested.

Jed Spearman, "Slim," "Hen," and three others, cowboys belonging with the Tin Cup outfit, who make some mistakes and are finally set right by the sheriff.

Roscoe, sheriff of Burleigh County, who plays a small but very important part.

CHAPTER I.

THE SKELETON IN THE CLOSET.

"Where's the old man, Prebbles?"

"Don't ask me, Jim. I haven't a notion."

"Well, there's a letter for him."

The postman dropped a letter on the desk in front of the little old man on the high stool, and the door slammed. Prebbles picked up the letter and blinked at it. For a while he sat staring like a person in a dream, then a gasp escaped his lips, and he slipped from the stool and carried the letter closer to the window.

It was almost sunset, and a neighboring building shut off the light, but there, close to the dusty window pane, the light was good enough. The letter dropped from Prebbles' shaking hand, and he fell back against the wall.

"It's from *him*," the old man mumbled; "it's—it's—"

The words died on his lips, and a choking gurgle arose in his throat. Trembling like a man with the palsy, Prebbles pulled himself together and staggered to the water cooler. He drew himself a glass, and the tumbler rattled against his teeth as he drank.

"This won't do," he said to himself, drawing a hand across his forehead in a dazed and bewildered way. "I've got to brace up, that's what I have. But what's Newt writing to *him* for? I—I can't understand that."

Prebbles went back and picked up the letter. He was still greatly shaken, although he was getting firmer hold of himself by swift degrees.

It was a very ordinary appearing letter to have aroused such an extraordinary state of mind in the old man. The address, in a peculiar backhand, was to "Mr. Amos Murgatroyd, Loan Broker, Jamestown, North Dakota."

Prebbles was Murgatroyd's clerk, and the only clerk in the loan office. For several weeks Murgatroyd had not been in Jamestown, and the work of the office—what little there was—fell to Prebbles.

During those weeks of absence, the broker had been doing unlawful things. Prebbles, knowing his employer well, expected nothing better of him; but just what Murgatroyd had been doing, the old clerk did not know.

Strange men, who might be detectives in disguise, were watching the office night and day. Prebbles had been keen enough to discover that.

It was the peculiar handwriting of the letter that had had such a powerful effect upon the old clerk. Not one man in a thousand, perhaps in ten thousand, used a pen as the writer of that letter to the broker had used it. Prebbles felt sure that he could not be mistaken—that there was not the least possibility of a mistake. He knew who the writer of the letter was, and for weeks the old man's dream by day and night was that he could discover the whereabouts of the man.

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The envelope was postmarked at Steele, N. D. The writer might be there, or he might not be there. After setting hand to the letter, it was more than possible he had mailed the letter at Steele and then gone to some other place.

There was one way to make sure—and only one: In order to find out positively where the writer of the letter was, Prebbles would have to open it and read it. Although a clerk in the office, his position did not give him the right to open his employer's personal mail; in fact, Murgatroyd had expressly forbidden this.

The letters received during Murgatroyd's absence—and they were but few—had been placed in the office safe. A week before, the collected letters had mysteriously vanished during the night, and in their place was left this scribbled line:

"Dropped in and got my mail. Say nothing to any one about my having been here.

A. M."

That was all, absolutely all, Prebbles had learned of his employer since he had left Jamestown several weeks before. Only two or three letters had collected in the safe since the others had been taken, and now this one from Steele must be added to them, unless—

Prebbles caught up a pair of scissors. Before he could snip off the end of the envelope, he paused. To deliberately open a letter addressed to some one else is a crime which, if brought to the attention of the postal authorities, is heavily punished. Prebbles was not afraid of the

punishment, for he believed that Murgatroyd himself was a fugitive; still, it was well to be wary.

Laying down the scissors, he ran the end of a pen-holder under the flap. But again he paused, realizing, with a tremor, that he belonged to the army, the Salvation Army. As a soldier in the ranks, had he the right to take this advantage of his employer? On the streets, Prebbles, because of his earnestness in the army work, he was known as "Old Hallelujah." Poor business, this, for Old Hallelujah to rifle his employer's mail!

With a groan, Prebbles pushed the letter aside and dropped his face in his hands. While he was thus humped over his desk, a picture of distress and misery, the door opened and a boy came in with a telegram. The message was for Prebbles, and he signed the receipt. As soon as the boy had left, he tore the message open.

"Forward mail at once to George Hobbes, Bismarck.

"HOBBS."

This was from Murgatroyd, and it was not the first time he had used the name of "George Hobbes."

Was Prebbles to send that letter on without first seeing what was inside it? Duty to his employer and duty to himself warred in his soul.

That last letter received for Murgatroyd might have been taken to the police. They could secure authority from Washington to open it. But, if the letter came from the person Prebbles suspected, he did not want the police to see it.

The six o'clock whistle blew, but Prebbles paid no attention. He was fighting with his Salvation Army principles, and the stake was the contents of that letter to Murgatroyd.

At seven o'clock, the haggard old man, the battle still going on in his breast, pushed the letter into his pocket and left the office, locking the door behind him. He did not go to the cheap eating house where he usually took his meals—there was no supper for him that night—but he proceeded directly to the "barracks," got into his dingy blue cap and coat, and took his cymbals. By eight, a dozen of the "faithful" were in the street, their torches flaring smokily, and the bass drum, the snare drum, the cymbals, and the tambourine whanging and clashing and rattling a quickstep.

Back and forth they marched, then rounded up on a corner and sang one of their army songs.

Old Hallelujah was particularly earnest, that night. His voice was loudest in the singing, and his exhorting was done with a fine fervor. His thin, crooked body straightened, and his eyes gleamed, and he struck the cymbals with unusual vigor.

"Ole Halleluyer is gittin' young ag'in," ran the comment of more than one bystander.

"If he's so pious," observed some one, "it's a wonder he don't break away from that ole thief, Murgatroyd."

It *was* a wonder, and no mistake. But the wonder was soon to cease.

At ten o'clock Prebbles and the rest were back in the barracks; and at ten-thirty Prebbles was in his five-by-ten little hall bedroom, calmly steaming open the letter to Murgatroyd. He had finished the fight, and had nerved himself for his first false step. But was it a false step? He had come to the conclusion that the end justified the means.

The letter, carefully written, jumped immediately into the business the writer of it had in mind.

"I must have more money or I shall tell all I know about you and the accident to Traquair and his aëroplane. I can't live on promises, and I'm not going to make a fugitive out of myself any longer just to shield you. You're a fugitive yourself, now, but I reckon you can dig up enough money for both of us. I have dropped down the line of the Northern Pacific to mail this letter; as soon as it is in the office, I'm going back to my headquarters at the mouth of Burnt Creek, on the Missouri, ten miles above Bismarck. You'd better meet me there at once, as it's the safest place you can find. I suppose you've made arrangements to have your mail forwarded, so I'm sending this to your office. *Bring plenty of money.*

NEWT PREBBLES."

For many a weary hour the old man paced the narrow confines of his room, reading the letter again and again and turning the contents over and over in his mind.

"The boy don't care for me, he's mad at me," muttered Prebbles wearily, "but if I can make up with him, maybe he can be saved. What's this about the accident to Traquair? What does Newt know about Murgatroyd? No matter what happens, I've got to get the boy out of Murgatroyd's clutches. If Newt stays with him, he'll be as bad as he is."

It was after midnight when Prebbles dropped weakly into a chair.

"Motor Matt will help me," he muttered.

The thought had come to him like a flash of inspiration. And another inspiration had come to him, as well. He made a copy of the letter, then placed the original in its envelope, carefully resealed it, and went to the broker's office. To take the collected letters from the safe, place them and the one from Steele in a large envelope and address the envelope to "Mr. George Hobbes, General

Delivery, Bismarck, N. D.," consumed only a few minutes.

"Motor Matt will know how to do the rest of it," thought the old clerk. "He's a clever lad, and he helps people. He helped Mrs. Traquair and he'll help Prebbles. I'm done with this office for good, and I'm glad of it."

He looked around the room with a grim laugh.

"I never thought I'd be pulling the pin on myself," he said aloud. "Maybe it's the poorhouse for mine, but I'll be glad to starve if I can make up with Newt and save him from that robber, Murgatroyd."

He turned off the light and closed and locked the office door. An hour later he had dropped the long envelope into a letter box and was back in his room. At seven in the morning he had boarded the northbound train for Minnewaukon and Devil's Lake. Motor Matt was at Fort Totten, on the south shore of the lake, and Prebbles would be at the fort in the afternoon.

The king of the motor boys was the old man's hope. Prebbles knew Matt, and had abundant faith in his ability to accomplish seemingly impossible things.

"He'll help me," murmured Prebbles, leaning back in one corner of the seat; "he helped Mrs. Traquair, and he'll help me."

CHAPTER II.

WHAT NEXT?

"An elegant day—for ducks," said Joe McGlory, turning from the window against which a torrent of rain was splashing. "I'd about got my nerve screwed up to the place where I was going to take a fly with you in the *Comet*, pard."

"Well," laughed Matt, "perhaps it will be a clear, still day to-morrow, Joe."

"The day may be all right, but whether I have the necessary amount of nerve is a question. It takes sand to sit on a couple of wings and let a gasoline engine push you through the clouds. Sufferin' jack rabbits! Why, Ping, that little, slant-eyed chink, has got more sand than me when it comes to slidin' around through the firmament on a couple o' squares of canvas. I'm disgusted with myself, and that's honest."

"It's as easy as falling off a log," remarked Lieutenant Cameron, of the Signal Corps. "I've been up with Matt, and I know. He does all the work, McGlory. You won't have to do anything but sit tight and hang on."

"Sit tight and hang on!" echoed the cowboy. "Sounds easy, don't it? At the same time, Cameron, you know that if your hair ain't parted in the middle, the overweight on one side is liable to make the *Comet* turn turtle."

"Hardly as bad as that," grinned Matt.

The three—Lieutenant Cameron, Motor Matt, and Joe McGlory—were in Cameron's quarters in officers' row at the post.

One window of the room overlooked the parade ground and, if the weather had not been so thick, would have given a view of the old barracks, beyond. Another window commanded a prospect of the lake, just now surging high and lashing its waters against the foot of the bluff on which the fort stood.

The post was practically abandoned, and no more than a handful of soldiers were in possession. Most of these comprised a detail of the Signal Corps sent there for the try-out of the Traquair aëroplane with which Matt had acquitted himself so creditably.

It was about three o'clock in the afternoon, and all day long Matt and McGlory had been housed up at the post on account of the storm.

Ping Pong, the Chinese boy, was watching the aëroplane, which was in a big shelter tent not far from the post trader's store.

The cowboy, grumbling over the cheerless prospect from each window of the room, finally returned to his rocking-chair and sat down.

"What next, Matt?" inquired Cameron. "You don't remain long in any one place, and I've been wondering when you'd leave here and where you'd go."

"We're liable to break out in any old place on the map," said McGlory. "That's what I like about trailing around with Pard Matt. You never know, from one week to the next, whether you're going to hang up your hat in Alaska or Panama. It's the uncertainty and the vast possibilities that hooked me."

"I haven't laid any plans," remarked the king of the motor boys. "The failure of the government to buy that aëroplane, after Joe and I had put up a lot of money and time building it, leaves me with the machine on my hands. It's something of a white elephant."

"It needn't be a white elephant," returned Cameron. "You can crate the *Comet* and leave it here at the post until you find a use for it. The other aëroplane which you and Mrs. Traquair sold the

war department is going to prove such a success that I am sure the government will be after this one. It will take a little time. There's a certain amount of red tape connected with the matter, you know."

"I'm hoping the government will buy the machine, but I don't feel like leaving it in storage while we're waiting for the war department to make up its mind."

"Why don't you go hunting for Murgatroyd?" inquired Cameron. "The government has offered a reward of one thousand dollars for his capture."

Murgatroyd had not only tried to wreck the first Traquair aëroplane at the time of the government trials at Fort Totten, but he had also resorted to crime in an attempt to secure, from Mrs. Traquair, a quarter section of land in Wells County, which, for some mysterious reason of his own, he was eager to get hold of. A deserter from the army, Cant Phillips by name, had assisted Murgatroyd in his nefarious work; and, for that, Phillips was now on his way to Fort Leavenworth to serve out a long sentence in a government prison, and Amos Murgatroyd was a fugitive.

Matt and his friends had been drawn into these lawless plots of the broker's, and Cameron supposed that, apart from the reward offered for the broker's capture, the young motorist would be eager to see him brought to book.

"I've lost interest in Murgatroyd," said Matt. "He's a scoundrel, and the government is dealing with him. What I want to do is to put the aëroplane to some profitable use. It was damaged considerably, when Murgatroyd brought it down with that rifle shot, and Joe and I have had to put up about three hundred more good dollars for repairs. Now that it's all shipshape and ready to fly once more, I feel as though we ought to make it earn something for us, instead of leaving it here at Fort Totten in storage."

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"Aëroplanes are built to sell, aren't they?" asked the lieutenant quizzically. "How can you make any profit off them if you don't sell them?"

"Well, for one thing," replied Matt, "aëro clubs, in different parts of the world, are offering prizes for flights in flying machines. This machine of Traquair's, as you know, Cameron, is the best one yet invented. It can go farther and do more than any other aëroplane on the market."

"I guess that's right," agreed Cameron.

"However, I'm not thinking of flying for a prize. We'd have to go to Europe in order to get busy with a project of that sort, and I don't want to leave the United States—at least, not for a while yet."

"I wouldn't go out of the country, Matt," said Cameron earnestly. "You're under contract, you know, not to dispose of any of the Traquair patents to foreign governments."

"I wasn't thinking of such a thing as that, Cameron. What I was thinking of is this: Yesterday I received a letter from a show—— one of these 'tented aggregations,' as they're called in the bills—offering five hundred dollars a week if we would travel with the outfit and give two short flights each day from the show grounds——"

McGlory was on his feet in an instant, waving his hand above his head and hurrahing.

"That hits me plump!" he cried. "I've always wanted to do something in a show. Whoop-ya! Matt, you old sphinx, why didn't you say something about this before?"

"I've been turning the proposition over in my mind," answered Matt. "Frankly, I don't like the idea of traveling with a show so much as I do the prospect of earning five hundred a week. I'll have to find out, too, whether the manager of the show is good for the money before I'll talk with him."

"Are we going to St. Paul for an interview?"

"No, to Fargo. The show will make that town in about a week, and I wired the manager that we would meet him there. The *Comet* will carry two light-weight passengers in addition to the operator, so you and Ping, Joe, will have to fly with me to Fargo. We can save railroad fare by going in the aëroplane, and that's why I want to get you accustomed to being in the air with the machine."

Cameron listened to Matt with an air that showed plainly his disapproval.

"You won't like the show business, Matt," he declared.

"I understand that," was the response, "but it's the salary that appeals to me."

"Furthermore," continued Cameron, "the manager of the show will probably dock your salary every time you fail to pull off a flight. You know how hard it is to bank on the weather. At least half of each week, I should say at a guess, you will find it too windy to go up."

"We'll have to have an understanding with the manager about that. It will have to be a pretty stiff wind, though, to keep me from flying. I've got the knack of handling the aëroplane, now, and a moderate breeze won't bother me at all."

"The show's the thing!" jubilated McGlory. "Speak to me about that, will you? The king of the motor boys and the *Comet* will be top-liners. And *draw*? Well, I should say! Why, they'll draw the people like a house afire."

The first Traquair aëroplane—the one sold to the government after the Fort Totten trials had been christened the *June Bug* by McGlory; but this one, built by Matt after the Traquair model,

he had himself named the *Comet*. This name was to perpetuate the memory of a motorcycle which Matt had owned and had used with telling effect in far-away Arizona.

"I'm sure I wish you all the luck in the world, Matt," said Cameron heartily, "although I tell you flat that this show project of yours doesn't commend itself to me worth a cent. However, you know your own business best. You have demonstrated, beyond all doubt, that the Traquair aeroplane can travel across country equally as well as around a prescribed course. This makes it possible for you to take your friends aboard and fly to Fargo, or to New York, if you want to—providing the wind isn't too strong and nothing goes wrong with the machinery, but——"

Cameron did not finish. Just at that moment a rap fell on the door, and he turned in his chair to ask who was outside.

"O'Hara, sor," came the response from the hall.

"What is it, O'Hara?"

"There's a little old man wid me, sor, who has just rained in from Minnewaukon. He's as damp as a fish and about all in, sor, an' he's afther wantin' t' spake wid Motor Matt."

"Bring him in, at once."

The door opened and Sergeant O'Hara entered the room, half dragging and half carrying a water-soaked individual who dropped feebly into a chair.

"Prebbles!" exclaimed the king of the motor boys, starting back in amazement.

CHAPTER III.

BRINGING THE SKELETON OUT.

The old clerk was so wrought up over the business he had in hand that he had given scant consideration to himself. All his life—ever since he had been cast adrift to make his own way in the world—he had been a clerk. The only outdoor exercise he had ever taken consisted in walking from his sleeping quarters to his boarding place, and thence to the office, back to the boarding place for lunch, then back once more for supper and to his lodgings for sleep. During the last few months, since joining the "army," he had had evening exercise of a strenuous nature, but it came at a time of life when it merely ran down the physical organism instead of building it up.

It was a bedraggled and shattered Prebbles that completed the trip by wagon from Minnewaukon to the post. This lap of the journey was through a driving rain, the old man being insufficiently protected by a thin horse blanket. His whole body was shaking, as he sat dripping in the chair, and his teeth clattered and rattled.

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Several times Prebbles tried to speak to Motor Matt, but the chill splintered his words into indistinguishable sounds.

O'Hara peered into the clerk's gray face, and then turned a significant look at his superior officer.

"Sor," said he, "th' ould chap ain't built t' shtand a couple av hours in th' rain."

"Get him something hot from the kitchen, sergeant," ordered Cameron. Then, when O'Hara had left, the lieutenant turned to Matt. "Bring him into my bedroom, Matt you and McGlory. I've some clothes he can put on. They'll be a mile too big for him, but they'll be dry."

"Don't try to talk now, Prebbles," admonished Matt, as he and the cowboy supported him into the next room. "You'll feel better in a little while and then you can talk all you please."

O'Hara came with a pitcher of hot milk, in which the post doctor had mixed a stimulant of some kind, and he was left in the bedroom to help Prebbles out of his wet clothes and into the dry ones.

