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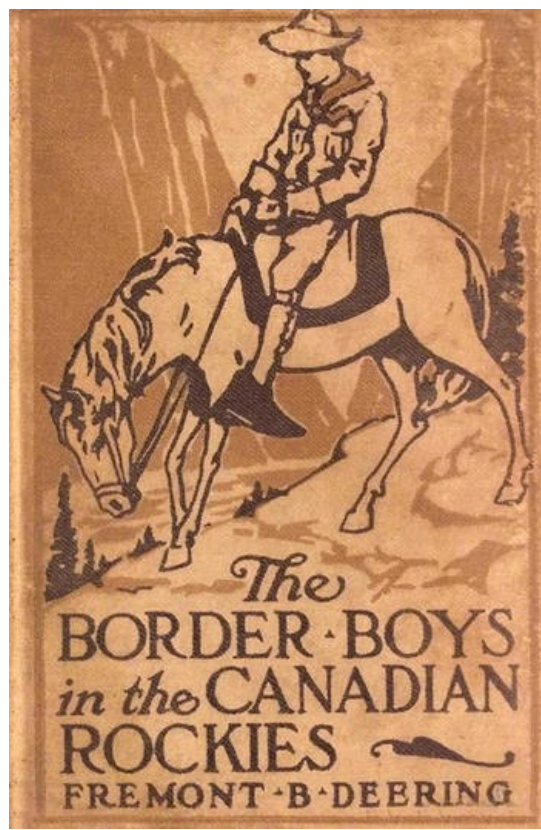
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\*\*\* START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE BORDER BOYS IN THE CANADIAN  
ROCKIES \*\*\*

**TRANSCRIBER'S NOTE:**

—Obvious print and punctuation errors were corrected.

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*The*  
**BORDER BOYS**  
*in the* **CANADIAN**  
**ROCKIES**   
**FREMONT B DEERING**

---



**He glanced down the rifle barrel and then  
as his finger pressed the trigger the  
report roared.**

(Page [219](#))

(*The Border Boys In the Canadian  
Rockies*)

# THE BORDER BOYS IN THE CANADIAN ROCKIES

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By FREMONT B. DEERING

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AUTHOR OF

"The Border Boys on the Trail," "The Border Boys  
Along the Frontier," "The Border Boys with the  
Mexican Rangers," "The Border Boys with the  
Texas Rangers," "The Border Boys Along  
the St. Lawrence."



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# The Border Boys in the Canadian Rockies

## CHAPTER I.

### THE BOY FROM NOWHERE.

"Hold on there a minute! Don't you think you're being unnecessarily rough with that boy?"

"Naw, I don't. And if I am, it ain't none of your business that I can see."

"Perhaps I mean to make it so."

"Aw run along and play, kid. Don't bother me."

The brakeman glared angrily at the tall, well-built lad who had accosted him. In so doing, he for an instant ceased belaboring a dust-covered, cowering lad in pitifully ragged clothing whom, a moment before, he had been cuffing about the head without mercy.

"Take that, you young tramp!" he had hurled out savagely, as each blow fell on the quivering form. [6]

The boy receiving this unmerciful punishment had been discovered riding the blind-baggage on the long, dust-covered train of Canadian Pacific coaches that had just come to a stop.

Of course the boy had been summarily ejected, and the brakeman was now engaged in what he would have termed "dusting the young rascal's jacket."

It was a pitiful sight, though, to see the slender, emaciated lad, whose rags hardly covered his thin body, and who could not have been much above sixteen, cowering under the punishment of the burly trainman. The brakeman was not of necessity a brute. But in his eyes the lad was "a miserable tramp," and only getting his just dues. To more humane eyes, though, the scene appeared in a different light.

Some of the passengers, gazing from the windows, had ventured to cry, "Shame," but that was all that had come of it till Ralph Stetson, who had been standing with a group of his friends at the other end of the platform of the Pine Pass station, in the heart of the Canadian Rockies, happened to see what was going forward. Without a word he had hastened from them and come to the rescue. Ralph was a boy whose blood always was on fire at the sight of cruelty and oppression, and it appeared to him that the brakeman was being unnecessarily rough. Besides, there was something in the big, appealing eyes of the sufferer, and his ragged, ill-clad form, that aroused all his sympathies. So it came about that he had tried to check the punishment with the words quoted at the beginning of this chapter. [7]

Now he stood facing the brakeman who appeared quite willing for a minute to drop the lad he was maltreating and turn on the newcomer. Perhaps, though, there was something in Ralph's eye that held him back. Old "King-pin" Stetson's son looked thoroughly business-like in his broad-brimmed woolen hat, corduroy jacket and trousers, stout hunting boots and flannel shirt, with a handkerchief loosely knotted about the neck. Evidently he had come prepared to rough it in the wild country in the midst of which the train had come to a halt. [8]

His life and experiences in the strenuous country along the Mexican border had toughened Ralph's muscles and bronzed his features, and he looked well equipped physically to carry out the confidence expressed in his cool, clear eyes.