"Who is he?" inquired Cameron, when he and the boys were once more back in the sitting room.

"Murgatroyd's clerk," replied Matt. "I saw him once, when I first reached Jamestown and called on the broker to make inquiries about Traquair's aeroplane."

"Then, if he works for a scoundrel like Murgatroyd, he must be of the same calibre. Like master, like man, you know."

"That old saw don't apply to this case, Cameron," said Matt earnestly. "Prebbles is a good deal of a man. He belongs to the Salvation Army and tries to be square with everybody. Why, the very first time I called on Murgatroyd, Prebbles warned me to beware of the broker."

"The old boy is the clear quill," said McGlory, "you take it from me. But what's he doing here? Sufferin' horned toads! Say, do you think he's come to tell us something about Murg?"

"By Jove," muttered Cameron, with suppressed excitement, "I'll bet that's what brought him!"

"Perhaps," said Matt. "We'll know all about it, in a little while."

In less than half an hour the old clerk emerged from the room, in a comfortable condition outside and in. The only thing about him that was at all damp was a sheet of folded paper which he carried in his hand.

"We had to swim, just about, from Minnewaukon over here," muttered Prebbles, as he lowered himself into a chair. "You're mighty good to an old man, Motor Matt, you and your friends."

"When did you leave Jamestown?" asked Matt.

"This morning."

"Then it was raining hard when you got off the train at Minnewaukon!"

"Raining pitchforks!"

"Why didn't you wait in the town until the rain was over?"

"There wasn't time," and the shake in Prebbles' high-pitched voice told of his growing excitement. "I just had to get here, that's all. What I've got to say, Motor Matt," he added, with an anxious look at Cameron and McGlory, "is—is mighty important."

"Perhaps we'd better go, then," said Cameron, with a look at the cowboy.

"Wait a minute," interposed Matt. "Has what you've got to say anything to do with Murgatroyd?"

"He's a robber," barked Prebbles: "he's worse'n a robber. Yes, Murg's mainly concerned in what I've got to say."

"Then it will be well for Cameron to stay and hear it. He represents the government, and the government is after Murgatroyd. As for McGlory, here, he's my pard, and I have few secrets from him."

"All right, then," returned Prebbles. "It ain't a pleasant story I'm goin' to tell—leastways not for me. I've got to dig a few old bones out of my past life, and I know you won't think hard of me, seeing as how I belong to the army. It's a great thing to belong," and the old man seemed to forget what he was about to say, for a few moments, and fell to musing.

The young motorist, the cowboy, and the lieutenant waited patiently for Prebbles to pull himself together and proceed. The old clerk's haggard face proved that he had suffered much, and his three auditors had only kindness and consideration for him.

"It's like this," went on the old man suddenly, pulling himself together and drawing a hand over his eyes. "I was married, a long while ago—so long it seems as though it must have been in another world. I reckon I was happy, then, but it didn't last long. My wife died in two years and left me with a boy to raise. I wonder if you know how hard it is for a man like me to bring up a boy without a good woman to help? The job was too much for Prebbles. I did the best I knew how, on only thirty-five dollars a month, givin' the lad an education—or trying to, rather, for he never took much to books and schooling. He ran away from me when he was fifteen, an' I didn't see him again until last spring, when he was twenty-one.

"Six years had made a big difference in that boy, friends. He had gone his way, and it wasn't a good way, either. He was in Jimtown just a month, gamblin' and carryin' on, and then him and me had a quarrel. They were bitter words we passed, me accusin' him of dishonoring his dead mother and his father, by his ways, and him twitting me of bein' a failure in life just because I didn't have the nerve to be dishonest and go to grafting. I must have said things that were awful—I can't remember—but all I do know is that Newt hit me. He knocked me down, right in Murgatroyd's office. Murg was out, at the time, and Newt and me was alone there together. When I came to, Newt was gone."

Again was there a silence, the old clerk fingering a scar on the side of his cheek.

"How like a serpent's tooth is an ungrateful son," went on Prebbles. "And yet, Newt wasn't all to blame. I wasn't the right sort to bring up a high-spirited boy. I wasn't able to do my duty. He left four hundred in gamblin' debts, when he went away. Murgatroyd showed me the I O U's with Newt's name to 'em. That's why I kept right on workin' for Murg, when I knew he was a robber, and after I had joined the army. I've been taking up those I O U's. Three of 'em been paid, and there's one more left; and here I've pulled the pin on myself before takin' up the other. I don't know what I'm going to do for a job," and a pathetic helplessness crept into the old clerk's voice, "but," and the voice strengthened grimly, "I started out on this thing and I'm going to see it through. What I want, is to make up with Newt. Lawsy, how that quarrel has worried me! I don't care about the way he hit me—he had the right, I guess—but I want to make up with him an' get him back."

[Pg 6]

The old man dropped his face in his hands. The other three looked at him sympathetically, and then exchanged significant glances.

"It isn't so hard, Prebbles," remarked Matt gently, "to advance the spark of friendship, and it ought to be more than easy in the case of you and your son."

Prebbles lifted his head and his forlorn face brightened.

"I knew you'd help me, Matt," and he put out his thin, clawlike hand to grip Matt's; "you help everybody that wants you to, and I knew sure you'd see me through this business. I did what I could for you—remember that? Mebby what I done didn't amount to such a terrible sight, but I put you next to Murgatroyd the first time you ever came into his office."

"Of course I'll do what I can to help you, Prebbles," said Matt reassuringly.

"It's make or break with me, this time," shivered Prebbles. "I'm pretty well along to stand such a row as I had with Newt."

"Where is Newt now?" inquired Matt.

"That's the point!" murmured Prebbles, trying to brace up in his chair. "Somehow, he's got under the thumb of Murgatroyd, or Murg's got under *his* thumb, I can't just understand which."

Prebbles smoothed out the damp sheet of folded paper on his knee.

"I belong to the army," he quavered, "and I don't feel that what I've done's wrong. A letter came to Murgatroyd, at the office, last night. It was addressed in Newt's handwriting. I opened that letter and made a copy of it; then I sent the letter on, with some others, to George Hobbes, Bismarck. That's the name Murg uses when he pretends he's lendin' money for some one else. He can gouge and strip a man, while sayin' he's actin' for Hobbes, see?"

Every one of the three who had listened to Prebbles was deeply interested. The bringing in of Murgatroyd seemed to offer a chance for capturing the rascal.

"Here's the letter, Motor Matt," said Prebbles. "Read it out loud, and then you'll all understand. There's a way to get Newt, and advance the spark of friendship, as you call it. By doin' that, the boy can be saved from the influence of Murgatroyd—and that's what I want."

Matt took the copy of the letter from the clerk's nerveless hand and read it aloud. Just as he finished, Prebbles slumped slowly forward out of his chair and fell in a senseless heap on the floor.

CHAPTER IV.

MARKING OUT A COURSE.

"Poor old codger!" exclaimed McGlory, as he and Matt lifted the clerk and carried him to the bed in the other room. "He's had more trouble than he could dodge, pard."

"He didn't try to dodge it, Joe," answered Matt quietly, "and that's to his credit. He's worn out. I'll bet that, while he was scrimping in order to take up his son's I O U's, he has hardly eaten enough to keep himself alive. His constitution is broken down, and this trip in the rain from Minnewaukon has topped off his endurance. It's only a faint, that's all, but it proves the old man has got to be looked after."

Matt and McGlory had revived Prebbles before Cameron came with the doctor. The latter, after listening to as much of the matter as the boys could tell him, felt the old man's pulse and shook his head gravely.

"We'll have to keep him in bed for a day or two, I think," he said.

"Don't say that!" begged Prebbles. "I got work to do, doctor! Besides, this isn't my bed—it belongs to Motor Matt's friend, Cameron, and——"

"Motor Matt's friend," put in the lieutenant, "is only too glad to give you his bed, Prebbles. I can sleep on the couch in the next room, and you can stay here until you're well enough to leave."

"But I can't stay here," cried Prebbles querulously. "Didn't you hear me say I had work to do? I've got to help Motor Matt—all of you know why."

"Anyhow, Prebbles," said Matt, "nothing can be done until morning. You stay here and keep quiet until then. Meanwhile, Cameron, McGlory, and I will mark out a course, and we'll tell you all about it before we begin following it. If you're able, you can go with us. If you're not able, you can stay here and feel sure that I'll carry out this make-and-break affair of yours just as though it was my own. You can trust me to advance the spark of friendship, can't you?"

"There ain't any one else I'd trust but you, Motor Matt," declared Prebbles. "But I'm going with you, in the morning. I haven't any money——"

"You don't need any," interrupted Cameron. "You're welcome to stay here as long as you please, at the government's expense. You have brought a clue which may lead to the capture of Murgatroyd, and the government has offered a reward of one thousand dollars for him."

"If he can be captured, Prebbles," added Matt, "the money will go to you."

"It'll come in handy, but—but it's Newt I want."

At a nod from the doctor, Matt, McGlory, and Cameron went into the other room and closed the door.

"Prebbles will never be able to leave here to-morrow morning," averred Cameron.

"It's up to McGlory and me," said Matt, "to do what we can."

"Give me a share in the work," begged Cameron. "Perhaps I can do something. If necessary, I'll get a furlough."

Matt was thoughtful for a few moments. Stepping to the window overlooking the parade ground, he peered out at the weather. The rain continued to come down in torrents, but there was a hint, overhead, that the storm would not last out the night.

"We have a good clue to Murgatroyd's whereabouts," said Matt presently, coming back and taking a chair facing his friends, "but there are several points to be considered. Prebbles sent on the original of his son's letter last night. That means that some time to-day Murgatroyd got the letter in Bismarck. If it is raining as hard, over on the Missouri, as it is here, it is unlikely that Murgatroyd went up the river to Burnt Creek to-day. With clearing weather, he'll probably go up to-morrow."

"Then," said Cameron, "it's our business to take a train for Jamestown at once, connect with a west-bound train there for Bismarck, and then take a team and drive from Bismarck to Burnt Creek."

"The afternoon train has left Minnewaukon," answered Matt, who seemed to have considered every phase of the matter, "and there is no other train south until to-morrow morning. That train, I think, connects with one on the main line for Bismarck, but we could hardly reach the town before late to-morrow afternoon, and it would be night before we could get to Burnt Creek. While we were losing all this time, what will Murgatroyd be doing?" [Pg 7]

"Why not get an automobile from Devil's Lake City," suggested Cameron, "and reach Jamestown in time to connect with an earlier train?"

"How will the roads be after this rain?" inquired Matt.

"That's so!" exclaimed Cameron, with a gloomy look from one of the windows. "These North Dakota roads are fine in dry weather, but they're little more than bogs after a rain like this. We can't use the automobile, that's sure, and Murgatroyd is likely to reach Burnt Creek before we can possibly get there. Will he and young Prebbles stay at Burnt Creek until we arrive? That's the point."

"It's so uncertain a point," said Matt, "that we can't take chances with it."

"We've *got* to take chances, pard," put in McGlory, "unless we charter an engine for the run to Jamestown."

"There's another way," asserted Matt.

"What other way is there?" asked Cameron.

"Well, first off, we can send a message at once to Bismarck, to the chief of police——"

"Sufferin' blockheads!" grunted McGlory. "I never thought of that."

"How are the police going to locate Murgatroyd?" went on Cameron. "The scoundrel is there under an assumed name."

"Why," said Matt, "tell the police, in the message, to arrest any man who calls at the post office and asks for mail for 'George Hobbes.'"

"Easy enough," muttered Cameron.

"No," proceeded Matt, "not so easy as you think, for it may be that Murgatroyd has already received the letter. But shoot the message through at once, Cameron, and let's do all we can, and as quick as we can."

The message was written out and sent to the telegraph office by O'Hara.

"Now," said Cameron, "assuming that that does the trick for Murgatroyd, there is still young Prebbles to think about. He'll wait at Burnt Creek, I take it, for Murgatroyd, and if Murgatroyd is captured, and isn't able to leave Bismarck, we can reach Burnt Creek in time to find our man and advance that 'spark of friendship'—which, to be perfectly candid, I haven't much faith in."

"I believe," said Matt, "that the greatest scoundrel that ever lived has an affection for his parents, somewhere deep down in his heart. If I'm any judge of human nature, that cowardly blow Newt gave his father has bothered the young fellow quite as much as it has that old man, in there," and Matt nodded toward the door of the bedroom. "Leaving out sentiment altogether, though, and our ability to reach Newt on Prebbles' behalf, there's something else in his letter that makes the biggest kind of a hit with me."

"What's that?" came from both Cameron and McGlory.

"Well, young Prebbles is asking Murgatroyd for money, and hinting at something he knows about the accident to Harry Traquair. You remember that Mrs. Traquair's husband lost his life, in Jamestown, by a fall with his aëroplane. It is possible that young Prebbles knows more about that accident than Murgatroyd wants him to know."

"Speak to me about that!" muttered the wide-eyed McGlory. "Matt, you old gilt-edged wonder, you're the best guesser that ever came down the pike! Give him the barest line on any old thing, Cameron, and this pard of mine will give you, offhand, all the dips, angles, and formations."

"This is plain enough, Joe," protested Matt.

"I can see it now," said Cameron, "but I couldn't before. There are big things to come out of this business, friends! I feel it in my bones."

"And the biggest thing," declared Matt, with feeling, "is making Newt Prebbles' peace with his father."

"Then," said Cameron, with sudden animation, "I'm to get leave and go with you by train, to-morrow morning, to Bismarck, on our way to Burnt Creek?"

Matt shook his head.

"That depends, Cameron," he answered, dropping a friendly hand on the lieutenant's knee.

"Depends on what?"

"Why, on whether it's a clear, still day or a stormy one."

Both Cameron and McGlory were puzzled.

"I can't see where that comes in," said the lieutenant.

"If it's a fine day, Joe and I will go to Burnt Creek with the *Comet*."

McGlory jumped in his chair.

"That's another time I missed the high jump!" he exclaimed. "Never once thought of the *Comet*."

"All roads are the same," went on Matt, "when you travel through the air. Apart from that, we can cut across lots, in the *Comet*, and do our forty to sixty miles an hour between here and the Missouri and Burnt Creek."

Cameron was dashed. He was eager to take part in the work of bagging Murgatroyd, and in finding Newt Prebbles.

"Suppose an accident happens to the flying machine," said he, "and you are dropped on the open prairie, fifty miles from anywhere? You wouldn't be gaining much time over the trip by train."

"We won't go by air ship," replied Matt, "unless we are very sure the conditions are right. Give me the proper conditions, and I'll guarantee no accident will happen to the *Comet*."

"But McGlory is scared of his life to fly in the machine," went on Cameron. "Why not leave him here and let me go with you?"

"Not in a thousand years!" clamored McGlory. "I'm going to ride in the *Comet*. That's flat."

"Well, the machine will carry three," proceeded Cameron. "Why not leave the Chinaman behind and take me?"

"The *Comet* will carry three light weights," laughed Matt. "You're too heavy, Cameron."

"That lets me out," deplored Cameron, "so far as the *Comet* is concerned, but I'll go by train. Maybe I'll arrive in time to be of some help."

"We may all have to go by train, lieutenant," returned Matt; "we won't know about that until tomorrow morning. For the present, though, the course is as I've marked it out."

"Well, let's go and eat," said Cameron, getting up as the notes of a bugle came to his ears. "There goes supper call. I'll hope for the best, but I'm for Burnt Creek, Matt, whether I go in the *Comet* or by train." [Pg 8]

Prebbles, they found, was asleep. O'Hara was brought in to sit with him while they were at supper, and all three left the room.

CHAPTER V.

THE START.

The following morning dawned clear, and bright, and still. It was a day made to order, so far as aeroplane flying was concerned.

Matt and his cowboy chum spent the night at the post. Before turning in, Matt got into sou'wester, slicker, and rubber boots and churned his way down to the aeroplane tent to see how Ping and the machine were getting along.

Everything was all right, and the heavy, water-proofed canvas was turning the rain nicely. Ping was in love with the *Comet*, and could be counted on to guard it as the apple of his eye.

"As fine a morning for your start as one could wish for," observed Cameron, with a note of regret in his voice, as he, and Matt, and McGlory came out of the mess hall and started along the board walk that edged the parade ground.

"I'm sorry, old chap, we can't take you with us," said Matt, "but the *Comet* is hardly a passenger craft, you know."

"What will you do with Prebbles, if he's well enough to go?"

"We'll let Ping come with you by train. Prebbles doesn't weigh much more than the Chinaman."

"Suppose Prebbles doesn't care to risk his neck in the machine?"

"I don't think he'll make any objection. However, we'll go to your quarters and make sure of that, right now. How did he pass the night?"

"Slept well, so O'Hara said. He was still sleeping when a private relieved the sergeant. McGlory," and here the lieutenant turned to the cowboy, "do you feel as much like flying, this morning, as you did last night?"

"Not half so much, Cameron," answered McGlory, with a tightening of his jaws, "but you couldn't keep me out of that flyin' machine with a shotgun. If we join a circus as air navigators, I've got to get used to flying, and I might as well begin right now."

"All right," answered the disappointed lieutenant, "I'll go by train."

The doctor was with Prebbles when Cameron and the boys reached the lieutenant's quarters. What is more, the doctor's face was graver than it had been the preceding afternoon. The old man was throwing himself around on the bed and muttering incoherently.

"Delirious," said the doctor, examining a temperature thermometer; "temperature a hundred and three, and he's as wild as a loon. Newt, Newt, Newt—that's the trend of his talk. You can't understand him, now, but he was talking plain enough when I got here."

"Is the sickness serious?" asked Matt.

"Pneumonia. Know what that is, don't you, Matt? It's hard enough on a person with a good constitution, but in a case like this, where the powers of resistance are almost exhausted, the end is pretty nearly a foregone conclusion. However, we're taking the trouble right at the beginning, and there's a chance I may break it up."

"Get a good nurse for him," said Matt, "and see that he gets all the care possible. The poor old chap was a good friend of mine, once, and I'll bear all the expense."

"Never mind that, Matt," spoke up Cameron. "If Murgatroyd is caught, because of the tip he gave us, the government will be owing Prebbles a lot of money."

Suddenly the old man sat up in bed, his eyes wide and staring vacantly, his arms stretched out in front of him and his hands beating together. His voice grew clear and distinct, echoing through the room with weird shrillness.

"At the cross, at the cross, there I first saw the light,
And the burden from my heart rolled away!
It was there by faith I received my sight,
And now I'm happy all the day!"

One verse was all. Spent with the effort, Prebbles dropped back on the pillow and continued his whispered muttering.

"It's one of those Salvation Army songs," observed the doctor.

"He thought he was marching and playing the cymbals," said Matt, in a low tone.

"Too bad!" exclaimed McGlory, shaking his head.

"Do all you can for him, doctor," urged Matt.

"I will, of course," was the answer, "but you may be able to do more for him than any one else, Matt."

"How so?"

"Why, by bringing back that scalawag son of his. That's the one thing the old man needs. If we can show Prebbles the boy, and make him realize that he's here, and sorry for the past, it will do a world of good."

"I'll bring him!" declared Matt, his voice vibrant with feeling. "Prebbles said this business would make or break him; and, as the work is on my shoulders now, it's make or break for me. Come on, Joe!"

He turned from the room, followed by McGlory and Cameron. Out of the post went the three, and down the hill and past the post trader's store, the king of the motor boys saying not a word; but, when the shelter tent was in sight, he turned to his companions.

"It's mighty odd," said he, "how chances to do a little good in the world will sometimes come a fellow's way. Through that rascal, Murgatroyd, I was led into giving a helping hand to Mrs. Traquair; and here, through the same man, I've a chance to help Prebbles."

"And you can bet your moccasins we'll help him," declared McGlory, "even though we lose that circus contract. Hey, pard?"

"We will!" answered Matt.

Ping had cooked himself a mess of rice on a camp stove near the shelter tent. He was just finishing his rations when the boys and the lieutenant came up.

"We're going out in the aëroplane to-day, Ping," announced Matt.

"Allee light," said the Chinaman, wiping off his chop sticks and slipping them into his blouse.

"You and McGlory are going with me," went on Matt.

The yellow face glowed, and the slant eyes sparkled.

"Hoop-a-la!" exulted Ping. "By Klismus, my likee sail in Cloud Joss!"

"I wish I had that heathen's nerve," muttered the cowboy. "It's plumb scandalous the way the joy bubbles out of him. All his life he's been glued to *terra firma*, same as me, but, from the way he acts, you'd think he'd spent most of his time on the wing. But mebbly he's only running in a rhinecaboo, and will dive into his wannegan as soon as we're ready to take a running start and climb into the air. We'll see."

"Pump up the bicycle tires, Joe," said Matt. "Get them good and hard. Ping," and Matt pointed to the haversack of provender McGlory had brought from the post, "stow that back of the seat on the lower wing. We may be gone two or three days."

"And mebbly we'll be cut off in our youth and bloom and never come back," observed McGlory, grabbing the air pump. "This is Matt's make and break," he grinned grewsomely; "we make an ascent and break our bloomin' necks. But who cares? We're helping a neighbor."

Ping crooned happily as he set about securing the haversack. He'd have jumped on a streak of chain lightning, if Matt had been going along with him to make the streak behave.

The *Comet* had two gasoline tanks, and both of these were full. The oil cups were also brimming, and there was a reserve supply to be drawn on in case of need.

Matt went over the machine carefully, as he always did before a flight, making sure that everything was tight and shipshape, and in perfect running order.

Even if anything went wrong with the motor, and the propeller ceased to drive the aéroplane ahead, there would have been no accident. The broad wings, or planes, would have glided down the air like twin parachutes and landed the flyers safely.

Cameron, having manfully smothered his disappointment, lent his hearty aid in getting the boys ready for the start. The machine, at the beginning of the flight, had to be driven forward on the bicycle wheels until the air under the wings offered sufficient resistance to lift the craft. A speed of thirty miles an hour was sufficient to carry the flying machine off the ground and launch it skyward.

But there was disappointment in store for the boys. The three, seated on the lower plane, Matt at the levers, tried again and again to send the machine fast enough along the muddy road to give it the required impetus to lift it. But the road was too heavy.

The trick of fortune caused Ping to gabble and jabber furiously, but McGlory watched and waited with passive willingness to accept whatever was to come.

"I guess you'll have to give up, Matt," said Cameron. "The road's too soft and you can't get a start."

Matt looked at the prairie alongside the road. The grass was short, and the springy turf seemed to offer some chance for a getaway.

"We'll try it there," said he, pointing to the trailside. "Give us a boost off the road, Cameron, and then start us."

The lieutenant assisted the laboring bicycle wheels to gain the roadside, and then pushed the machine straight off across the prairie. Matt threw every ounce of power into the wheels.

Usually the air ship took to wing in less than a hundred yards, but now the distance consumed by the start was three times that. For two hundred feet Cameron kept up and pushed; then the *Comet* went away from him at a steadily increasing pace. Finally the wheels lifted.

Quick as thought, Matt shifted the power to the propeller. The *Comet* dropped a little, then caught herself just as the wheels were brushing the grass and forged upward.

"Hoop-a-la!" cried Ping.

McGlory said nothing. His face was set, his eyes gleaming, and he was hanging to his seat with both hands.

CHAPTER VI.

A SHOT ACROSS THE BOWS.

The sensation of gliding through the air, entirely cut adrift from solid ground, is as novel as it is pleasant. The body seems suddenly to have acquired an indescribable lightness, and the spirits become equally buoyant. Dizziness, or vertigo, is unheard of among aéro-nauts. While on the ground a man may not be able to climb a ladder for a distance of ten feet without losing his head and falling, the same man can look downward for thousands of feet from a balloon with his nerves unruffled.

Joe McGlory, now for the first time leaping into the air with a flying machine, was holding his breath and hanging on desperately to keep himself from being shaken off his seat, but, to his astonishment, his fears were rapidly dying away within him.

The cowboy was a lad of pluck and daring; nevertheless, he had viewed his projected flight in a mood akin to panic. Although passionately fond of boats, yet the roll of a launch in a seaway always made him sick; in the same manner, perhaps, he was in love with flying machines, although it had taken a lot of strenuous work to get him to promise to go aloft.

The necessity, on account of wet ground, of juggling for a start, had thrown something of a wet blanket over McGlory's ardor. Once in the air, however, his enthusiasm arose as his fears went down.

Matt sat on the left side of the broad seat, firmly planted with his feet on the footrest and his body bent forward, one hand on the mechanism that expanded or contracted the great wings, and the other manipulating the rudder that gave the craft a vertical course.

On Matt's quickness of judgment and lightning-like celerity in shifting the levers, the lives of all three of the boys depended. Every change in the centre of air pressure—and this was shifting every second—had to be met with an expansion or contraction of the wings in order to make the centre of air pressure and the centre of gravity coincide at all times.

Upon Matt, therefore, fell all the labor and responsibility. He had no time to give to the scenery passing below, and what talking he indulged in was mechanical and of secondary importance to his work. But this is not to say that he missed all the pleasures of flying. A greater delight than that offered by the zest of danger and responsibility in the air would be hard to imagine. Every second his nerves were strung to tightest tension.

Ping sat between Matt and McGlory, his yellow hands clutching the rim of the seat between his knees. He was purring with happiness, like some overgrown cat, while a grin of heavenly joy parted his face as his eyes marked the muddy roads over which they were passing without hindrance.

Up and up Matt forced the machine until they reached a height of five hundred feet. Here the air was crisp and cool, and much steadier than the currents closer to the surface.

"Great!" shouted the cowboy. "I haven't the least fear that we're going to drop, and I'd just as lieve go out on the end of one of the wings and stand on my head." [Pg 10]

"Don't do it," laughed Matt, keeping his eyes straight ahead, while his hand trawled constantly back and forth with the lever controlling the wing ends.

"Him plenty fine!" cooed Ping.

"Fine ain't the name for it," said McGlory. "I'm so plumb tickled I can't sit still. And to think that I shied and side-stepped, when I might have been having this fun right along! Well, we can't be so wise all the time as we are just some of the time, and that's a fact. How far do you make it, Matt, to where we're going?"

"A little over a hundred miles, as the crow flies."

"As the *Comet* flies, you mean. How fast are we going?"

"Fifty miles an hour."

"That clip will drop us near Burnt Creek in two hours. Whoop-ya!"

The cowboy let out a yell from pure exhilaration. Not a thought regarding possible accident ran through his head. The engine was working as sweetly as any motor had ever worked, the propeller was whirling at a speed that made it look like a solid disk, and the great wings were plunging through the air with the steady, swooping motion of a hawk in full flight.

A huddle of houses rushed toward the *Comet*, far below, and vanished behind.

"What was that, pard?" cried the cowboy.

"Minnewaukon," answered Matt.

At that moment the young motorist shifted the rudder behind, which was the one giving the craft her right and left course, and they made a half turn. As the *Comet* came around and pointed her nose toward the southwest, she careened, throwing the right-hand wings sharply upward.

McGlory gave vent to a hair-raising yell. He was hurled against Ping, and Ping, in turn, was thrown against Matt.

"Right yourselves, pards," called Matt. "That was nothing. When we swing around a turn we're bound to roll a little. You can't expect more of an air ship, you know, than you can of a boat in the water. You keep track of the time, Ping. Joe, follow our course on the map. You can hang on with one hand and hold the map open with the other. We can't sail without a chart."

Matt had secured his open-face watch to a bracket directly above Ping's head. The boy could see the time-piece without shifting his position.

The map McGlory had in his pocket. Removing the map from his coat with one hand, the cowboy opened it upon his knee.

With a ruler, Matt had drawn a line from Minnewaukon straight to the point where Burnt Creek emptied into the Missouri. This line ran directly southwest, crossing four lines of railroad, and as many towns.

"How are we going to know we're keeping the course, pard?" inquired McGlory. "We ought to have a compass."

"A compass wouldn't have been a bad thing to bring along," returned Matt, "but we'll be able to keep the course, all right, by watching for the towns we're due to pass. The first town is Flora, on the branch road running northwest from Oberon. If I'm not mistaken, there it is to the right of us. Hang on, both of you! I'm going to drop down close, Joe, while you hail one of the citizens and ask him if I've got the name of the place right."

There was plenty of excitement in the little prairie village. Men, women, and children could be seen rushing out of their houses and gazing upward at the strange monster in the sky. Everybody in that section had heard of Motor Matt and his aeroplanes, so the curiosity and surprise were tempered with a certain amount of knowledge.

"Hello, neighbor!" roared McGlory, as the air ship swept downward to within fifty feet of the ground, "what town is this?"

"Flora," came the reply. "Light, strangers, an' roost in our front yard. Ma and the children would like to get a good look at your machine, and——"

The voice faded to rearward, and "ma and the children" had to be disappointed.

Having assured himself that he was right, Matt headed the *aéroplane* toward the skies, once more.

Settlers' shacks, and more pretentious farmhouses, raced along under them, and in every place where there were any human beings, intense excitement was manifested as the *Comet* winged its way onward.

In less than fifteen minutes after passing Flora, they caught sight of another railroad track and another huddle of buildings. It was the "Soo" road, and the town was Manfred.

"How long have we been in the air, Ping?" asked Matt.

"Fitty-fi' minutes," replied the Chinaman.

"Manfred ain't many miles from Sykestown, pard," said Joe, "and we must be within gunshot of that place where we had our troubles, a few days back."

"I'm glad we're giving the spot a wide berth," returned Matt, with a wry face. "We've got to make better time," he added, opening the throttle; "we're not doing as well as I thought."

The *Comet* hurled herself onward at faster speed. The air of their flight whistled and sang in the boys' ears, and hills underneath leaped at them and then vanished rearward with dizzying swiftness.

"I'd like to travel in an *aéroplane* all the time," remarked McGlory. "Sufferin' skyrockets! What's the use of hoofin' it, or ridin' in railroad cars, when you can pick up a pair of wings and a motor and go gallywhooping through the air?"

The machine was well over the coteaus, now, and the rough country would hold, with only now and then an occasional break, clear to the Missouri.

Another railroad, and a cluster of dwellings known as "Goodrich," were passed, and the *aéroplane* slid along over the corner of McLean County and into Burleigh.

They were drawing close to Burnt Creek, and everything was going swimmingly. Matt, notwithstanding the severe strain upon him, was not in the least tired. In a little less than two hours after leaving Fort Totten they crossed their last railroad—a branch running northward from Bismarck. The town, near where they winged over the steel rails, was down on the map as "Arnold."

"Speak to me about this!" cried McGlory. "There's a creek under us, Matt, and I'll bet it's the one we're looking for."

"We're finding something else we were not looking for," answered the king of the motor boys grimly.

"What's that?" queried McGlory.

"Look straight ahead at the top of the next hill."

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McGlory turned his eyes in the direction indicated. A number of rough-looking horsemen, evidently cowboys, were scattered over the hill. They were armed with rifles, and were spurring back and forth in an apparent desire to get directly in front of the *Comet*.

"Why, pard," shouted McGlory, "they're punchers, same as me. Punchers are a friendly lot, and that outfit wouldn't no more think of cutting up rough with us than——"

The words were taken out of the cowboy's mouth by the sharp crack of a rifle. One of the horsemen had fired, his bullet singing through the air in front of the *Comet*.

"That's across our bows," said Matt, "and it's an invitation to come down."

The "invitation" was seconded by a yell the import of which there was no mistaking.

"Hit the airth, you, up thar, or we'll bring ye down wrong-side up!"

"Nice outfit *they* are!" grunted McGlory. "Get into the sky a couple of miles, Matt, and—— Sufferin' terrors! What are you about?"

Motor Matt had pointed the air ship earthward, and was gliding toward the hilltop.

"No use, Joe," Matt answered. "They could hit us with their bullets and wreck us before we got out of range. They want to talk with us, and we might as well humor them."

"Mighty peculiar way for a lot of cowboys to act," muttered McGlory.

"No likee," said Ping.

CHAPTER VII.

THE MAN HUNTERS.

Motor Matt was not anticipating any serious trouble with the cowboys. The worst that could possibly happen, he believed, was a slight delay while the curiosity of the horsemen regarding the *aéroplane* was satisfied.

Armed cattlemen are proverbially reckless. A refusal to alight would certainly have made the

Comet a target for half a dozen guns, and it was a foregone conclusion that not all the bullets would have gone wild.

The cowboys, of course, knew nothing about aëroplanes. They wanted Matt to come down, no matter whether the landing was made in a spot from which the aëroplane could take a fresh start, or in a place where a start would be impossible.

The hill on which the horsemen were posted was a high one, and had smooth, treeless slopes on all sides. It was, in fact, a veritable turf-covered coteau.

Matt was planning to alight on the very crest of the hill. When he and his pards were ready to take wing again, he thought they could dash down the hill slope, and be in the air before the foot of the hill was reached.

The horses of the men below were frightened by the aëroplane, and began to kick and plunge. The trained riders, however, held them steady with one hand while gripping rifles with the other.

The flying machine circled obediently in answer to her steering apparatus, and landed on the crest of the hill with hardly a jar. As the craft rested there, the boys got out to stretch their cramped legs and inquire what the cowboys wanted. The latter had spurred their restive animals close, and were grouped in a circle about the *Comet*.

"Well, I'll be gosh-hanged!" muttered one, staring at the machine with jaws agape.

"Me, too!" murmured another. "Gee, man, but this here's hard ter believe."

"Hustlin' around through the air," put in another, "same as I go slashin' over the range on a bronk."

The fourth man gave less heed to his amazement than he did to the business immediately in hand.

"Ain't either one o' 'em George Hobbes?" he averred, looking Matt, McGlory, and Ping over with some disappointment.

That name, falling from the cowboy's lips, caused Matt and McGlory to exchange wondering glances.

"What did you stop us for?" asked Matt.

"Me an' Slim, thar, thought ye mout hev Hobbes aboard that thing-um-bob," went on the last speaker. "We're from the Tin Cup Ranch, us fellers are. I'm Jed Spearman, the foreman. Whar d'ye hail from?"

"From Fort Totten."

"When d'ye leave thar?"

"About two hours ago."

"Come off! Totten's a good hunnerd an' twenty miles from here."

"Well," laughed Matt, "we can travel sixty miles an hour, when we let ourselves out, and bad roads can't stop us. But tell us about this man, Hobbes. Who is he?"

"He's a tinhorn, that's what. He blowed inter the Tin Cup bunkhouse, last night, an' cleaned us all out in a leetle game o' one-call-two."

"If you're foolish enough to gamble," said Matt, "you ought to have the nerve to take the consequences."

"Gad-hook it all," spoke up the man referred to as "Slim," "I ain't puttin' up no holler when I loses fair, but this Hobbes person is that rank with his cold decks, his table hold outs, an' his extra aces, that I blushes ter think o' how we was all roped in."

"He cheated you?"

"Cheat?" echoed Jed Spearman, "waal, no. From the way we sized it up when we got tergether this mornin', it was jest plain rob'ry. Hobbes headed this way, an' we slid inter our saddles an' follered. But we've lost the trail, an' was jest commuin' with ourselves ter find out what jump ter make next, when this thing"—he waved his hand toward the aëroplane—"swung inter sight agin' the sky. We seen you three aboard the thing, an' got the fool notion that mebbly Hebbes was one o' ye."

"Didn't you find out last night that you had been cheated?" asked Matt.

"Nary. If we had, pilgrim, ye kin gamble a stack we'd have took arter this Hobbes person right then. It was only this mornin' when Slim diskivered the deck o' keerds belongin' ter the feller, which same he had left behind most unaccountable, that we sensed how bad we'd been done. The' was an extry set o' aces with that pack, the backs was all readers, an' the hull lay-out was that peculiar we wasn't more'n a brace o' shakes makin' up our minds what ter do."

"What sort of a looking man was this Hobbes?"

"Dead ringer fer a cattleman, neighbor. Blue eyes, well set up, an' youngish."

Matt was surprised. He was expecting to receive a description of Murgatroyd, but the specifications did not fit the broker. Murgatroyd was a large, lean man with black, gimlet-like eyes.

"What's yer bizness in these parts?" demanded Jed Spearman. "Jest takin' a leetle fly fer the fun

o' the thing?"

"Well," answered Matt, "not exactly."

"Ain't in no rush, are ye?"

"Yes. Now that you know the man Hobbes isn't with us, we'll get aboard and resume our flight."

Matt stepped toward the aeroplane, with the intention of taking his place at the driving levers. But Jed Spearman stayed him with a grip of the arm.