"Who are you, anyhow?" the brakeman hurled at him, growing more aggressive as he saw some of his mates running toward him from the head of the long train where the two big Mogul locomotives were thundering impatiently.

"Never mind that for now. Drop that boy and I'll pay his fare to wherever he wants to go."

"Well, you are a softy! Pay a tramp's fare? Let me tell you, mister  
---

"Say, going to hold this train all day?" demanded the conductor bustling up. "What's all this?"

"This kid got on the train in the night some place. Bin ridin' the blind baggage. I was giving him 'what for' when this other kid butts in," explained the brakeman.

"I said I was willing to pay this boy's fare rather than see him abused," struck in Ralph, flushing slightly.

"Well, that's fair and square," said the conductor, "so long as he pays his fare, that's all I care. But I ain't goin' to hold my train. Where d'ye want to go, boy?"

"This is Pine Pass, ain't it?" demanded the ride stealer, whom the brakeman had now released.

"This is the Pass,—yes. Come, hurry up."

"Then I've come all the fur I'm goin'."

As if to signify that his interest was over, the conductor waved his hand to the engineers peering from their cabs ahead. The brakemen scampered for their cars. The locomotives puffed and snorted and the long train began to move. As the conductor swung on he called back sarcastically:

[10]

"Sorry we couldn't wait while you fixed it up. Wish you joy of your bargain."

In another instant the train was swinging around into a long cut between deep, rocky walls. In yet another instant it was gone, and Ralph Stetson, with a rather puzzled expression on his good-looking face, stood confronting the scarecrow-like object he had rescued from the brakeman. In the tenement-house district of any large city the pitiful figure might not have looked out of place.

But here, in the Canadian Rockies, with a boiling, leaping torrent racing under a slender trestle, great scraps of rocks and pine and balsam-clad mountains towering above, and in the distance the mighty peaks of the Selkirks looming against the clean-swept blue, the spectacle that this waif of the big towns presented seemed almost ludicrous in its contrast. Ralph felt it so at least, for he smiled a little as he looked at the disreputable figure before him and asked:

[11]

"What are you doing at Pine Pass?"

The question was certainly a natural one. Besides the tiny station, no human habitation was in sight. Above it, threatening to crush it seemingly, towered a precipice of dark colored rock. Beyond this rose mighty pines, cliffs, waterfalls and, finally, climbing fields of snow. Everywhere peaks and summits loomed with a solitary eagle wheeling far above. In the air was the thunderous voice of the torrent as it tumbled along under the spidery trestle beyond the station, and the sweet, clean fragrance of the pines.

"What'm I doin' at Pine Pass?" The ragged youth repeated the question. "I-I'm sorry, mister, but I can't tell yer." He paused, and a strange, wistful look came into his eyes as he gazed at the distant peaks, "I thought some time I'd get up among them mountains; but there's a heap more of 'em than I calculated on."

[12]

"How did you get here? Where did you come from?" pursued Ralph.

"Frum Noo York." And then, answering the unspoken question, he continued, "You kin call me Jimmie, and ef you want ter know how I got yere, I jes' beat it."

"Beat it, eh? Tramped it, you mean?"

"Yep. Stole rides when I could. Walked when I couldn't. Bin two munts er more, I reckon. Steamboats, freights, blin' baggage, anyting."

"And what did you think you'd do when you got here?"

"Work till I got some coin togedder. But it don't look much as if there was any jobs fer a kid aroun' here, does it?"

"It does not. What can you do?"

"Anyting; that's on the level."

"Hum; you wait here a minute, Jimmie. I don't quite understand what brought you here, and if you don't want to tell me I won't ask you. But you wait here a minute and I'll see what I can do."

[13]

"Say, you will? Kin you put me to woik? Say, you're all right, you are, mister. I'll bet you'd have put that braky away in a couple of punches, big as he wuz."

And the boy gazed admiringly after Ralph's athletic form as the



latter hastened toward the group at the end of the platform. They were standing beside what appeared to be a small mountain of baggage and they had just noticed his absence.

"Well, what under the sun——?" began Harry Ware, whose full name, H. D. Ware, was, of course, shortened at Stone fell College to Hardware.