"I got er notion," said Jed, "that I'd like ter take a ride in that thing myself." The other cowboys gave a roar of wild appreciation and approval. "Ye say ye kin do sixty miles an hour," proceeded Jed. "I'm goin' back ter the Tin Cup Ranch ter see if the other party that went out arter Hobbes had any success. It's thirty miles ter the Tin Cup, an' ye ort ter git me thar an' back inside o' an hour—onless ye was puttin' up a summer breeze when ye told how fast this here dufunny machine could travel. Hey? How does it hit ye?"

Motor Matt was taken all aback. An hour's delay might spell ruin so far as meeting Newt Prebbles at the mouth of Burnt Creek was concerned.

"We're in too much of a hurry," said Matt, "and we can't spare the time. I'd like to oblige you, Spearman, but it's out of the question."

"No more it ain't out o' the question," growled Spearman. "I'm pinin' ter take a ride in that thar machine, an' ye kin help us in our hunt fer Hobbes if ye'll only take me back ter the ranch. I reckon yore bizness ain't any more important than what ours is."

"Make him take ye, Jed!" howled the other punchers. "If he won't, we'll make kindlin' wood out er the ole buzzard."

The temper of the cowboys was such that Matt was in a quandary. While he was turning the situation over in his mind, McGlory stepped forward and took part in the talk.

"Say, you," he cried angrily, "what you putting up this kind of a deal on us for? You can't make us toe the mark by putting the bud to us, and if you try it, we'll pull till the latigoes snap."

"Don't git sassy," said Jed, in a patronizing tone. "We're too many fer ye, kid. Ridin' in that thing'll be more fun fer me than a three-ring circus, say nothin' o' the help it'll be fer us ter find out whether the other bunch o' man hunters struck 'signs' er not. Step back, an' sing small. Here, Slim, you take charge o' my hoss."

The foreman passed his bridle reins to Slim, dismounted, and laid his gun on the ground.

"We'll have to wait here till ye git back, won't we?" asked Slim.

"Sure," replied Jed. "We've lost the trail, an' thar ain't no manner o' use ter keep on until we find out somethin'."

"Then I'm goin' ter git down," said Slim. "We kin bunch up the critters an' smoke a little."

McGlory's temper was rapidly growing. The cool way in which Jed Spearman was planning to appropriate the *Comet* was more than McGlory could stand.

"You're a lot of tinhorns!" he cried. "This lad here," he waved his hand toward the king of the motor boys, "is Motor Matt, and he's making this flight on government business, mainly. You keep hands off, or you'll get into trouble."

"That's me!" whooped Spearman. "Trouble! I live on *that*. Get ready that flyin' machine, kase I'm hungry ter do my sixty miles an hour on the way back ter headquarters."

An idea suddenly popped into McGlory's head.

"This way, Matt," said he, stepping off to one side and beckoning Matt to follow.

The cowboys were a little suspicious, but their curiosity prompted them to inspect the *Comet* and leave Matt and McGlory to their own devices.

"What do you think, pard?" asked McGlory, when he and Matt were by themselves.

"I think it won't do to have any delay," replied Matt, "but I don't just see how we're going to avoid it. If it wasn't for those rifles——" He cast a look at the cowboys and shrugged his shoulders.

"I've got a notion we can fool the punchers," said McGlory, "but Ping and I will have to be left behind, if we do it. You'll be going it alone, from here on. Think you can manage it?"

"I'll try anything," answered Matt. "All I want is to get away. Who this gambler the cowboys call George Hobbes is, I haven't the least idea. Their description of the fellow doesn't tally with the description of Murgatroyd, and the whole affair is beginning to have a queer look. I don't think there's any time to be lost."

"No more there isn't," replied McGlory. "Ping and I can wander on to the mouth of Burnt Creek on foot as soon as we can shake the punchers, and you can look for us there. What I'm plannin' is this."

Thereupon McGlory hastily sketched his swiftly formed plan. It had rather a venturesome look, to Matt, and might, or might not, win out. There was nothing to do, however, but to try it.

"What you shorthorns gassin' about?" yelled Jed Spearman. "I'm all ready ter fly, an' time's skurse."

Matt and McGlory, having finished their brief talk, walked back to the cowboys.

CHAPTER VIII.

FOOLING THE COWBOYS.

"If you're bound to make Motor Matt take you to the ranch, Spearman," said McGlory, "that means that the chink and me'll have to wait here till you get back."

"Which is what I was expectin'," answered Spearman. "I don't want ter feel cramped in that thar machine."

"The rest of you will have to give the machine a start down the hill," went on McGlory innocently. "When the craft gets a start, and is in the air, you'll have to watch your chance, Spearman, and jump aboard."

"Jump on when she's goin' sixty miles an hour?" howled Spearman. "Say, what d'ye think my scalp's wuth?"

"It won't be going sixty miles an hour," parried McGlory.

Matt had already taken his seat in the *Comet*.

"Why kain't I git in thar with him," asked Spearman, "an' travel with the machine right from the start?"

"Sufferin' centipedes!" exclaimed McGlory, in well-feigned disgust. "Say, I reckon you don't savvy a whole lot about flyin' machines. She's got to have a runnin' start, as light as possible; then, when she begins to skyhoot, you climb aboard. I guess you don't *want* to take a trip aloft."

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"Guess again," cried Spearman. "I kin jump some, if it comes ter that, only"—and here he turned to Matt, who was quietly waiting—"fly low an' slow."

"All of you have got to help," proceeded Matt's cowboy pard briskly. "Lay your guns away, somewhere, so you can give both hands to your work."

None of the cowboys had six-shooters, but all were armed with rifles. This was rather odd, but, nevertheless, a fact. When they started out after George Hobbes, the Tin Cup men had been counting on target practice at long range.

The horses had already been bunched with their heads together. Four of the cowboys, who were still holding their rifles, stepped hilariously over to where Slim and Spearman had deposited their guns, and dropped their weapons.

McGlory gave Ping a significant look. The young Chinaman stared blankly for a moment, and then a complacent grin settled over his yellow face. He was as sharp as a steel trap when it came to understanding guileful things. Ping knew what was expected of him, and he was ready.

The *Comet* was headed down the western slope of the hill. Four of the cowboys placed themselves at the lower wings, two on each side, ready to run with the machine when they received the word. Spearman, in his shirt sleeves, was tying one end of a riata to the timber which passengers in the aeroplane used as a footrest.

"What are you doing that for?" demanded Matt.

Spearman straightened up with a wink.

"Waal, it's fer two things, pilgrim," he answered jocosely. "Fust off, by hangin' ter the rope, Slim an' me kin pull while the rest o' the boys push. Then, ag'in, if ye've got any little trick up yer sleeve, I'll have a line on yer ole sky sailer an' ye kain't leave me behind, not noways."

That rope troubled Matt, but he could voice no reasonable objection to it. Already McGlory had played on the credulity of the punchers to the limit, and it was not safe to go much farther.

"I'm goin' ter have yer job, Jed," rallied one of the cowboys, "if ye fall outen the machine an' bust yer neck."

"Don't ye take my job till I'm planted, Hen, that's all," grinned the foreman. "I been wantin' a new sensation fer quite a spell, an' I guess here's the place whar I connect with it."

If the plans of Matt and his friends worked out successfully, Jed Spearman was to "connect with a sensation" vastly different from what he was expecting. McGlory was chuckling to himself over the prospect.

The cowboys, in their uproarious mood, did not seem to notice that neither McGlory nor Ping were helping to give the aeroplane a running start down the hill.

"Ye'll be a reg'lar human skyrocket, Jed," remarked Slim, "if ye travel at the rate o' sixty miles an hour."

"I'll be goin' some, an' that's shore," answered the foreman. "Wonder what folks'll invent next? Say, thar! If ye're ready, let's start."

Matt started the motor. This evidence of power rather awed the cowboys, and their grins faded as they watched and listened.

"Now," instructed Matt, "the minute I turn the power into the bicycle wheels, you fellows begin to run the machine downhill."

"Let 'er go!" came the whooping chorus.

Jed Spearman and Slim, tailed on to a forty-foot riata, were some twenty feet ahead of the aëroplane.

"Now!" cried Matt.

The bicycle wheels began to take the push, and the *Comet* started down the slope, the two cowboys ahead pulling, and the four at the wings pushing.

Naturally, the descent aided the motor. There had not been as much rain, in that part of the State, as there had been in the Devil's Lake country, and the turf was fairly dry and afforded tolerably good wheeling.

The cowboys roared with delight as they ran awkwardly in their tight, high-heeled boots. What happened was only natural, in the circumstances, although quite unexpected to the ignorant cattlemen.

In less than fifty feet the aëroplane was going too fast for the runners. The four at the wings had to let go; and the two at the rope, finding themselves in imminent danger of being run over, dropped the rope and leaped to one side.

All six of the cowboys watched while the *Comet*, catching the air under her outspread pinions, mounted gracefully—and then continued to mount, the riata trailing beneath.

"He ain't comin' back fer ye, Jed!" howled Slim.

"Here, you!" bellowed the foreman. "Whar ye goin'? What kinder way is that ter treat a feller? Come back, or I'll send a bullet arter ye!"

Matt paid no attention. He was following, to the very letter, the plan McGlory had formed, and was rushing at speed in the direction of the Missouri and the mouth of Burnt Creek.

"Git yer guns!" cried the wrathful Spearman. "Shoot him up!"

It is doubtful whether the cowboys would have been able to retrace their way up the hill and secure their guns before Matt had got out of range. But they had not a chance to put their purpose to the test, for the contingency had been guarded against.

When the cowboys reached the top of the hill, Ping was at the foot of it on the eastern side, traveling as fast as his legs could carry him; and clasped in his arms were the six rifles!

"Blazes ter blazes an' all hands round!" fumed the enraged Jed. "The chink's runnin' off with the guns so'st we kain't shoot. Hosses, boys! Capter the little heathen!"

And here, again, were the cowboys doomed to disappointment. Well beyond the foot of the hill, on the south side, was McGlory. He was riding one horse and leading the other five bronchos.

"Done!" gasped Slim, pulling off his Stetson and slamming it on the ground, "done ter a turn! Who'd 'a' thort it possible?"

"It was a frame-up!" raged the foreman. "The two of 'em hatched the plan while they were talkin'. I was a fool ter let 'em palaver like what they done, kase I mout hev knowed they was up ter somethin'. The chink lifted the guns on us, an' t'other feller lifted the hosses so'st we couldn't ketch the chink; an', as for *him*," and Jed Spearman turned and looked westward to where the aëroplane was a mere speck in the sky, "as fer him, I say, if that flyin' machine ever comes crowhoppin' eround whar I am, I'll shore put it out o' bizness!"

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"An' ye didn't fly, arter all!" bubbled Slim.

"You hesh," grunted Spearman, "or thar'll be fireworks."

"Ye're purty good at jumpin'," jeered another, "so why don't ye jump aboard? I don't reckon she's more'n two mile off an' a mile high."

"Oh," fretted the foreman, "if I *only* had a gun! Say, let up er I'll use my hands."

"An' we had to push," scoffed Slim; "oh, yas, *indeed!* We had ter git off'n our hosses, an' put down our guns, an' push. Never reckoned nothin', did we? Never a thing. But they knowed, them fellers did—they knowed ev'ry minit jest what they was about. Next time I fool with this here Motor Matt an' his flyin' machine, ye'll know it."

"An' Jed had a string on her," mourned another. "Sure he did. Why, Jed had his rope fast to her so'st ter hang on in case Motor Matt had anythin' up his sleeve. Well, well! I wonder——"

But Spearman could stand no more. With a fierce whoop, he rushed down the hill along the path taken by the Chinaman. Across, on an opposite uplift, Ping could be seen. He was adding insult to injury by hopping up and down and making derisive gestures with one hand.

"We got ter overhaul the chink an' git back them guns," shouted Slim. "Come on, boys!"

The remaining five started after Spearman. Ping, observing the pursuit, hopped out of sight over the top of the hill. Burdened as he was, he could not hope to escape the pursuing cowboys. But he had faith in McGlory—and McGlory did not fail him.

When the cowboys reached the top of the next hill, they could look down and see McGlory and the six horses. Ping was mounting one of the animals, and when he and McGlory vanished around the base of another coteau—which they were not slow in doing—they took the rifles with them.

The cowboys had to pursue, and they had to do their pursuing on foot. If a cattleman hates one thing more than another it is walking, and the six disgruntled Tin Cup men limped and staggered and toiled onward through the coteaus, following the trail for at least four miles. When they

finally ran it out, they found their horses and their guns, but McGlory and Ping were conspicuous by their absence.

CHAPTER IX.

THE TRAILING ROPE.

Motor Matt could not look behind and take note of how events were progressing on the hill. He could only hope that McGlory would carry out the rest of his plan without any setbacks, and that he and Ping would get safely away from the foiled cattlemen.

The ease with which the boys had played upon the ignorance and credulity of the high-handed cowpunchers, would have been laughable could the young motorist have known how successfully the rest of McGlory's plot was to be carried out. As the matter stood, Matt was worrying too much to enjoy the situation.

He carried away a memento of the recent trouble in the shape of the trailing rope. The forty-foot line hung downward, swinging to right and left and giving frightful pitches to the *Comet* in spite of Matt's manipulation of the wing ends.

Bending down, he tried with one hand to untie the riata and rid the machine of its weight, but the knot had been drawn too tight by the pulling of Spearman and Slim. As a compromise, Matt pulled the rope in and dropped it in the seats recently occupied by McGlory and Ping.

Now for the mouth of Burnt Creek, and the carrying out of the purpose that had brought Matt into that section. The mystery connected with the "George Hobbes" the cowboys were looking for, and the success or failure of McGlory and Ping in their final clash with the Tin Cup men, the king of the motor boys put resolutely from his mind. He was now to look for Newt Prebbles and advance the spark of friendship in behalf of the poor old man at Fort Totten.

Matt conceived that the easiest way to reach the mouth of Burnt Creek was to hover over the stream and follow it to its junction with the Missouri. This manœuvre he at once put into operation.

The creek was as crooked as could well be imagined, and twisted and writhed among the coteaus, carrying with it, on either bank, a scant growth of cottonwoods. Matt cut off the corners, flying high enough to clear the tops of the neighboring hills, and soon had the broad stretch of the Upper Missouri in plain view ahead of him.

In a clump of cottonwoods, near the mouth of the creek, was a small shack. Matt's view of the shanty was not good, on account of the trees, and he could not tell whether or not there was any one about the place.

He was just looking for a spot, on the river bank, where he could make a comfortable landing, when he was startled by discovering a skiff.

The skiff was in the river, well off the mouth of the creek, and was heading for the western bank of the Missouri. There was one man in the boat, and he was using his oars frantically, watching the *Comet* as he rowed.

"That may be George Hobbes," thought Matt, "and it may be Newt Prebbles. In any event the fellow, whoever he is, thinks I'm pursuing him. I'll drop lower and give him a hail."

As the *Comet* settled downward over the surface of the river, the man in the skiff redoubled his efforts with the oars. He seemed to be seized with an unreasoning panic.

"Hello, below there!" shouted Matt.

To slow the aëroplane too much would mean a drop into the water, for a certain rate of flight was necessary in order to keep the machine aloft.

As Matt called, he passed on beyond the boat, described a turn over the middle of the river, and came back toward the eastern bank.

The man made no response.

"Are you Newt Prebbles?" yelled Matt.

The other shouted something, in an angry tone, the exact import of which the young motorist could not catch. Taking his right hand from the oar, the man jerked a revolver from his belt.

"Don't shoot!" cried Matt. "I'm a friend of yours."

The last word was snipped off in the incisive crack of the weapon. The bit of lead zipped past Matt's head and bored a hole through the upper wing of the air ship.

"Stop that!" called Matt sternly, pointing the aëroplane higher and turning again when over the eastern bank. [Pg 15]

Whatever he did, he realized that he must not expose the motor and propeller to a stray bullet.

But no more shots were fired.

Matt wondered at this until he had faced the machine about and was able to observe what was going on below.

The man in the skiff had lost an oar. In releasing his hand to use the revolver, the oar had slipped from the rowlock into the water.

A frantic effort was being made by the man to recover the oar; and so wild and inconsidered was the attempt that the skiff went over, throwing its occupant into the river.

"Help!" came the cry, as the man, thrashing and floundering, bobbed to the surface of the river between the overturned boat and the oar.

It was evident, at a glance, that he could not swim, or that he could swim so little the mere weight of his clothes was enough to drag him under.

"Keep your nerve!" cried Matt encouragingly. "I'll help you in a minute."

The *Comet* was well to the westward of the man. Matt turned her sharply, at the same time bringing her as close to the water as he dared. Then, with one hand on the lever controlling the wing tips, with the other he reached for the rope on the seat beside him.

Laying a course to pass directly over the man, Matt leaned forward and flung the riata downward. The sinuous coils straightened out as the rope descended, the lower end swishing through the water.

"Catch the rope and hold fast!" cried Motor Matt, as the aëroplane skimmed over the surface of the river.

There would be a jolt when the *Comet* took up the slack in the riata, providing the man were successful in laying hold of the line. Would the jolt disengage the man's hands, or have any serious effect on the *Comet*?

By that time the aëroplane was so far beyond the man that Matt could not see what he was doing. Holding his breath, the king of the motor boys braced himself and waited.

In perhaps a second the *Comet* reeled and shivered as though under a blow. Quickly Matt turned full speed into the propeller, and the machine steadied itself and began to tug at the weight underneath and behind.

Then, slowly, the aëroplane mounted upward. At a height of fifty feet, Matt could look down and see a dripping form, swaying and gyrating at the end of the riata.

"Can you hang on?" called Matt.

"Yes," was the response from below, "if you don't want me to hang on too long."

"No more than a minute. By that time I'll have you ashore."

The heavy weight, swinging under the machine like a pendulum, made the aëroplane exceedingly difficult to manage. In the early stages of aëroplane flying, equilibrium had only been kept by swinging weights, and it had remained for the Wrights to discover that bending the wing tips upward or downward kept an aëroplane's poise much better than any shifting weight could do; and to Harry Traquair had fallen the honor of inventing sliding extensions, whereby either wing area could be increased or contracted in the space of a breadth.

Now that the *Comet* had both a shifting weight and wing manipulations to keep her steady, she was not steady at all—one balance seeming to counteract the other. In spite of the terrific dipping and plunging, however, Matt succeeded in getting to the shore.

The moment the man on the rope found himself over solid ground, he let go his hold and dropped five or six feet to the bank.

Instantly the *Comet* came fairly well under control again, and would have been entirely so but for the weight of the rope.

Matt selected a cleared spot in which to alight, shut off the power, and glided to the earth easily and safely.

Stepping out of the aëroplane, he hurried to the spot where the rescued man was lying.

"How are you?" asked Matt, kneeling beside him.

"I'm about fagged," he answered. "There's a cabin, about a rod up the creek on this side. Go there and get the bottle of whisky you'll find on the table. A pull at that bottle will put some ginger into me."

"You don't need that kind of ginger," replied Matt. "I'll help you to the cabin, and when we get there you can get into some dry clothes. That will do you more good than all the fire-water that ever came out of a still."

The man hoisted up on one elbow and peered at Matt with weak curiosity.

"That's your brand, is it?" he asked, with as much contempt as he was able to put into the words.

"Well, yes," replied Matt. "It's my brand, and you'd be a heap better off if it was yours."

He had been scrutinizing the man closely. He now saw that he was young, that he had blue eyes, and that he was wearing cowboy clothes. His hat, of course, was in the river.

"Who are you?" the young fellow asked.

"I'll tell you later," was the indefinite reply.

"How did you happen to be around here in that flying machine?" went on the other suspiciously.

"You'll find that out, too, at the proper time."

"If you're from the Tin Cup Ranch——"

"I'm not, so make your mind easy on that. But I know you. You're George Hobbes, and you robbed the cowboys at the Tin Cup Ranch in a game of cards, last night. You——"

With a fierce exclamation, the youth sat up, and his right hand darted toward his hip.

"You're not going to do any shooting," said Matt. "Your gun's in the river, and you'd have been there, too, but for me. What sort of way is that to act toward the man who saved you from drowning?"

CHAPTER X.

A BOLT FROM THE BLUE.

Small, and seemingly trifling, events sometimes pave the way for vital undertakings. The performance on the coteau, in which the Tin Cup men had so prominently figured, had left the *Comet* equipped with a forty-foot riata. On the flight to the Missouri Matt had tried to untie the rope and drop it from the machine. In this he had failed—a very fortunate circumstance for the dripping young man on the bank. But for that trailing rope, Matt would never have been able to effect a rescue.

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"It may be," said the young man, "that you have only pulled me out of the river to give me into the hands of the Tin Cup outfit."

"I have already told you," returned Matt, "that I have nothing to do with the Tin Cup outfit."

"Why were you chasing me in that air ship, then?"

"I wasn't chasing you. You had a guilty conscience, and if a man had been coming this way on an elephant you would have thought he was after you."

The other was silent for a space, surveying Matt furtively and, apparently, trying to guess his business.

"You knew about that work in the Tin Cup bunk house, last night," said he tentatively.

"I heard of it from a party who are out looking for George Hobbes. That is your name, is it?"

"That's the way I was billed during that performance at the bunk house."

"What are you, by profession—a cowboy or a gambler?"

"Cowboy."

Matt glanced at the young fellow's hands. They looked more like a gambler's hands than a cowboy's. And yet, skillful though he must have been with the cards, Hobbes had not the appearance of a gambler.

"Do you live here?" Matt went on.

"Yes," was the answer. "I told you, a moment ago, where my shack was."

"Then you're not doing much in the cattle line if you hang out in this deserted spot."

Hobbes gave a grunt and got up.

"What are you trying to pry into my business affairs for?" he asked surlily. "Do you think saving my life gives you a right to do that?"

"Well," fenced Matt, "that depends. You don't talk like any cowboy I ever heard—your English is too good."

"There are a lot of punchers who use better English than I do."

"Possibly," answered Matt. "I haven't been in the cattle country very much. What was the amount of money you stole from the Tin Cup outfit?"

A flush of color ran into Hobbes' tanned face.

"I didn't steal their money," he cried angrily. "I played cards for it."

"You didn't play a square game. They found the pack you used, this morning, and there were extra aces, and the backs were printed in such a way that you could tell what cards your opponents held."

"What of that?" was the scoffing response. "They didn't find me out. They had the right to beat me at my own game—if they could."

"I'm not here to preach," said Matt, "but you've got yourself into a pretty bad mix. I'm willing to help you out if you'll send back the money."

"I'll not send back a soo," was the answer, "and you've got your nerve along to bat such a proposition up to me. Who asked for your help? I didn't."

Hobbes turned away in a huff and started for the creek, his wet clothes slapping about him as he walked.

"Just a minute, Hobbes," called Matt, "and I'll go with you. I want to rope this flying machine to a couple of trees, so that it won't be blown into the river if a wind should happen to come up."

Hobbes was very wet, very tired, and very sulky, but he could hardly refuse such a trifling request. With the rope that had saved his life, he helped Matt secure the *Comet*.

"Do you know any one, in these parts, by the name of Newt Prebbles?" Matt inquired, while they were moving toward the shack.

"You used that name while I was in the skiff," said Hobbes, "I remember, now. What's your business with Newt Prebbles?"

"I'll tell him that when I see him. It's important. Do you know the man?"

"Yes, I know him. He's a pal of mine and lives with me in the shack."

"Is he there, now?" asked Matt eagerly.

"No."

"When will he be back?"

"That's hard to tell. He won't come back at all if you don't tell me what your business is with him."

"Why so?"

"I'll warn him away. You've found out a lot about me, but how much have you told me about yourself? Not a thing. I haven't a notion who you are, and I'm blamed if I like mysteries."

They were close to the cluster of cottonwoods and the shack, and Matt fell silent. The house, as the king of the motor boys could see, now that he was close to it, was built of sod, and had a roof of grass thatched over cottonwood poles. It was in a fairly good state of repair and had evidently been occupied for some time.

The door stood open, and Hobbes stepped to one side to let Matt enter first. It looked like a mere act of courtesy, and may have been no more than that; but, in view of what immediately happened, Matt would have been entitled to suspicions.

Believing the shack to be empty, Matt crossed the threshold. He was instantly seized by some one who threw himself from behind the open door.

With a startled cry, the young motorist twisted around in the strong arms that held him and caught a look at the man's face. [Pg 17]

It was Murgatroyd!

Another moment and all the fight in Matt's nature flew to the surface. Putting forth all his strength, he kicked and struggled until he had freed himself of the broker's grip.

He was no sooner clear of Murgatroyd, however, when Hobbes set upon him. Hobbes had not yet recovered his strength, and Matt would have made short work of him had not the broker come savagely to his aid. Between them Matt was forced to the clay floor of the house and lashed with a rope in such a manner that he was powerless to move.

Murgatroyd, panting from his exertions, lifted himself erect and gave the prisoner a vengeful kick.

"Wasn't expecting to find me here, eh?" he asked. "You've led me a pretty chase, Motor Matt, but here we are at the end of the trail, and I've got the upper hand."

Somehow Matt had fallen under the impression that the police of Bismarck would take care of Murgatroyd; hence, he had left the broker out of his calculations, and this meeting with him in that sod shack was like lightning out of a clear sky.

"You know this fellow, then?" said Hobbes.

"I know him too well, and that's the trouble. He's meddled with my affairs until they're in a pretty tangle, and I'll have all I can do to straighten them out again. I wasn't expecting a chance like this," and a jubilant note entered the broker's voice. "How did he happen to come here, Newt?"

"That's too many for me, Murg. He was in a flying machine. I saw him coming, and thought he was on my track for a little game that was pulled off at the Tin Cup Ranch, last night. In my hurry to get across the river I lost an oar, and in my hurry to get the oar I overturned the boat. I can't swim much, and with all my clothes on I'd have gone to the bottom if he hadn't snatched me ashore."

Motor Matt was not much surprised to hear Murgatroyd call the supposed Hobbes "Newt." The young motorist's mind had been working around to that view of the young fellow's identity. He was Newt Prebbles, and was on friendly terms with the master scoundrel, Murgatroyd.

The broker seated himself in a chair, and did not seem particularly well pleased with the news Prebbles had just given him. Perhaps, for his peace of mind, he was wishing that Matt had not rescued Newt, and it may be he resented the "hold" this rescue gave Matt on Newt's gratitude—providing Newt harbored such a sentiment, which seemed doubtful.

Newt began changing his clothes. Before he began, he took a bottle from the table and poured himself a drink of its fiery contents.

"When did you get here, Murg?" he demanded, as he got into his clothes.

"It must have been while you were having that trouble on the river. I didn't see anything of the flying machine, and I didn't hear anything of the fracas. Feeling sure you'd be back soon, I hitched my horse among the cottonwoods and came in here to wait. I heard you and Motor Matt talking as you walked this way, and I had to rub my eyes in order to make sure it was really Motor Matt who was coming. Jove, but this is a stroke of luck!"

"You'll have to tell me about that, for it's mighty dark to me. You got my letter all right?"

"Naturally, or I shouldn't be here. The letter arrived in Bismarck yesterday forenoon, and I pulled out of the town at once. Stayed last night with a farmer, more to make certain I wasn't followed than anything else." Murgatroyd scowled. "This being a fugitive," he finished, "gets on a man's nerves."

Newt laughed grimly.

"Did you bring the money?" he demanded.

"Don't talk about that here," and the broker flashed a significant glance at Matt.

"All right," agreed Newt. "Suppose we let this Motor Matt, as you call him, go free? We don't want him around, anyhow."

"Go free?" cried Murgatroyd. "I'll catch myself doing that! I owe him something," and here a demoniacal look crept into the broker's eyes, "and I guess, as my old friend Siwash used to say, I'll take advantage of this opportunity and 'saw off' with him."

This threat, however, did not make Matt feel at all uncomfortable. He had in his hands the material necessary to play off one of these men against the other. Out of this might come a good deal of benefit to himself, and much good for Newt Prebbles. In case he did not succeed in this plan, there was McGlory and Ping yet to be heard from. If they had safely escaped the Tin Cup men, it would not be long before they gained the mouth of Burnt Creek and played their part in events to come.

Just then Matt felt like congratulating himself on having been made a prisoner. Such a position gave him the advantage of being impartial in the hostility he was about to incite between his captors.

CHAPTER XI.

"ADVANCING THE SPARK."

"I'm not going to stand around and let you be rough with him," asserted Newt, finishing his dressing and taking another drink from the bottle.

"Nobody asked you to stand around," said Murgatroyd. "When I'm ready to get rough, you can go down to the river and stay there till I'm through." [Pg 18]

"Why did you jump on him like that?"

Considering what he himself had done toward Matt's capture, Newt's stand was hardly consistent.

"I'll tell you," and, with that, Murgatroyd went on to relate the number of times his trail had crossed Matt's, and the circumstances.

Newt's eyes widened as the recital proceeded, and when the end was reached it found him moody and preoccupied.

"From all that," went on Murgatroyd, "you can see just how much I am in Motor Matt's debt."

"He saved my life," said Newt doggedly, "and I'm not going to let you be rough with him."

"Don't make a fool of yourself, Newt," scowled Murgatroyd.

"He did me a good turn," insisted the other, "and I'm not going to let him get the worst of this."

"Sit me up in a chair, can't you?" asked Matt. "I want to talk a little, and I'm not very comfortable, lying here like this."

"It's nothing to me," snarled Murgatroyd, "whether you're comfortable or not."

Without a word, Newt went to the prisoner and helped him get to his feet and drop into a chair.

"Leave his ropes alone," called Murgatroyd sharply.

"I'm not touching his ropes—yet," returned Newt. "What have you got to say?" he asked, facing Matt.

"How many I O U's for gambling debts did you leave in Jamestown, Prebbles, when you left there?"

A lighted bomb, hurled suddenly into the shack, could not have startled either of the two men more than did this question.

It was a random shot on Matt's part. He wanted both Newt and Murgatroyd to understand that he was well equipped with information.

"I didn't leave a single gambling debt behind me," asserted Newt, with rising indignation.

The broker became visibly uncomfortable.

"He's talking wild, Newt," said he.

"Then," continued Matt, "how did it happen that Murgatroyd had several duebills, signed by you?"

"He didn't have any signed by me."

"Of course not," agreed Murgatroyd, laughing derisively, but there were demons rising in his sharp eyes.

"Too bad your father didn't know that, Newt," said Matt. "He's been slaving, and denying himself necessities of life, to take up a lot of I O U's which, Murgatroyd told him, had been given by you for gambling debts."

Newt, his face full of rage, whirled on the broker in a fury.

"Is that the truth?" he cried.

"Not a word of truth in it," answered the broker coolly. "From what I've told you about Motor Matt, Newt, you ought to understand that he's cunning. He's working some sort of a dodge, now. Don't let him fool you."

Newt was quieted somewhat but not convinced.

"Who told you about those duebills?" he demanded.

"Your father."

"When did you see him? And how did he happen to tell you anything like that?"

"Just a minute," said Matt, playing with the spark before he advanced it fully. "There's a point about George Hobbes that I'd like to have settled. Which of you uses that name? Or have you a partnership interest in it? Newt plays cards at the Tin Cup Ranch as George Hobbes, and Murgatroyd does business in that name and receives letters in Bismarck when they are so addressed. Now——"

With a hoarse exclamation of astonishment and anger, Murgatroyd flung himself from the chair and started toward Matt. Newt jumped in front of him.

"You'd better sit down, Murg," said Newt.

The two men stared at each other, the broker furious, and the younger man defiant.

"He knows too much!" flared Murgatroyd.

"He says so much I know to be true that I'm inclined to believe everything he tells us. We'll hear him out, and if you try to lay your hands on him you'll settle with me."

The spark was working splendidly. It would not be long, now, before it set off an explosion.

"You wrote a letter to Murgatroyd, Newt," said Matt, "and posted it in Steele, North Dakota. Murgatroyd hasn't found it healthy to be in his Jamestown office for some time, and the only person there, when your letter was received, was your father. He recognized your handwriting, and he opened the letter and made a copy of it before he sent it on to Murgatroyd, in Bismarck."

The broker's face became fairly livid. He tried to talk, but the words gurgled in his throat.

"Your father knew I was a friend of his," pursued Matt, "and he came to Fort Totten to see me. He got there yesterday afternoon, driving over from Minnewaukon in a heavy rain. When he showed me the copy of your letter, I started for this place in the aëroplane."

"What were you intending to do here?" inquired Newt.

"I was hoping to persuade you to go back to Totten and see your father. He wants you."

Newt shook his head.

"It won't do," he answered. "The old man and I had a tumble, and it's better for us to keep apart."

"You don't *dare* to go!" stormed Murgatroyd. "What have I been paying you, for? Tell me that. You'll stay away from Fort Totten, Newt. I've brought money enough to take you to South America, and that's where you're going."

Newt's eyes brightened a little.

"I wonder if you really mean to shell out enough to take me that far?" he asked.

"Yes," cried the broker, "and I'll pay you well for going, too."

"You won't go, Newt," put in Matt. "You're not going to let this scoundrel wheedle you into leaving the country just to get you out of the way and prevent you from telling what you know about the accident to Harry Traquair."

Silence followed the launching of this bolt, silence that was broken only by the startled breathing of the two men. Both of them kept their eyes riveted on the prisoner.

"Traquair, the inventor of the aëroplane," continued Matt, "tried out his machine in Jamestown, several weeks ago, and an accident happened. Some part of the mechanism broke. Why did it break?" Matt's voice grew solemn as he turned his eyes on Murgatroyd. "Why did it break?" he asked, again.

The broker's face turned ashen. Drops of sweat stood out on his forehead, his hands clinched spasmodically, and his lips moved without sound.

"Murgatroyd," Matt pursued mercilessly, "had a mortgage on Harry Traquair's homestead, in Wells County. For some reason of his own, Murgatroyd wants that piece of prairie land. If Traquair had lived, he would have sold his aéroplane to the government, and have paid off the mortgage. But he didn't live, because a *supposed* accident happened to his aéroplane."

The broker's lips were dry, and again and again he moistened them with his tongue. The demons grew harder, and brighter, and more merciless in his eyes.

The spark was doing well, but it had not yet been advanced to the limit. It was the spark of friendship, but it was coming into its own through devious ways. The friendship was to be between poor old Prebbles and his son; but it was to result in something else between Newt and Murgatroyd, and prove powerful enough to force the two apart.

"Murgatroyd has been paying you money, Newt," resumed Matt, "to keep in the background and remain silent about what you know. Is the scoundrel worth protecting? Is it worth while to take hush money from him? The bribes he has been giving you, he collected from your father by means of duebills to which he had forged your name."

Fierce anger flamed in Newt's face. Matt, seeing that an explosion was close, hastened on.

"Your father is now lying ill at Fort Totten. It is doubtful whether he can live—and he certainly cannot unless you go back with me and be to him what you have not been in the past—a son."

The red faded from Newt Prebbles' face and a deathly pallor came in its stead. Stepping over to Matt, he dropped both hands on his shoulders and looked him steadily in the eyes.

"Motor Matt," said he, "are you telling me the truth about my father? He is dangerously sick at Fort Totten? Don't you lie to me," he warned fiercely.

"I am telling you the truth."

"And those forged I O U's—where did you learn about them?"

"From your father, as I have already told you."

"It's like Murgatroyd," said Newt, between his teeth. "He did want Traquair's homestead, because he happened to discover that there is coal under the soil, and the railroad company will buy the hundred and sixty at a fancy price and run a spur track to it, so——"

The explosion came, at that moment, but it was not as Matt expected. While Newt Prebbles stood facing Matt, his back to the broker, there came the sound of a blow.

Pain convulsed Newt's face for the fraction of a second, his eyes closed, and he dropped senseless, overturning Matt and his chair with the force of his fall.

Lying bound and helpless, Matt heard sounds of quick footsteps, and saw Murgatroyd bending down over him.

CHAPTER XII.

THE TRAIL TO THE RIVER.

Joe McGlory and Ping were in a fine good humor. They had left the horses and rifles for the Tin Cup men and, from the top of a distant hill, they had watched the party recover the live stock and the guns. Then, laughing and congratulating themselves, the boys had ducked in among the cottonwoods of the creek bottom and started along the trail to the river.

"Plenty fine," chattered Ping. "By Klismus, my gettee heap fun this tlip. Woosh!"