"Simpering serpents, Ralph," broke in Percy Simmons, who, equally, of course, was known to his boyish chums as Persimmons, "grinning gargoyles, we knew this was to be a collecting trip, but you appear to have started by acquiring a scarecrow!"

[14]

"Hold on a minute, boys," cried Ralph, half laughingly, for Persimmons' odd way of talking and explosive exclamations made everyone who knew him smile. "Hold on; listen to what happened."

The eldest member of the group, a tall and angular, but withal good-natured and kindly looking man with a pair of shell-rimmed spectacles perched across his bony nose, now struck in.

"Yes, boys; let us hear what Ralph has been up to now. I declare, since our experience along the Border I'm prepared for anything."

"Even what may befall us in the Canadian Rockies, eh, Professor Wintergreen?" asked Ralph. "Well, that lad yonder, if I'm not much mistaken, is our future deputy cook, bottlewasher, and midshipmate."

[15]

They all stared at him. Persimmons was the first to recover his voice.

"Giggling gophers," he gasped, "as if Hardware hadn't brought along enough patent dingbats without your adding a live one to the collection!"

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[16]

## CHAPTER II.

### THE TORRENT.

Vacation time had rolled around once more at Stonefell College, which accounts for our finding Professor Wintergreen, Ralph Stetson, and the latter's chums at this isolated spot in the heart of the Canadian Rockies. Readers of former volumes of this series will at once recall the eccentric professor and his young companion Ralph. Harry Ware and Percy Simmons, however, we have not met before. Jack Merrill and Walt Phelps, the two young ranchmen who shared Ralph's adventure on the Mexican border, could not be with him on the present vacation, both boys being required at their western homes.

So it had come about that when Professor Wintergreen received a commission to hunt specimens in the Canadian Rockies, Ralph jumped at the chance to accompany him. His father, the railroad magnate, and Ralph's mother had planned a trip to Europe, but the boy, being given the choice of the Rocky Mountain expedition or the trip across the Atlantic, had, with his characteristic love of adventure, chosen the former without hesitation. His mother grieved rather over this, but his father approved. "King-pin Stetson," as Wall Street knew the dignified railroad magnate, approved of boys roughing it. He had seen how much good Ralph's western experiences had done the boy. His shoulders had broadened, his muscles hardened, and his eyes grown brighter during his strenuous times along the border. Not less noteworthy had been his mental broadening. From an indolent attitude toward studies, a condition caused, perhaps, by his former rather delicate health, Ralph's appetite for learning had become as robust as the rest of him.

[17]

There is no space here to detail all that had happened during Ralph's vacation on the Mexican border. But briefly, as told in "The Border Boys on the Trail," it included the exciting experiences attendant upon the capture of his chums and himself by a border bandit, and their sharing many perils and adventures on both sides of the frontier. In the second volume, called "The Border Boys Across the Frontier," the boys discovered the Haunted Mesa, and stumbled by the merest accident upon a subterranean river. The finding of this latter plunged them into a series of accidents and thrilling adventures, exciting beyond their wildest dreams. It is no laughing matter to be captured and suspected as spies by Mexican revolutionists, as the boys found out. But they managed to stop the smuggling of arms across the Border, as readers of that volume know.

[18]

"The Border Boys with the Mexican Rangers" showed how courage and skill may be more than a match for villainy and duplicity. With the "Rurales" the boys lived a life brimming to the full with the sort of experiences they had grown to love. The finding of a hidden mine, too, enriched them all and gave each lad an independent bank account of no mean dimension. The following book, which was entitled "The Border Boys with the Texas Rangers," found the three lads sharing the perils and hardships of the body that has done so much to keep law and order in a much vexed region. Brave, resourceful, and skillful, as their former experiences had trained them to be, the boys found full scope for all their faculties with the Rangers. A band of cattle thieves made trouble for them, and Jack Merrill's climb out of the Hidden Valley furnished the most thrilling experience of his life.

[19]

Dearly would Ralph have loved to share with his former companions the exciting times which he was sure lay ahead of him in the Canadian Rockies. But it was not to be, and so, when young Ware and Percy Simmons both begged to be "let off" from Bar Harbor and Newport, Professor Wintergreen had, on their parents' request, decided to allow them to come along. The professor's interests in the Canadian Rockies were purely scientific. His duty was to collect specimens of minerals, and also of animal life, for one of the best known scientific bodies in the east. Ralph, with his knowledge of hunting and woodcraft, was to be relied upon as a valuable aide. Young Ware and Percy Simmons were more or less Tenderfeet, though both had been camping before.