"We played 'em to a fare-you-well," laughed McGlory, pausing to extend his hand to Ping. "Shake, my little heathen brother! You're the finest bit of the Yellow Peril that ever landed in the U. S. You've got a head on you, you have. Why, you savvied right off what I wanted you to do with those guns, and I didn't have to say a word."

"My savvy look you makee all same eye," chuckled Ping. "Top-side pidgin! One piecee fine bizness."

Then, abruptly, Ping had a swift, paralyzing thought.

"Mebbyso Melican men makee chase fo' McGloly and Ping, huh?" he cried. "Plaps we lun, ketchee Matt, no lettee Melican men ketchee us?"

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"Oh, shucks, Ping!" exclaimed McGlory disgustedly. "When you forget yourself, now and then, and do a particularly bright thing, you spoil it all by some break of that sort. Those punchers don't know where we're going! And what sort of a trail are we leaving?" The cowboy turned and looked back over the ground they had covered. "All buffalo grass," he finished, "and the Tin Cup outfit couldn't run us down in a thousand years."

But Ping's fears persisted, in spite of McGlory's attempt to smother them.

"My no likee," he quavered, pausing again and again to look back as they traveled. "Mebbyso they ketchee, they takee scalp. My no likee. Losee pigtail, no go back to China ally mo'."

"Well, well, don't blubber about it!" exclaimed McGlory. "You'll keep the pigtail, all right, though what in Sam Hill it's good for is more than I know. Buck up, step high, wide, and handsome, and don't lose so much time looking around. Just stow it away in your mind, Ping, that every step on the trail to the river brings us that much closer to Pard Matt."

McGlory took the lead and set a brisk pace.

"Didn't Matt get away in great shape?" he called out, as he strode along. "And that rope Spearman tied to the machine didn't amount to a row of dobies."

"Cloud Joss heap fine fo' tlevel," remarked Ping. "Feet tlevel plenty tough fo' China boy."

"I guess the circus we pulled off, back there on that hill, was worth the price, Ping. Don't grumble. There was something doing, and you and I answered to roll-call during the height of the agitation. Little Chop Suey and your Uncle Joe had something to say and do every minute the curtain was up. Oh, shucks! I'm tickled to death with myself. I'll be plumb contented, now, if nothing happens to me for the next fifteen minutes. Wonder how Matt's getting along, advancing that spark? Something gives me a hunch and whispers in my ear that he's having his hands full. Put your best foot forward, Ping, and let's see how quick we can get to where we're going."

"No gottee best foot," complained Ping. "Both feets allee same bum. Cleek makee bend, makee bend, makee bend; heap walkee to go li'l way."

"That's right," agreed McGlory. "Sufferin' serpents, how the creek twists! Suppose we climb to the top of this hill on the right and see if we can't work a cut-off on the pesky stream."

"Awri'," agreed Ping, and followed McGlory to the top of the hill.

From the crest they had an extensive view in every direction; in fact, it was almost too extensive, for behind them they glimpsed the Tin Cup men, racing back and forth over the uplifts, scattered widely and hunting for "signs."

McGlory muttered to himself and slipped off the top of the hill like a shot. Ping gasped as he followed.

"They ketchee China boy," he wailed, "him losee pigtail."

"Oh, hush about that," growled McGlory. "Do you know where we was lame, Ping?"

"My plenty lame in feet," said Ping.

"I mean, where we made a hobble. It was by not keeping two of those horses and using them to take us to the mouth of Burnt Creek."

"Woosh! We ketchee Matt now, Melican men follow tlail, ketchee Matt, too. Motol Matt go top-side, we all go top-side. Plenty bad pidgin."

"If they're really following us, which I don't think," remarked McGlory, "we'll fool 'em."

"No fool 'em twice."

"You watch. We'll take the longest way to the river and get that bunch away from the creek."

Ping groaned at the thought of more walking. He could have stood the journey better if he had not been compelled to hang onto his grass sandals with his toes.

McGlory scuttled off between the coteaus, and every once in a while he would climb to the top of a hill to reconnoiter along the back track. Finally, to his great satisfaction, he lost sight of the Tin Cup men.

"That means," said he, when he reported the fact to Ping, "that we're free, once more, to get to the mouth of Burnt Creek as soon as we can."

From that on there was little talking. The boys needed their breath for the work before them. As before, McGlory led the way and Ping hopped and scuffled along behind him.

An occasional hill was scaled to get the bearings of the creek and watch out for the river. McGlory gave a shout of joy when he finally saw the broad ribbon of muddy water in the distance ahead.

"We're close to where we're bound for, Ping," he said cheerily. "We've been two or three hours on the hike, but you trail along and I'll land you at the junction of the creek and the river in less than twenty minutes. Whoop-ya! I'm guessing about Matt. Has it been make or break with him? And how has the spark worked? I'm all stirred up with the notion that he's having a time. Ever get a hunch like that and not be able to explain how you got it?"

"No savvy hunch," groaned Ping. "Let's findee place to makee sit in shade. Heap tired."

"We'll sit in the shade and rest and enjoy ourselves after we find Matt. Keep a-moving, Ping, keep a-moving."

A pass between two hills brought them out into the creek bottom again. The sun was getting low in the west, but it was still uncomfortably warm, and the shade of the cottonwood trees was refreshing. Ping tottered along with his eyes on McGlory's heels. Suddenly the cowboy stopped and whirled around.

"Look!" he murmured, pointing.

The Chinaman swerved his weary eyes in the direction indicated and saw the sod shack.

"Hoop-a-la!" he exclaimed.

"I hear voices in there," whispered McGlory, "and I'll bet Pard Matt's busy laying down the law to Newt Prebbles. Let's not interrupt, but slip carefully up to the door and get the lay of the land before we butt in."

Ping was for getting to a place of comfort and refreshment in the shortest possible time; but, as usual, he deferred to the superior wisdom of the cowboy.

Silently they stole toward the open door of the hut. Through the opening there came to them the sound of a voice. It was a strange voice, and the words were not distinguishable.

While they were still some distance from the door, the voice was blotted out by the impact of a blow; and immediately there came a crash as of something being overturned.

McGlory was no longer anxious to "get the lay of the land" before butting into Matt's argument with Newt Prebbles. In an instant he jumped for the door and stood peering into the hut.

The scene before him was difficult to comprehend. A chair had been overturned, and there was a form—no, two forms—lying on the floor beside it. Then, too, there was some one else, a man, bending over one of the forms.

The dark interior of the shack was not favorable to a clear survey of the scene by eyes but recently turned from the glaring sunshine.

McGlory, however, caught one detail of the picture that wrenched a sharp cry from his lips.

"Murgatroyd!" he shouted.

The bent form lifted itself with catlike quickness, *Crack!* The sharp note of a revolver rattled through the narrow room, followed by a warning shout in a well-known voice:

"Look out, Joe! It's Murgatroyd, and he's in a killing mood!"

Matt was in the room, bound and helpless. That was the next detail that flashed before the eyes of McGlory.

Murgatroyd's shot had missed. Mad with rage, he was making ready to fire again.

Blindly, desperately, the cowboy flung himself across the room. Pard Matt was there, and in danger. Think of himself, McGlory would not.

The demons in the broker's eyes glowered murderously along the sights of the leveled weapon. It seemed as though nothing could save the cowboy.

At just that moment, however, a window behind the broker crashed inward. A stone, hurled by Ping with all his force, had shattered the glass, plunged across the gap, and struck Murgatroyd's arm.

The arm dropped as though paralyzed, and the broker staggered sideways with a cry of pain. McGlory sprang upon him, and the two were struggling fiercely when Ping raced into the room and took a hand in the battle.

Murgatroyd, with only one hand, was no match for his wiry young antagonists.

As Newt and Murgatroyd had overpowered Matt, so the cowboy and the Chinaman wrestled and secured the advantage of Murgatroyd.

One of the forms on the floor slowly lifted itself and became busy with the cords around Matt's wrists.

"I can do the rest, Newt," said Matt, sitting up and freeing his ankles.

A few moments more and the tables had been completely turned. Murgatroyd was now the prisoner, and the king of the motor boys and his friends were in command of the situation.

CHAPTER XIII.

UNWELCOME CALLERS.

Once more, during the course of that eventful day, Ping was to be congratulated on his quickness and wit. McGlory had gone to the door to make his survey of what was transpiring inside the sod shack, and Ping had approached a window. The revolver shot caused the Chinese boy to jump, and to debate in his startled mind whether it would be better to run, or to hold his ground. He held his ground and used the stone—to the lasting benefit of Joe McGlory.

Now, at last, it seemed, the brawling and the violence was over. Murgatroyd lay in the place where Matt had lain, Newt Prebbles was bathing his injured head in a basin of cool water, and Matt, McGlory, and Ping were sitting down and explaining to each other how everything had happened.

"You were foolish to talk like you did to Murgatroyd, when he had the best of you, Matt," said McGlory.

"He didn't have the best of me," asserted Matt. "I had made a friend by that talk, and the friend was Newt Prebbles."

"That's the truth," spoke up Newt, turning his head for a look at Matt.

"Well, then," bristled McGlory, "maybe you'll explain why you helped Murgatroyd down Matt, in the first place?"

"I was to blame there," answered Newt, "but I didn't understand the situation. Everything had been sprung on me all of a heap, as you might say, and I was dazed and bewildered. Murgatroyd had come here because I had written and asked him to. He had money for me, as I supposed, and I considered myself in duty bound to help him. Later, when Motor Matt did his talking, I discovered some things which put up the bars between Murgatroyd and me. That last thump on the head, of course, topped off the whole affair. Murgatroyd was crazy mad, that's all. He hit me with something harder than his bare knuckles. Was it the handle of his revolver?"

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"Maybe it was this," and McGlory leaned forward and picked a pair of brass knuckle dusters off the clay floor.

"That's what he used," declared Prebbles.

"I have always feared," said Matt, "that our dealings with Murgatroyd would end in some violent work, like this. And it was all for a hundred and sixty acres of coal land, which would have netted Murgatroyd only a few thousand dollars, at the most!"

The broker's anger had vanished with his capture, and left him miserable in spirit; but, even now, while his fortunes were at lowest ebb, his crafty mind led him to think of some way out of his troubles.

"You've got me," said he, with a bitter laugh. "I didn't think you lads could do it, but you've turned the trick. Are you any better off?"

"Speak to me about that!" muttered McGlory. "Matt's a heap better off. I don't know what you were going to do, when Ping and I showed up, but I'm feeling a whole lot easier to have this matter just as it is."

"So am I better off," put in Newt Prebbles. "I've led a hard life, and I've been a hard man, but I'm the only one to blame for that. And I know this: Association with Amos Murgatroyd, for any length of time, is an excellent passport to the penitentiary."

"That's right, Newt," said the broker scathingly. "You know on which side your bread is buttered. Get on the side of the winning team, by all means. But I wasn't talking to you or McGlory, but to Motor Matt."

His voice changed to a pleading tone.

"I'm wrecked, Motor Matt," he went on, "if you turn me over to the authorities. There's nothing in my past life that's so very criminal. Of course, knowing what I did about the Traquair homestead, I was anxious to get hold of it. But that's out of my power, now. You've been put to a good deal of inconvenience, but I'll make that all up to you in dollars and cents if you'll take these ropes off me and let me clear out."

"You say," said Matt, "that there's nothing in your past that is so very criminal. If that's so, why are you afraid to face the music? Why do you want to shirk the consequences?"

"Even a short term of imprisonment will ruin my loan business," answered Murgatroyd. "I have built that business up very carefully, and I hate to see it go to smash. I tell you what I'll do. If you'll release me, I'll wipe out that mortgage of one thousand dollars which I hold on the Traquair homestead, and I'll give you and your friends a thousand apiece, all around. What do you say?"

"I'm sorry for you, Murgatroyd," said Matt, "but I haven't any authority to set you free, even if I was inclined that way. It's the government that wants you; and the government wants you so much that a price has been placed on your head. You've danced, and now you've got to pay the fiddler."

"He says he hasn't done anything so very criminal," remarked Newt Prebbles, as he tied a handkerchief around his head. "I'd like to know what he calls criminal."

"Well," sneered the broker, "I haven't been bribed for keeping what I know away from the authorities."

"As I was bribed," retorted Newt hotly, "with money my own father paid you for forged duebills!"

Murgatroyd laughed, and it was the laugh of a wretch utterly devoid of conscience.

"That *was* rather a neat play of mine," said he. "But you haven't given me your answer yet, Motor Matt."

"Yes, I have," said Matt. "You're going to Fort Totten."

"And so am I," put in Newt Prebbles, "just as quick as I can get there. I'll take Murgatroyd's horse and ride to Bismarck. There's a night train I can catch for Jamestown, and I ought to be at the post some time before noon, to-morrow."

"You can't get there any too quick," observed McGlory caustically.

He had no liking for Newt Prebbles. A man who would do what Newt Prebbles had done could never stand very high in the cowboy's estimation.

"You'd better watch that fellow, Motor Matt," called Murgatroyd. "He'll not go to the post, but will clear out for parts unknown."

"He'll go to the post, I'm sure of it," said Matt.

"I will," declared Newt. "My father and I never agreed very well, but I guess that was my fault, too. When you leave here, Motor Matt, just lock the door and bring the key. I don't know whether I'll ever come back to this shack or not—I don't think I will, as I feel now—but it will be well for me to have the key. Good-by."

He stepped toward the king of the motor boys and extended his hand.

"Haven't you forgotten something, Newt?" inquired Matt.

Prebbles gave him a blank look. The next moment he understood what Matt had reference to, and pulled a jingling bag from his pocket and tossed it upon the table.

"That's the whole of it," he said. "You'll see that it is returned?"

Matt nodded.

"That means that I'll have to walk to Totten, or ride Murgatroyd's horse," Prebbles added, as he moved toward the door.

Matt was about to lend him the money for his railroad ticket, when a form darkened the door and stepped into the room. [Pg 23]

"Goin' somewheres?" queried a voice. "Well, I wouldn't, George—not jest yet."

It was Jed Spearman. Behind him came Slim, and back of Slim trailed the cowboy who had been referred to as "Hen."

Matt, greatly alarmed, sprang up and stepped forward.

"Don't lay a hand on that man, Spearman," said Matt. "His father is sick at Fort Totten, and he's got to go there in a hurry."

"Oh, ho!" guffawed the foreman. "If here ain't Motor Matt, who was flyin' this way on gov'ment bizness! An' the chink that run off with the guns, an' t'other chap as lit out with our live stock. Waal, now, ain't this here a pleasin' surprise—fer us? Don't git vi'lent, any o' ye. Three o' us is in here, and thar's three more watchin' on the outside. I reckon the boot's on the other leg, this deal, hey, Slim?"

"I reckon," agreed Slim. "This is a whole lot funnier than that other game, over on the coteau."

"Don't ye ask us ter put down our guns an' do no more pushin'," said Spearman. "Ye kain't work that joke on us twicet, hand-runnin'. We've cut our eyeteeth, we hev. Got any weppins among ye?"

Newt Prebbles, glaring at the Tin Cup men, had backed into a corner. He had his eye on the broken window, and Spearman observed his intention.

"Don't ye never try *that*, George," he grinned. "Ye'd be riddled like a salt shaker afore ye'd hit the ground."

"Spearman," said Matt, "you don't understand this matter. If you did——"

"Thar was some parts o' it I didn't onderstand none too well, back thar on the hill, a few hours ago. But ye heered me say we'd cut our eyeteeth, didn't ye? I meant jest that."

"I came here on government duty, just as I said," went on Matt, "and if you interfere with me in any way, you'll regret it."

"Will I? Waal, life is plumb full o' sorrers an' regrets. Who's the gent on the floor?"

"I'm a helpless victim of these young scoundrels," said Murgatroyd plaintively. "Release me, gentlemen, and do an act of simple justice!"

"His name is Murgatroyd," corrected Matt, "and the government has offered a reward of a thousand dollars for his capture."

"That's your story fer it, young man. I ain't takin' your word fer nothin'. Slim, step over an' cut the gent loose."

Slim started. Matt stepped in front of him.

"Leave that man alone!" ordered Matt. "You fellows, I suppose," he continued, turning to Spearman, "have come here after the money Prebbles took from you at the ranch. He was leaving it with me to deliver to you, just as you came."

"Likely yarn," scoffed Jed Spearman, taking a chair in the doorway. "Consider yerselves pris'ners, all o' ye. We ain't so terribly het up over Motor Matt, and we ain't so mad at t'other feller or the chink as we mout be, seein' as how they left us our hosses an' guns an' then trailed straight fer this place whar we diskiver George Hobbes. It's Hobbes we want, an' I tell ye plain we're goin' ter play bob with him afore we're done. That's flat."

CHAPTER XIV.

AN UNEXPECTED TURN.

Motor Matt was never more at sea than he was at that moment. What could he, and McGlory, and Ping do against six armed cowboys who, because of their hostility, would not listen to reason?

Jed Spearman and his companions could do exactly as they pleased. They could take the law into their own hands, so far as Newt Prebbles was concerned, and delay his departure for Fort Totten; and, in reckless defiance of what Matt said, they could release Murgatroyd.

Ping, so far from being a factor of strength in the slender force to be mustered against the cowboys, was a decided element of weakness. He was afraid he was going to lose his queue, and the fear had made him almost daft.

"Slim," called Spearman, tilting back in his chair and fanning himself with his hat, "jest count the *dinero* in that bag an' see how much it foots up."

Slim slouched over to the table, Matt, meanwhile, standing guard between him and Murgatroyd.

With elaborate ease, Slim dumped the contents of the pouch on the table and proceeded to count the gold pieces.

"Why, Jed," he called, "I'm blamed if it ain't all here, an' a dollar more'n what we lost."

"Keep the dollar fer int'rest, Slim," said Spearman generously. "Tell me, Hen," he proceeded, "what we're goin' ter do to the low-down tinhorn who run in them fancy tricks on us at the bunk house?"

"Hang 'im," replied Hen promptly.

"Oh, ye're altogether too desp'rit. Somethin' lighter'n that. What say, Slim?"

"Waal," replied Slim, "I'd suggest runnin' him out o' the kentry, Jed. We ain't got no room, in these parts, fer a robber like what this feller is. The law kain't tech him, ye know."

"Hev we got ter waste our vallyble time pusson'ly conductin' sich a missable galoot across the border?" asked Spearman.