[20]

When Ralph had finished relating Jimmie's story to the others, the professor said:

"I'll talk to the lad myself. If he proves all that he appears to be from your description, Ralph, we might manage to use him. A boy willing to make himself useful around camp might come in handy."

So the professor stalked off on his long legs to interview Jimmie, who viewed his approach with awe, while the boys stood in a chattering group about the pile of baggage. It was to be remarked that most of it bore the initials H. D. Ware, of which more anon. [21]

"Wonder what's become of that guide and the ponies?" spoke up Ralph, while the Professor interrogated the awe-struck Jimmie.

"Don't know," responded Hardware, gazing at a dusty track that wound itself up the cliff back of the station for a few yards, and was then lost around a scrap of rock that glittered with "fool's-gold." "Ought to be here by now, though."

"Fiddling fish," struck in Persimmons at this moment, "there ought to be trout in that stream below there, boys. I'm going down to have a look."

"All right. We'll wait for you and give you a hail when the ponies show up. Look out you don't fall in, though. Those rocks look slippery where the water has dashed over them," warned Ralph.

"I'm all right," responded Persimmons airily, and he set out, clambering down the rocky path leading to the brink of the foaming, brown torrent that roared through Pine Pass. [22]

Shortly afterward, the Professor came back with his arm on Jimmie's shoulder. The man of science, childlike in some things and absorbed in study for the most part, was yet a fairly accurate reader of human nature.

"I've been talking to Jimmie, boys," he said, as he approached, "and he'll do. He's been officially engaged as general assistant to our guide with the Wintergreen expedition."

"Good for you, Jimmie," smiled Ralph, "and so now your troubles are at an end for a time, anyhow."

The eyes of the waif filled with tears.

"I dunno jes how ter thank you, boss," he said, addressing all of them, "but I kin promise you that I'll make good."

"Sure of that," said the Professor kindly, "but I can't make out why you won't tell us what brought you to such an out-of-the-way, not to say remote, part of the world as this." [23]

"I'd tell yer if I could; honest I would, boss," spoke Jimmie; "but—but I can't jes' yet. Some time maybe—"

The lad broke off, and once more his wistful eyes sought the distant peaks.

"Is them the Selkirks over yonder?" he asked presently.

"Yes; those far peaks are," said the Professor, also gazing toward the giant ranges in the distance whose crests glimmered with the cold gleam of never-melting snow, "those are the Selkirks."

"Goin' that way?" asked Jimmie, his eyes still riveted on the far-flung ranges.

"Yes; we hope to penetrate as far as that. Why?"

"Oh, nuttin'. I hoped you was, that's all."

A smile played over Ralph's lips. He was about to ask Jimmie some bantering question about what he, the New York waif, expected to find in the distant mountains, but at that instant there came a piercing cry. [24]

"Help! Guzzling grasshoppers! H-e-l-p!"

"Gracious! It's Persimmons!" cried Ralph, an alarmed look coming over his countenance. Well did he know his friend's capacity for getting into trouble.

"Run, boys, run! He must be in a serious predicament!" cried the Professor, as the cry came once more.

At top speed they ran toward the end of the platform and the rocky path leading to the thundering mountain torrent.

"If he's fallen in that creek, he's a goner!" shouted the station agent, rushing out of the depot. "The falls are right below, and he'll be swept into them!"

## CHAPTER III.

### IN PERIL OF HIS LIFE.

Just how they clambered down that rocky, slippery track none of the party was ever able to recall in after life. But, burned deep on each boy's mind for as long as he should live was the picture they saw as they came in full view of the swirling, madly dashing torrent. Above a foam-flecked eddy, beyond which the main current boiled and seethed, towered the black, spider-like outlines of the trestle. On the other shore was a rocky steep covered with big pines and balsams.

Between the two, his white, frightened face showing above the current as he clung with might and main to a log, was Persimmons. This log, evidently the trunk of a tree which had fallen from its foothold beside the path on the depot side of the torrent, reached out some twenty feet above the devil's caldron of the stream. The roots and the main part of the trunk rested on the shore. That portion that projected over the water was nothing more than a slender pole. The freshets of spring had swept it clean of branch or limb. It was as bare as a flag-staff.

[26]

Under it the green water rushed frantically on toward a fall that lay beyond the trestle. The voice of the cataract was plainly audible in their ears, although in the extremity of their fear for Persimmons they gave it no heed. It was almost at the end of this frail support that the boy was clinging. Only his head and shoulders were above the water, which dragged malignantly at him, trying to tear loose his hold. It was plain at once that flesh and blood could not stand the strain long. If they did not act to save him, and that quickly, Percy Simmons was doomed speedily to be swept from his hold and hurtled to the falls and—but they did not dare dwell upon that thought.