"Thar's a hoss among the cottonwoods, Jed. Let's tie the tinhorn ter his back, take off the hoss' bridle, an' then chase the critter fer a ways. That 'u'd do the trick."

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"Gentlemen," came the imploring voice of Murgatroyd, "that animal belongs to me. I beg of you not to use him in your scheme of punishment. How shall I get back to Bismarck after you release me?"

"Stop yer talkin', you!" scowled Spearman. "I reckon, if we turn ye loose, that ort ter be about all ye kin ask. Slim," he added to his comrade, "yer suggestion is in good taste, an' hes my approval. The trick hes been done afore, an' allers, I make no doubt, with good an' lastin' effects ter the community. Pris'ner, hev ye got anythin' ter say?"

"Only this," replied Newt Prebbles. "My father is lying sick at Fort Totten. He needs me. If you try to tie me to that horse and send me across the border, I'll fight till I drop. What more do you want?" he cried passionately. "I gambled with you, and I resorted to a gambler's tricks, but I have returned more money than I took."

"Ye returned the money becase ye had ter," said Spearman grimly. "If us fellers hadn't blowed in here, we wouldn't 'a' got it."

"You're wrong there, Spearman," called Matt. "I have told you once, and I repeat it now, that Prebbles gave up that moment before he, or any of the rest of us, knew you were coming here. I protest against such inhuman treatment as you're planning to give him."

"All right," grinned Spearman, "protest. Now, we'll let that drap while we consider the case o' the gent on the floor. I reckon, Motor Matt, ye're plumb anxious ter take him ter Totten, ain't ye?"

"I am," answered Matt. "As I told you, he's wanted by the government."

"It 'u'd be a feather in yer cap if ye toted him in, wouldn't it?"

"I don't know anything about that, and I don't care. He's a scoundrel, and ought to be punished."

"An' thar's a thousand out fer him?"

"Yes."

"Which ye'd git?"

"No. It goes to another man."

Spearman drew down an eyelid in a knowing wink.

"Course I ain't swallerin' that, not nowadays. It was right funny, that thing ye done over on the hill. I reckon ye've laughed a-considerable about that, hey? I didn't git a chance ter fly with ye, an' the boys hev been joshin' me ever sence about it. Ye ort ter be punished somehow, an' I reckon the easiest and best way ter do that is by lettin' yer pris'ner go. Ye won't hev no feather in yer cap, an' ye won't hev no thousand dollars. Slim!"

"On deck, Jed."

"I ordered ye, a while ago, ter let that man loose. Now, I order ye ag'in. This time, I want it done!"

"Wait a second!" cried Matt. "Spearman," he went on, "are you such a fool you think you can punish me by allowing this man his freedom?"

"Keerful!" warned the foreman. "Don't git ter callin' names. I won't stand fer that, not fer a minit."

"If you allow this criminal to go, you'll be getting yourself into hot water—you won't be hurting me."

"I know what I'm about. Slim!"

Slim started toward Motor Matt, swinging one hand carelessly but significantly behind him.

"Keep away," said Matt, a dangerous light rising in his eyes. "You'll not let this man go."

"Are you going to let yourself be bluffed by a fellow of his size?" taunted Murgatroyd, taking another tack.

"No words from you," growled Spearman.

Slim undoubtedly felt that it was up to him to let the foreman and Hen know what he was good for. He had a natural delicacy about using a weapon against an unarmed youth, so he made the mistake of thinking he could eliminate the barrier with his hands.

"Side-step!" he commanded.

Matt held his ground.

"Waal, if ye won't, then take that."

Slim swung his fist. What happened, then, must have astonished him exceedingly.

His fist clove the empty air, and before he could recover his poise he was struck a blow that heaved him over against Hen, and toppled both of them against the wall.

"Jumpin' jee-mimy!" stuttered Slim, rubbing his chin. "He hits like the kick of a mule—an' it was about as quick."

"Oh, blazes!" growled Spearman, in disgust. "Hen, you help. If the two o' ye ain't enough, I'll join in."

McGlory had pressed closer to Matt's side. The two chums were now shoulder to shoulder.

"I'm a cowboy myself," cried McGlory, "and if you longhorns have come out prancin' for trouble, I guess we can accommodate you."

But the matter was never brought to an issue. A shrill whistle echoed from the outside. Spearman jumped to his feet.

"That's from one o' our boys," said he. "What's doin'?"

The next moment Spearman knew. A khaki-clad officer appeared in the doorway, covered with the dust of a hard ride. Standing there, for an instant, he surveyed the interior of the shack.

"Cameron!" cried Matt joyfully.

"Whoop-ya!" roared McGlory. "Lieutenant Cameron, of the old U. S. A. Speak to me about that! He's just in time."

"Who's Lieutenant Cameron?" snorted Spearman. "I don't know him from Adam."

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"Possibly not," answered Cameron, "but, fortunately, I've got a man with me whom you do know. Come in, Roscoe!" called the lieutenant, stepping farther into the room.

A burly individual slouched through the doorway and stood looking out from under his bushy brows at Spearman.

The foreman's careless air left him in a flash. He fell back a step.

"Roscoe!"

"Surest thing you know," replied the burly individual, "Roscoe, Sheriff of Burleigh. Now, what's been going on here?"

There was something humorous, after that, in Spearman's attempt to explain. The whole story was finally given by Matt, and listened to with attention.

The sheriff, when all the details were in, drew a large slab of tobacco from his pocket and nibbled off a corner.

"Who's got the money that was won at the bunk house?" he asked calmly.

"Slim, thar," answered Spearman.

"Fork over, Slim."

Slim promptly tossed the bag to Roscoe.

"If you Tin Cup men haven't got sense enough to keep from being skinned," remarked the sheriff, "you ought to be done out of your eyeteeth. And, furthermore, you haven't any call to chase the man that was too sharp for you and try to run him out of the country. You fellows at the Tin Cup are a heap too lawless. I've had my eye on you for quite a spell. The money goes to the man that took it. Here, stranger! I'm not approving of the way it was come by, mark you, but, so far as the ethics of this case are concerned, the money is yours."

"I don't want it," was the astounding response from Newt Prebbles. "I'm a different man from what I was when I got that away from the Tin Cup fellows."

The sheriff stared, then calmly dropped the bag into his own pocket.

"I'll accept the donation," said he, "and pass it along to the Bismarck Orphan Asylum. Now,

Spearman," and he stepped over and tapped the foreman on the chest, "I wish I could take you to town with me for planning to release a badly wanted man. But I can't. All I can say is that I've got my eye on you. Scatter out of this. That will be about all."

The Tin Cup men "scattered." As the galloping hoofs died away in the distance, Lieutenant Cameron stepped over and caught Matt's hand.

"I guess I was of some use, after all, eh, Matt? You fellows have had most of the fun, but I managed to get here in time to save you some unpleasantness."

"You did," answered Motor Matt gratefully, wringing the brave fellow's hand. "You've saved the prisoner, and made it possible for Prebbles' son to get to the post in time to——"

"Wait," interrupted Cameron, pulling a yellow slip from his pocket. "That reached me just as the sheriff and I were leaving Bismarck."

Matt took the telegram. It was brief, but terribly to the point.

"Prebbles can't last more than twenty-four hours, at the outside. Useless to bring his son."

This was signed by the doctor. Silently Matt passed the telegram to Newt.

Young Prebbles read it, dropped into a chair, and buried his face in his hands.

CHAPTER XV.

A RISKY VENTURE.

While Roscoe was removing the ropes from Murgatroyd's hands and replacing them with a pair of steel manacles, Matt and McGlory stepped out of the shack for a brief talk.

"Young Prebbles is pretty badly cut up," said Cameron.

"He ought to be," said McGlory. "I reckon this is a lesson for him, and for any other young fellow who feels like taking the bit in his teeth."

"It's pretty tough," murmured Matt, shaking his head. "There's good stuff in young Prebbles."

"That's Pard Matt for you, Cameron," said the cowboy. "He always looks for the good stuff in a fellow and never sees much of anything else."

"After all," approved Cameron, "that's the best way. But I'll warrant Matt can't find much to commend in Murgatroyd."

"He's old enough to know right from wrong," said Matt, "and now that he's made his bed, he's got to lie in it. Where did you find the sheriff, Cameron?"

"Wired him I was coming, and he met me at the train with a couple of riding horses. They couldn't remember anything definite at the post office, although one of the clerks had a hazy recollection that some one had called for a letter addressed to Hobbes. That's all we had to go on. We hit the trail and rode hard."

"Good thing you did. If you hadn't ridden so hard you might have got here too late."

"What a day this has been! I should think you fellows would be about fagged."

Before Matt could make any response, Newt Prebbles came out of the shack.

"I'm going, just the same," said he doggedly.

"There's no way you can get to the post in time, Prebbles," returned Cameron kindly.

"I'll get there, anyhow, whether I'm late or not. Good heavens! You don't understand what this means to me! You don't know——" [Pg 26]

He bit his lips to keep back the emotion that grew with the words.

"I've just got to go," he finished. "I'll get through somehow."

"How'll you get from here to Bismarck?" inquired Cameron.

"On Murgatroyd's horse."

"Your connections are poor all the way through. You'll not be able to reach Totten before tomorrow afternoon."

"I'm going."

"Wait," said Matt. "Are you willing to take a little risk, Prebbles?"

"Risk? I'd take any risk if it could shorten my trip to Totten by a single hour."

"Do you know the country between here and Totten?"

"Every foot of it."

"By night as well as by day?"

"Any time."

"Let's get a little something to eat," said Matt, "and then I'll agree to get you to Totten inside of three hours."

"How?"

"We'll use the aëroplane."

There was a silence, then a protest from McGlory.

"Pard, you're not made of iron. You can't stand that trip, after all you've done. Sufferin' cats! Why, you're workin' every second you're runnin' the *Comet*! And it's the hardest kind of work, at that."

"I can do it," said Matt, looking around at the gathering dusk. "But we'll have to start before it gets too dark."

"Look at the risk!"

"We'll face it. Besides, it's not so much."

There was no arguing with Matt. He had his mind made up and was like a rock.

"You and Ping, Joe," said Matt, "will come with Cameron and Murgatroyd. Have you a lantern, Newt?"

"Yes."

"Get it."

The lantern was secured and lighted. After Matt had hastily bolted a few mouthfuls of food, he took the lantern and started for the place where he had left the *Comet*.

Cameron, Ping, and McGlory accompanied the king of the motor boys and Newt Prebbles. Roscoe remained at the shack with Murgatroyd.

The rope with which the aëroplane had been made fast to the trees was taken off, and Matt, while he was going over the machine to see that everything was in proper order, told McGlory to hunt for a favorable place to make the start.

When Matt had finished his inspection, the cowboy had selected the nearest spot which was at all promising.

"It's at the top of the bank, Matt," said McGlory. "There's a clear stretch, sloping slightly to the east."

"Then let's get the machine up there."

The *Comet*, a ghostly monstrosity in the gloom, was pushed and pulled to the top of the bank and pointed down the slight slope. Matt walked over the course of the start with the lantern, to make sure there were no stones in the way.

"We don't want the lantern," said Matt, coming back and handing the light to McGlory. "Lock up the shack when you leave and bring the key with you, Joe."

McGlory was nervous and apprehensive. He grabbed Matt's hand before he took his seat.

"It's a risky venture," he breathed.

"A little risk, of course," answered Matt. "There always is."

"But this is night, pard. You never tried to fly the machine at night before."

"There's always got to be a first time."

"There's some wind, too."

"Not enough to be dangerous."

"You'll win out, Motor Matt," said Cameron; "you always do."

"There's got to be a first time when he won't," croaked McGlory dismally.

"Take your seat, Newt," said Matt.

Newt, without a word, placed himself as directed.

"I guess we're all ready," called Matt, starting the motor. "Help us in the getaway, you fellows."

Cameron, McGlory, and Ping pushed the car down the slope through the dusk. Finally it drew away from them, and they saw it, like a huge spectre, sailing skyward.

Newt Prebbles undoubtedly remembered more about that daring night trip than Motor Matt.

The king of the motor boys had eyes and ears for nothing but his work. The propeller whirled the great planes on and on into the gloom, and sense of touch alone told Matt when to meet the varying points of air pressure by a shift of the wing tips.

Newt said little, and what he did say was in the nature of directions for keeping the *Comet* on the right course. With eyes peering ahead and downward, he watched the dusky panorama flitting away below them.

Matt admired his courage. Calm and steady, he kept rigidly to his place, interfered in no way with the freedom of Matt's movements, and watched alertly for the landmarks with which he was familiar.

Whenever they swept over a cluster of lights, young Prebbles named the town instantly.

The stars came out in the dusky vault overhead, and a big moon crept up over the horizon.

Swinging through space, hung from the zenith as by invisible cords, the *Comet* glided steadily and surely onward.

"Oberon," announced Newt, as they swept across a gleaming mat of yellow.

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"Great spark plugs!" exclaimed the king of the motor boys. "I don't know, Newt, but I've a notion we're making a record flight."

"It's wonderful," mused young Prebbles; "but there's something which, to my mind, is even more wonderful than this work of the flying machine."

"What's that?"

"Why, that you're doing this for me—for a man who nearly drowned himself trying to get away from you, and who tried his best to cripple you, or the *Comet*, with a bullet."

"We all of us make mistakes, now and then," answered Matt. "It's a mighty foolish man who won't rectify a mistake when he finds he has made one."

From Oberon the course led north and east.

"There's the post trader's store," reported Prebbles.

"That means we're just about where we're going," said Matt.

"Where'll we come down?"

"On the parade ground at the post."

When near the old fort, they could hear the call of the sentries, and were able to mark the fringe of oil lamps around the barracks and officers' quarters.

Silently, like a wraith from the Unknown, they dropped downward, struck on the bicycle wheels, and glided to a stop.

"Be hivins," cried a voice, "it's th' *Comet*. Now what would you be afther thinkin' av that? Th' *Comet*, d'ye moind, rammin' around in th' dark th' same as if it was broad day. Is that yerself, Motor Matt?"

"Yes," said Matt, stepping out of the machine. "How's Prebbles, O'Hara?"

"Th' ould sawbones has given up hope, an' that's all I kin tell ye. But who is it ye have along?"

"Prebbles' son. Take him up to Cameron's quarters at once, will you?"

"Sure I will."

"I'll see you in the morning, Newt," Matt added.

Young Prebbles paused to grasp Matt's hand.

"I appreciate what you have done for me, don't forget that," he said.

Matt gave the *Comet* into the care of a guard, then hunted up a place to sleep. His head had hardly dropped on the pillow before he was off for the land of dreams.

CHAPTER XVI.

CONCLUSION.

Doctors are not infallible, and the post doctor was no exception in this respect. All his experience and skill in diagnosing the ills of humanity, made him certain that Prebbles was booked for the other world. But there was an error—and, more than likely, that error was due to the arrival of Newt, who, it will be remembered, the doctor had wired it would be useless to send.

Prebbles was singing his Salvation Army hymns when Newt stepped into the sick room. All night he was marching the streets, in his disordered mind, pounding the cymbals and exhorting. Occasionally there crept into the oral wanderings a reference to the young man watching at the bedside.

Most unexpectedly—most unaccountably, to the doctor—a lucid moment came to Prebbles in the early morning. He saw his son, he recognized him, and he felt his handclasp. There was a smile on the old man's lips as he drifted back into his sea of visions.

But, from that moment, there was a noticeable change. There seemed more resisting power in the wasted body of the old clerk, as though hope for better things had grown up in him and was giving him strength.

To Matt, Newt Prebbles told what he knew about the accident to poor Harry Traquair.

Siwash Charley, under agreement with Murgatroyd, had tampered with Traquair's machine before the fatal flight, just as he had tampered with Matt's machine before the official trials at Fort Totten. But Traquair had not been so fortunate as the king of the motor boys.

Newt had learned of this villainous work through Siwash Charley, and had received from Siwash, at a time when the ruffian was under the influence of liquor, an incriminating note from the broker, signed with his *alias*, "George Hobbes."

Prebbles had made use of this document, holding it over Murgatroyd's head and extorting money from him on account of it.

This, of course, formed a sad commentary on the character of young Prebbles. But Motor Matt, in "advancing the spark of friendship," so played upon the facts in the case, and showed up the broker's duplicity, that the old clerk's illness formed the turning point in his son's career.

Such transformations are not so rare as it would seem.

Cameron, Matt, Ping, and Roscoe arrived at the post in the afternoon following the arrival of Matt and young Prebbles. Murgatroyd, of course, accompanied them.

Murgatroyd was tried, not on the Traquair charge, but on the later one of conniving, with Siwash Charley, to injure the aëroplane at the government trials, thus endangering the life, not only of Motor Matt, but of Lieutenant Cameron as well.

His sentence was commensurate with the evil he had attempted, and he followed Siwash Charley to the Leavenworth prison.

After a few days the post doctor was as certain Prebbles would recover as he had been positive, at the time he sent his message to Cameron, that he had not many hours to live.

The reward paid by the government for the capture of Murgatroyd was made over to the old clerk. On this, he and his son were to begin life anew. [Pg 28]

One of the first things Matt did, after reaching the post with Newt Prebbles, was to write to Mrs. Traquair, at Jamestown, settling a mystery which had long puzzled every one who knew of Murgatroyd's attempts to secure the Wells County homestead.

There was coal under the soil of the quarter-section, and the railroad company wanted it. That was the secret, and Mrs. Traquair profited handsomely by the knowledge of it.

The mortgage was paid, and the homestead passed into the hands of the railroad company.

In a country so barren of trees as North Dakota, coal is a valuable commodity.

Matt still kept the aëroplane, and still persistently refused to put it in storage at the post, to be called for later.

"The *Comet*," said Matt, one evening when he and McGlory were again with Cameron, "has got to earn something for Joe, and Ping, and myself."

"Ping comes in on the deal, does he?" laughed Cameron.

"Share and share alike with the rest of us," averred Matt. "That Chinese boy is loyalty itself. Down in that shelter tent, below the post trader's, he spends his nights and days watching the aëroplane."

"And talking to it, and singing about it, and burning rice-paper prayers to the heathen josses, asking them to keep it carefully and not let it go broke while up in the air," put in McGlory. "Oh, he's a freak, that Ping boy; but, as Matt says, he's a mighty good sort of a freak at that. Look how he ran off with the rifles when we fooled the Tin Cup punchers on the hill! And remember how he slammed that stone through the window when Murgatroyd had drawn a fine bead on me and was about to press the trigger. Share and share alike? Well, I should say."

"You're still determined to go into the show business, Matt?" asked Cameron anxiously.

"I don't see why we shouldn't," said Matt. "Five hundred a week isn't to be sneezed at. Joe's agreed, and so has Ping. When the first favorable day arrives, we're going to fly to Fargo."

Two days later the favorable moment was at hand. All the soldiers at the post were out to witness the start, and even the gruff post trader was present to say good-by to the king of the motor boys and his friends.

Matt's last call, at the post, was made on Prebbles. The old man was practically out of danger, but his recovery would take time, and for a long while yet he would have to remain in bed.

He was not able to say much, but what little he did say Matt considered an ample reward for the strenuous adventures that had befallen him and his chums on their flight to the upper Missouri.

Newt had become his sworn friend. Whenever Matt wanted any help, in any way that was within Newt's power to grant, he was surely to call on young Prebbles.

When finally Motor Matt took his way down the post hill for the last time, he was in an exceedingly thoughtful mood.

He remembered when he had first come to Devil's Lake, knowing nothing about aëroplanes, and had practiced with the *June Bug* until he had acquired the knack of flying the machine and had made good and sold the machine to the government for enough to give large profit to himself and his friends, and, what pleased him most, to place Mrs. Traquair above want.

He remembered, too, how he had sailed away alone into Wells County on a fool's errand, had become entangled in a losing cause, and had experienced a sharp reverse.

But, best of all, in his estimation, was the night journey back to the post from the Missouri River, bringing Newt Prebbles to his father's bedside.

Down into the cheering throng below the post trader's store went the king of the motor boys, shaking hands with every one he met, Indians, whites, or "breeds," receiving good wishes from all and heartily returning them.

For the last time the aeroplane was dragged from the shelter tent, given a strong start along the old familiar roadway, and then watched as it climbed up and up into the air and winged swiftly eastward, carrying Motor Matt, and Joe McGlory, and Ping into untried ventures and fresh fields of endeavor.

THE END.

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OR,

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<h2>MOTOR STORIES</h2> <p>THRILLING ADVENTURE MOTOR FICTION</p>

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NEW YORK, August 21, 1909.

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MOSE HOWARD'S FISH TRAP.

Nicodemus Squab, Professor of Orthography in the Jimtown district school, was a man of an inquiring turn of mind.

Overhearing some of the scholars discussing a prospective coon hunt that was to come off the following Saturday night, the professor drew near and inquired if they would allow him to join them.

"Of course you kin jine us," said Mose Howard, who was the ringleader in all the devilment in the neighborhood. "Glad tu have you go 'long. We'll come by for you."

"Thank you," said the professor. "I never was coon hunting in my life, though I've always wanted to go—just to see how it is done, you know."

According to promise, Mose Howard, Dick Miller, and Joe Smiley came by for the professor, who was ready and waiting, and who joined the hunters, anticipating a jolly old time.

After winding up the coon hunt, which resulted in the capture of five possums and three coons, Mose Howard proposed that they should go back by the fish trap and catch a mess of fish.

The proposition was unanimously agreed to, and they struck off down the creek, the professor

bringing up the rear, puffing and blowing, though highly elated at the variation that this additional act in the programme promised, as well as at the prospect of a successful raid upon the finny tribe.

The "Dofuny" contraption that Mose dignified with the name of fish trap consisted merely of a large sack held open by a hoop, around which the mouth of the sack was fastened, and a couple of ropes, one end of which was fastened to each side of the hoop, while the other ends were fastened to trees on the opposite sides of the stream, in such a way as to allow the hoop to remain about halfway submerged.

On the bank of the creek was a lantern, in which was about half a tallow candle.

Producing some matches, Mose lit the candle and proceeded to explain to the professor the modus operandi of catching fish with his new-fangled trap.

"You just take the lamp, and wade into the trap, and hold the lamp right in front of the mouth so that the fish can see how to run in, and we boys'll go away down the creek and pull off our clothes and wade into the creek and drive the fish up and into the trap."

The professor, as unsuspecting of any trick as a sucking baby, shucked himself, and then taking up the lantern, waded into the trap that the boys set for him instead of for fish, and in the construction of which they had not only exhausted their financial resources in the purchase of the material out of which it was constructed, but also their ingenuity in the getting up and fabrication of the same.

"Ugh!" grunted the professor, as he reached the trap and placed the lantern in the position indicated, "this water is cold as ice. I want you boys to make haste."

"Yes, sir," responded the boys.

"You'll hear us hollerin' as we come," said Mose, and off they started down the creek in a trot.

"All right," said the professor.

As soon as they got out of sight their gait slackened to a walk, which they kept till they reached a point some four hundred yards distant from the trap, when, seating themselves on a log, they began the most uproarious din of yelling and howling that had ever awakened the slumbering echoes of those old woods since the aborigines had vacated the premises.

After about an hour spent in this way the boys got up and advanced slowly up the bank of the stream about a hundred yards, when they seated themselves on another log, where they continued to whoop and yell like so many wild Indians.

After another hour thus spent they made another advance which brought the professor and the fish trap within their range of vision, though, owing to the darkness, they were not visible to him.

"Hurry up, boys!" he shouted. "I'm nearly froze, and the candle's nearly out."

That was what they were waiting for—the candle to burn out—so that their failure to catch fish could be laid to the absence of the light.

"Yes, sir!" they shouted back; "we're hurrying as fast as we can!"

And renewing their yells, they advanced slowly—very slowly—up the stream.

"Hurry up! hurry up!" again shouted the professor. "The candle will be out in two minutes."

"Ay, ay, sir!" shouted Mose back; "but you must stop hollerin', or you'll skeer the fish."

Sure enough, in about two minutes the candle gave a last convulsive flicker, and in the twinkling of an eye thick darkness reigned as absolutely over the professor and the fish trap as elsewhere.

"Boys," said Mose, in a tone of voice loud enough for the professor to hear him, "there ain't no use wadin' in this water any longer; let's go back an' git our cloze."

Seating themselves on a log, they sat perfectly silent for a while—long enough, as they thought, for it to have taken them to go back to where they commenced their drive, dress themselves, and reach that point on their return—when they got up and resumed their progress upstream.

On reaching the trap, they found the professor on shore, and though he had completed his toilet, his teeth were chattering together worse than a pair of castanets rattling off a quickstep march.

"We'll have to try it over ag'in some other time," said Mose, "and fetch more candles with us. I thought we had plenty this time, but we didn't. I guess I'll bring enough next time."

"Why didn't you fellows hurry up?" said the professor. "What made you come so slow?" the chattering of his teeth as he spoke causing him to cut the words into more than the legitimate number of syllables to which they were entitled.

"Couldn't come no faster," said Mose. "The water was so thunderin' cold the fish wouldn't drive fast."

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Satisfied with this explanation, the professor fell into ranks as the boys filed off in the direction of home. The exercise of walking soon brought a reaction in his system, the first effect of which was to put a stop to the music of the castanets, and on reaching home he pronounced himself all right again.

Sometime during the ensuing week Mose Howard informed the professor that they were going to try the fish trap again the following Saturday night, and asked him if he didn't want to go along.

The professor gave an involuntary shudder as the recollection of that protracted soaking in ice

water of the previous Saturday night flashed across his mind.

Discretion prompted him to give a negative response. Curiosity, however, got the better of discretion, and he accepted the invitation.

"I'll be on hand," said he. "There's no fun standing in that cold water, especially when you get no fish; but if you can stand it I guess I can."

At the appointed time the boys came by, when, the professor joining them, they proceeded to the fish trap.

On arriving there, Mose produced a couple of pieces of candle, one of which he proceeded to light and put in the lantern. It was nearly twice as long as the one they had burned out on the previous occasion.

The other piece he placed in the lantern, so that it could be easily got at if it should be needed.

This latter piece Mose had had manufactured himself especially for the occasion, and had taken some little pains in its construction.

After soaking the wick in water until it was perfectly saturated, he had taken a skillet and melted some tallow therein; then placing the wick in a mould, he filled the latter with the melted tallow, and the thing was accomplished.

This particular candle he had carefully marked, so as to be able to distinguish it from any other candle.

Before completing their arrangements at the fish trap, preparatory to beginning the drive, the professor proposed that one of the boys should take his place at the trap while he accompanied the others and assisted in driving the fish.

"Kin you swim?" asked Mose Howard.

"No," answered the professor.

"Well, you'd run the resk ov gittin' drownded, then," said Mose.

"You go on, then," said the professor, "and I'll mind the trap."

So off the boys started, and going down the stream about a mile, seated themselves upon a log, and began yelling and whooping, as on the previous occasion.

Hour after hour passed, each hour seeming to the benumbed professor an age.

The yelling approached slowly but surely.

The boys had now arrived at a point where every motion of the professor was distinctly visible.

The piece of candle Mose had lighted and put in the lantern was nearly burned out. Taking up the other piece, the professor proceeded to light it. Placing it in the lantern, it gave a splutter and went out. Dark! Dark was no name for it. No moon, no stars, no matches.

But that bogus candle would have been a match for a whole box of matches.

"What in thunder's the matter now?" shouted Mose.

"The candle's gone out," shouted the professor back. "Have you got any matches?" he inquired.

"Nary match," said Mose.

"What's to be done?" inquired the professor.

"Nuthin'," said Mose. "The thing's played out. Put on your cloze, while we go and git ourn, and then we'll git for home."

Seating themselves on a log, the boys remained quiet for a while, then rising to their feet, they came up to where the professor was waltzing around trying to get up a circulation.

"Another waterhaul," said Mose.

"Looks a good deal like it," said the professor.

"Don't know why the mischief some of us didn't think tu bring some matches," said Mose.

"I don't know, either," responded the professor, in a deprecating tone of voice, as though he entertained the idea that somehow or other he had been mainly instrumental in producing the bad luck.

"Better luck next time," said Mose philosophically, as he struck out for home, followed by the others.

They had proceeded about two-thirds of the way home, groping their way as best they could through the thick darkness, when a shrill, prolonged scream directly ahead of them, and apparently at no great distance, broke upon their startled auriculars.

"Painter!" ejaculated Mose, in a low tone of voice, though sufficiently loud to be distinctly audible to the professor, at the same time springing to one side, and the next moment he was out of the professor's hearing.

The fact was he had only taken a couple of steps and then squatted in the grass as completely concealed from his companions by the intense darkness as though he had been on the opposite side of the globe.

"Painter!" repeated the other boys, following Mose's example, of springing to one side and

squatting in the grass.

Left alone, the professor, with hair on end, paused a moment to collect his scattered thoughts; but only for a moment.

Another scream long drawn out, and apparently but a few yards distant, set his dumpling-shaped body in motion, and the next moment he was streaking it across the country as fast as his duck legs could carry him.

Tumbling over a log lying on the edge of a bank some twenty feet high and nearly perpendicular, down which he rolled, he landed in a mud hole at the bottom.

Gathering himself up he began looking for his hat, which had parted company with him on the way down the bank, when, another scream breaking upon his ear, he struck out once more on his race for life, hatless and covered with mud from his head to his heels.

Coming to a brier patch, he was on the point of diverging from his course in order to try and go around it, when another scream precipitated the terror-stricken professor into the patch like a catapult.

Emerging from the brier patch with his coat tails torn into ribbons, the mud-begrimed professor held on the even tenor of his way without any diminution of speed for a hundred yards or so, when his pace began to slacken a little. Another scream, however, put him to his mettle again, but as that was the last, and as he was about exhausted, he soon settled down to a walk, and presently stumbling over a log, he picked himself up and seated himself thereon.

After resting a while, plunged in the meantime in a deep cogitation, he finally concluded to try and seek a shelter for the remainder of the night. So, starting forward, he wandered about first in one direction and then in another, and it was not until daylight began to streak the eastern horizon that he stumbled on a clearing in the woods, in the midst of which was a log cabin.

Cautiously approaching the cabin, he had reached the foot of a sapling some fifty steps from the door when a big dog came dashing around the corner of the house, barking in a most furious manner.

No sooner did the professor catch sight of the dog bouncing along in the direction of him and the sapling than he was seized with such a sudden panic as to cause him to grasp the sapling in his arms and start up it, though, owing to want of practice, with hardly the agility of a squirrel. After a tremendous effort he succeeded in reaching a fork some ten feet from the ground, where he seated himself, and awaited the issue of events.

He didn't have long to wait. The furious barking of the dog soon roused the inmates of the cabin.

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Scarcely a minute had elapsed after the professor had succeeded, by the most superhuman exertions, in seating himself comfortably in the fork of the sapling, out of the reach of the dog, when the door of the cabin opened and a huge six-footer of a backwoodsman, somewhat airily attired, with a rifle of corresponding size with himself in his hand, emerged therefrom.

"What you got thar, Bull?" said the man, as he approached the sapling, at the root of which the dog was barking in a most vociferous manner. "What is it, old feller?" he continued. "B'ar, painter, ur catamount?"

Bull's response was an abortive attempt to climb the tree, accompanied by a most furious outburst of barking.

"Be quiet, old feller," said the man; "we'll soon see what it is," at the same time raising his rifle to his shoulder.

"Hold on there," shouted the professor, who was beginning to realize the perilous position in which he was placed, and the imminent danger he was in of being shot for a bear or catamount. "I am no varmint. I'm Nicodemus Squab, Professor of Orthography in the Jimtown district school."

"Hallo," said the backwoodsman, as he lowered his rifle, "is that so? Well, that gits me. What in thunder ur you doin' up thar?"

"Wait till I get down, and I'll tell you."

And crawling out of the crotch in which he had been seated, the professor slid down the sapling, when he soon succeeded in explaining matters to the satisfaction of that thinly clad backwoodsman and his savage bulldog.

It was now broad daylight, and when he reached Jimtown the sun was some distance above the horizon, climbing upward toward the zenith.

Of course every man, woman, and child in the place beheld, with wonder-depicted countenances, the advent of the mud-begrimed, hatless professor, and a thousand conjectures were indulged in as to the cause of his singular appearance.

The professor was disposed to be reticent on the subject, answering interrogatories in relation to the matter evasively; but the joke was too good to be kept, and in less than twenty-four hours his approach toward any crowd was greeted by a broad grin overspreading the countenances of a majority of the members thereof, and his departure signalized by a long guffaw.

This conduct on the part of the citizens annoyed the professor considerably at first; then it grew monotonous, and he became disgusted.

Finally he burst into a flame of indignation, and after taking his revenge out of the hides of the

pupils, especially Mose Howard and his confederates, the irate professor shook the dust of Jintown off his feet, and betook himself to parts unknown.

PHOTOGRAPHS TAKEN IN DANGEROUS PLACES.

"Race war in Alabama. Take cinematograph pictures of fighting and country." "Want pictures of Dyaks of Borneo as soon as possible." "Series wanted of whale-hunting in Arctic regions."

The average man, receiving one of these messages with his breakfast, would not regard the commission exactly in the light of a pleasure trip. To the cinematograph man, however, such orders are all in a day's work. He simply packs up his machine, makes his arrangements in the shortest possible time, and goes right ahead with the business.

It is thrilling and wonderful work at times; and it requires a little patience, too. "One of our photographers," said the manager of a company recently, "once sat beside a geyser in Iceland for three weeks, waiting for an eruption to take place, in order that he might obtain some pictures of this wonderful phenomenon. The geyser seemed in no hurry to oblige him, so he left the district for a couple of days. When he returned he found that the eruption had taken place and the geyser had again become inactive.

"Another of our photographers, who went out to Borneo to take pictures of the home life of the natives, narrowly escaped losing his head as well as his machine. The natives thought the latter was some new and powerful weapon, and it was only by the timely intervention of the interpreter, who explained matters, that they adopted a more friendly attitude.

"By the way, this particular photographer raised a good laugh when he came home. We wanted some pictures taken while traveling down the water chute at an exhibition. It was necessary for the operator and the machine to be strapped to the boat, in order that he might be quite free to turn the handle and take the photographs as he shot down the chute. I asked the photographer from Borneo to do the job. 'I would rather be excused,' he said; 'I've got a weak heart.' Here was a man, who spent weeks among one of the most savage tribes in the world, who was afraid to go down a water chute. Nerves are peculiar things.

"I think, however, the worst experience which has befallen one of our photographers was that of the man we sent to take the pictures of a whale-hunting expedition. A fine school—I believe that is the correct term—of whales was sighted one day. The boats went in pursuit, and our photographer with his machine entered one of them. The crew of this boat managed to harpoon a fine big whale, who went through the sea at a terrific pace, dragging the boat behind him. Our photographer was just congratulating himself on getting some of the most realistic pictures ever obtained, when suddenly the whale doubled in its tracks, and, to make a long story short, smashed the boat. Luckily, another boat came up at the critical moment and rescued the crew and the photographer. But the latter is always bemoaning the fact that one of the finest sets of cinematograph pictures ever taken lies at the bottom of the Arctic Ocean."

Some of the most interesting pictures shown, however, are scenes taken en route while traveling by rail in various parts of the world. A special engine is chartered, and the operator, with his machine, takes his place on the front platform of the engine, or on a low truck which the engine pushes in front of it. Thus mile after mile of scenery is photographed as the engine rushes along. It is a rather ticklish job, particularly in wild regions where all sorts of animals stray on to the line, and there is a risk of collision and general smash.

Doubtless many readers are acquainted with the entertaining and novel manner in which these pictures are afterward shown. One sits in a stationary model of a railway carriage, the picture being thrown on a screen at the end. A motor underneath the carriage gives a realistic impression of the noise made by a train when traveling, and thus one seems to be rushing through the country which is being depicted on the screen. It is a novel notion, which is deserving of all the success and popularity it has attained.

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Transcriber's Notes:

Added table of contents.

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Page 2, corrected "aëroplan" to "aéroplane" in "Traquair and his aéroplane."

Page 3, corrected "Tarquair" to "Traquair" in "try-out of the Traquair" and "you and Mrs. Traquair sold."

Page 6, corrected "wil" to "will" in "money will go to you."

Page 10, corrected "se" to "see" in "see the time-piece."

Page 25, corrected "Pebbles" to "Prebbles" in "good stuff in young Pebbles."

Page 29, corrected "thty" to "they" in "which they kept till."

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK MOTOR MATT'S MAKE-AND-BREAK; OR,
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