[27]

How the boy could have got where he was, was for the present a mystery. But there he was, almost at the end of the slender tree trunk, which whipped under the strain of his weight.

"Can you hold on?" shouted Ralph, using the first words that came into his head.

They saw Persimmons' lips move, but could not hear his reply.

"Don't make him speak; he needs every ounce of breath he has," said the professor, whose face was ashen white under his tan. The boys were hardly less pale. They looked about them despairingly.

"We must find a rope and get it out to him," cried Harry Ware.

"But how? Nobody could maintain a foothold on that log," declared Ralph.

"We might drift it down to him," suggested the station agent; "get on the bank further up and allow the current to carry down a loop that he could grab."

[28]

"That's a good idea," cried the professor, hailing any solution of their quandary with joy, "have you got a rope?"

"Yes, in the shack above. I'll get it in a jiffy."

Before he had finished speaking, the man was off, racing up the rocky path as fast as his legs could carry him.

"Hold on, Perce!" cried Ralph encouragingly, waving his hand. "We'll get you out of that in no time."

They saw poor Persimmons' lips try to frame a pitiful smile, but the next instant a wave of foam dashed over him. After what seemed an agony of waiting, but which was in reality only a few minutes, the agent reappeared with several yards of light but strong rope.

"Now we shan't be long," he said encouragingly, as he rapidly formed a loop in it.

No sooner was this done, than Ralph seized the rope and tried to throw it over Persimmons' head like a lasso. He had learned to throw a rope like a cowboy on the Border, but this time either the feat was beyond his skill, or he was too unnerved to do it properly. At any rate, at each attempt the throw fell short, and the current whirled the lifeline out of their comrade's reach.

[29]

Fortunately, Persimmons had managed, by this time, to brace his feet against an out-cropping rock, and so give his overstrained arms some relief. But it was obvious that, even with this aid, he could not

hold on much longer.

Nothing remained but to try the plan that the agent had suggested, namely, to carry the rope up the bank a little and try to drift it down stream. With a prayer on his lips, Ralph made the first cast. The rope fell on the water in what appeared to be just the spot for the current to carry it down to the boy they were trying to rescue.

But their joy was short lived. Having carried the loop a short way, a viciously swirling eddy caught it and sucked it under the surface. It became entangled in a rock, and they had much ado to get it back ashore at all. [30]

A sigh that was almost a groan broke from Ralph as he saw the futility of his cast. It looked like the last chance to save the boy whose life depended on their reaching him quickly. It was out of the question to get out on the slender, swaying end of the trunk to which young Simmons was clinging. Not one of them but was too heavy to risk it. And, in the event of the trunk snapping, they knew only too well what would ensue. A brief struggle, and their comrade would be swept to the falls, from which he could not possibly emerge alive.

"We must save him!" panted Ralph, "but how—how?"

"The only way is to get the rope to him," said the professor.

"And we can't accomplish that unless—I think I can do it, professor," broke off Ralph suddenly. [31]

"What do you mean to do?"

"To straddle that log and get the rope out to him in that way."

"Nonsense, it would not bear your weight even if you could balance on it."

But Ralph begged so hard to be allowed to put his plan into execution that the professor was at last forced to give way and consent to his trying the perilous feat.

"But come back the instant you are convinced you are in danger," he commanded; "remember, I am in charge of you boys."

Ralph eagerly gave the required bond. Fastening the rope to his waist, he straddled the narrow trunk and gingerly began working himself forward toward his imperiled chum.

He got along all right till he was in a position where his feet began to be clawed at by the hurrying waters below. He swayed, recovered himself by a desperate effort, and then once more began his snail-like progress. The sight of Persimmons' blue lips and white cheeks, for in that land the waters are almost as cold in midsummer as in the depth of winter, gave him fresh determination to continue his hazardous mission. [32]

But even the most determined will cannot always overcome material obstacles. A chunk of driftwood was swept against Ralph's feet. He was almost overbalanced by the force of the blow. The watchers on shore saw him strive wildly for an instant to recover his equilibrium, and then a cry of alarm broke from their lips as they saw the boy suddenly lose his balance completely and topple off the trunk into the stream.

"The rope! Haul on the rope!" shouted the professor, as Ralph vanished, to reappear an instant later fighting for his life in the relentless torrent.

Well it was for the boy then, that he had tied the rope to his waist. Had he not done so, the moment might have been his last, for even the strongest swimmer that ever breasted water would have been but a helpless infant in that titanic current. [33]

They all laid hold of the rope and pulled with every ounce of muscle their combined forces could command. But, even then, so strongly did the swiftly dashing stream suck at its victim that it was all they could do to get him ashore. Blue and shivering from cold, however, Ralph finally found footing and scrambled up the bank. Then, and not till then—such had been the strain—did they recollect Persimmons.

For an instant they hardly dared to look up. They feared that the end of the long log might prove to be tenantless. But, to their unspeakable relief, Persimmons still was clinging there. But even as they gave a shout of joy at the sight of him, another thought rushed in. Of what avail was it that the boy was there, when there appeared no possible way of getting him out of his predicament?

Were they to stand there helplessly and see him swept to his [34]

death before their very eyes? Was there nothing they could do? No untried way of getting that precious rope to him?

It appeared that the answer to these questions must be in the negative.

"Great heaven!" burst from the professor's pale lips, and his voice sounded harsh and rough as if his throat was as dry as ashes. "Can't we do anything? Can none of you suggest a way?"

"I tink I can get dat rope out dere, if you'll gimme a chanct, boss," piped a voice at his elbow.

They all looked around. It was Jimmie, whom, in the stress of the last minutes, they had forgotten as completely as if he had never existed. But now here he was, repeating, with calm assurance, but no braggadocio, his offer:

"I tink I can get it to him, if you'll gimme a chanct."

---

## CHAPTER IV.

### JIMMIE'S PLUCK.

"You can get that rope to him?"

The professor's voice held a note of amazement and possibly one of unconscious incredulity, for Jimmie colored under his gaze.

"Sure I can." He spoke rapidly, for it was no time to waste words. "I used ter be wid a circus for a time, see. I learned ter do a balancin' act wid a troupe. I'll jes' take dat long stick dere fer a balancin' pole, and I'll snake him out fer youse, er—er I'll go up de flume meself."

Strange as it may appear, there was something in the manner of the waif that instilled a new confidence into their hearts. Under other circumstances they might not have felt it, but now, with Persimmons' life in such danger, they were in the mood of drowning men who grasp at straws. [36]

Jimmie was such a straw, and his self-confident manner formed to a not small degree the basis of their trust in his ability to carry out what he said he could accomplish. Carefully the rope was transferred from the dripping, half-frozen Ralph to Jimmie's waist. This done, the lad carefully balanced a longish branch he had picked up, and appeared to find it suitable for use as a balancing pole; for, after one or two trials, he stepped out on the log and began such a "rope walking" act as has seldom if ever been witnessed.

Before starting, he had kicked off his ragged, broken boots,—stockings or socks he had none,—and was now barefooted. The rough bark of the tree trunk afforded a certain stability of footing, but they held their breath as they watched the waif's slender, pitifully thin figure painfully making its way on that narrow bridge above the swirling, leaping waves of the torrent. [37]

Once he hesitated and swayed, and a gasp went up from the watchers on the bank. Involuntarily they took a tighter grip on the rope. But it was only the green rush of waters under his feet that had momentarily caused Jimmie's head to swim.

He swiftly recovered himself and, forcing his eyes to remain riveted on a definite object, he forged steadily ahead. Now he was only five feet from where Persimmons, with a sub-conscious strength, was hanging on to his precarious hold, now but four feet intervened, then three, two,—one! How the slender trunk swayed! It appeared impossible that anything human could keep its footing upon it.

But at last the young acrobat reached a point beyond which he dared not go. Holding his balancing pole with one hand, he undid the rope from his waist with the other. Bending, very slowly, very cautiously, he formed a loop and dropped it over Persimmons' head. The numbed boy had just strength enough to work it under his armpits. [38]

Then his strength gave out completely. He would have been swirled away had not Jimmie taken the precaution to pass the rope around the opposite side of the tree trunk to that on which the current was pulling. But Persimmons was safe. The rope held him firm. He took a brief interval for a breath, and then managed to work his way along the trunk while the others hauled.

As for Jimmie, he crouched low for a time, using his balancing pole with wonderful adroitness. Then, walking backward along that swaying, treacherous trunk, he reached shore just as they dragged young Simmons out. It was in the nick of time, too, for he could not have lasted much longer. As it was, when they laid him on the bank he collapsed utterly.

"Jimmie, if you ever were an acrobat, and there's no room to doubt that, you must have been a marvel!" cried Ralph throwing his arms about the boy's neck, while the professor and Hardware congratulated him hardly less enthusiastically, and the agent danced a jig. [39]

"Gee!" exclaimed Jimmie, when he released himself, "if you tink I was a wonder, ask Sig. Montinelli, who trained me. I was so good dat he used to beat the life out uv me. Dat's de reason I ran away from de show and came up here,—dat and annudder reason."

There was no time just then to ask him what he meant, for they

were all immediately busied in chafing poor Persimmons' body and bringing life back to him. The agent had rushed off up the rocky path for hot coffee, for he had been preparing his breakfast when the train came in. What with this stimulant and a brisk rub-down, Persimmons soon recovered and was able to sit up and thank his rescuer, which he did characteristically and warmly, despite the latter's embarrassment and frequent interruptions of "It wasn't nawthing."

[40]

"Howling handsprings!" exclaimed Persimmons to Ralph, as the latter helped him up the rocky path, "and to think that I classed that kid in with Hardware's dingbats! But that's what he is, too," he added with a sort of an inspiration; "Hardware's got his bags and boxes full of fool fishing dingbats and cooking dingbats and chopping dingbats, but this one of yours, Ralph, is the greatest ever, he's a life-saving dingbat. What can I give him?"

"Not money, if you take my advice," said Ralph dryly. "While you were down and out there the professor offered him some, and his eyes blazed and he turned quite pale as he refused it. 'I've joined this expedition to be generally useful, and that was only one of my jobs, see,' was what he said."

"Waltzing wombats! I hope he never has to be useful in just that way again," breathed Persimmons fervently, as they reached the top of the trail.

[41]

"I hope not. But how did you ever come to get in such a fix?"

Persimmons explained that he had been looking at some wonderful trout disporting themselves in a pool some distance above where the tree trunk stretched out over the waters of the torrent. In some way his foot had slipped, and before he knew what had happened he was whirled out into midstream.

Hurried along, brushed by out-cropping rocks and bits of drift timber, he had caught at the first thing that offered, which happened to be the trunk that so providentially stretched out above the torrent.

"Bounding beetles! but it was a close shave, I tell you," he concluded fervently. "I don't think I could have held on a minute longer when Jimmie got that rope to me; but when I felt it, new strength seemed to come to me and I could help you fellows drag me ashore."

[42]

For a consideration, the agent drew on his stores, and they made a hearty breakfast after this adventure. Jimmie, of course, was the hero of the occasion, although no one could have accused him of seeking honors. The boy looked actually embarrassed as they each, in turn and in chorus, told him over and over what they thought of his plucky act.

They were still eating when there came a clatter of hoofs on the cliff above.

"Something comin' down the trail," observed the agent; "shouldn't wonder if that's your man now."

"I hope so, indeed," said the professor, "this delay is most annoying."

Emerging from the depot they saw a strange cavalcade coming down the dusty trail. In advance, on a wiry buckskin cayuse, rode a figure that might have stepped out of a book. His saddle was of the gaily rigged ranger's type. But it was the person who sat in it with an easy grace that was more striking to the eye than any of his caparisons.

[43]

He was of medium height, it appeared, but of so powerful a build that his breadth of chest and massive loins seemed better fitted for a giant. His hair and beard were curly and as yellow as corn silk, his face fiery red by constant exposure to sun and wind and snow, while his eyes, deep-set in wrinkles, were as blue as the Canadian sky above them. His clothes were of the frontiersman's type, and on his massive head was a colorless sombrero, badly crushed, with several holes cut in its crown.

Behind him came, in single file, four wiry looking little cayuses, saddled and bridled ready for their riders. These were followed by three pack animals of rather sorry appearance, but, as the party was to learn later, of proved ability on the trail.

"You Professor Summered?" he hailed, in a deep, hearty voice, as he saw the professor and the boys standing in a group outside the little depot, eying him with deep interest and attention.

[44]

"Wintergreen, sir! Wintergreen!" exclaimed the professor rather



testily.

“Oh, ho! ho! Beg your pardon. I’m Mountain Jim Bothwell, at your service. Sorry to be late, but the trail up above is none too good.”

He struck his pony with his spurs, and the whole procession broke into an ambling trot coming down the trail in a cloud of yellow dust toward the waiting group of travelers.

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# CHAPTER V.

## THE START FOR THE ROCKIES.

"Great Blue Bells of Scotland!"

Mountain Jim Bothwell uttered the exclamation as he gazed at the immense pile of baggage labeled H. D. Ware.

"Say, who *is* H. D. Ware, anyhow? He goin' to start a hotel hereabouts? When's the wagons comin' for all this truck?"

"That's my camping equipment," struck in "H. D. Ware," looking rather red and uncomfortable under the appraising blue eye of Mountain Jim.

"Young feller," spoke Jim solemnly, "you'd need an ocean liner to transport all that duffle. We ain't goin' to sea; we're goin' inter the mountains. What you got in there, anyhow?"

"Dingbats," said Ralph quietly, a mischievous smile playing about his mouth. [46]

"Dingbats? Great Bells of Scotland, what's them?"

"The things that the sporting goods catalogues say no camper should be without," exclaimed Ralph; "we told him, but it wasn't any good."

"Well, my mother said I was to have every comfort," said poor Hardware, crimsoning under the guide's amused scrutiny. "When we were camping in Maine——"

"When you were camping in Maine, I don't doubt you had a cook ——"

Hardware nodded. He had to admit that, like most wealthy New Yorkers, his parents' ideas of "a camp" had been a sort of independent summer hotel under canvas.

"Well, young fellow, let me tell you something. From what the professor here wrote me, you young fellers came up here to rough it. I'm goin' to see that you do. The cooking will mostly be done by you and your chums; your elders will—will eat it, and that'll be sufficient punishment for them." [47]

"But—but I've just engaged a lad to aid with the cooking and help out generally," struck in the professor.

"That's all right," responded Mountain Jim airily, eyeing Jimmie, whose clothes, since they had been dried by the agent's cook stove, looked worse than before, "that kid seems all right, and he can take his turn with the others. In the mountains it's share and share alike, you know, and no favors. That's the rule up this way."

The boys looked rather dismayed. Already the standards of the city were being swept aside. Evidently this mountaineer looked upon all men and boys as being alike, provided they did their share of the work set before them.

Ralph, alone, whose wild life on the Border had already done for him what the Rockies were to perform for his companions, viewed the guide with approval. He knew that out in the wilderness, be it mountain or plain, certain false standards of caste and station count for nothing. As Coyote Pete had been wont to say in those old days along the Border, "It ain't the hide that counts, it's the man underneath it." [48]

"First thing to do is to sort out some of this truck and see what you do need and what you don't," decided Mountain Jim presently. "Most times it's the things that you think you kain't get along without that you kin, and the things you think you kin that you kain't."

"That's right," agreed Ralph heartily. "Daniel Boone, on his first journey into Kentucky, managed to worry along on pinole and salt, and relied for everything else on his old rifle and flint and steel."

"Never heard of the gentleman," said Mountain Jim, "but he must uv been a good woodsman. Now let's get to work and sort out this truck."

Ruthlessly the travelers' kits were torn open, and it was amazing, when Mountain Jim got through, what a huge pile of things that he declared unnecessary were heaped upon the depot platform. As for poor Hardware's "dingbats," a new kind of compass and a hunting knife that met with Jim's approval, alone remained. [49]

"All this stuff can stay here till you get ready to come back," said

Jim; "the station agent will look after it and see that it is put in the freight shed."

But it is an ill wind that blows nobody any good. Out of the rejected "Dingbats" a fine hunting suit, axe, knife and compass were found for Jimmie, who, indeed, stood sadly in need of them. When the boy had retired to the station agent's room and dressed himself in his new garments, the change in him was so remarkable, when he reappeared, as to be nothing less than striking. In the place of the ragged looking Bowery boy, they saw a well set-up lad in natty hunting outfit. A trifle emaciated he was, to be sure, but "We'll soon fill him out with hard work and good grub," declared Mountain Jim, who had been told the boy's story, and who had warmly praised his heroism in rescuing Persimmons.

[50]

The latter had also changed his wet garments and was in his usual bubbling spirits when they were ready, in Ralph's phrase, to "hit the trail." This was not till nearly noon, however, for the rejection of the superfluous "Dingbats," of which even Ralph and the professor were found to have a few, had occupied much time. Then, after hearty adieus to the station agent, who had incidentally been the recipient of a generous gratuity from the professor, they mounted their ponies and, with Mountain Jim in the lead, started on their long journey into the wilds. Jimmy, whose circus experience had taught him how to ride, was mounted on one of the pack animals, for, such had been Mountain Jim's ruthless rejection of "Dingbats," only a tithe of the expected "pack" remained.

[51]

Up the trail they mounted at an easy pace under the big pines that shook out honey-sweet odors as the little cavalcade passed beneath them. At the summit of the rocky cliff that towered above the depot, the trail plunged abruptly into a dense, black tunnel of tamarack, pine and Douglas firs.

As the horses' hoofs rang clear on the rocky trail and echoed among the columnar trunks that shot up on every side like the pillars of some vast cathedral roof, Mountain Jim broke into dolorous song:

"Hokey pokey winky wang;  
Linkum, lankum muscodang;  
The Injuns swore that th-e-y would h-a-n-g  
Them that couldn't keep w-a-r-m!"

[52]

Over and over he sang it, while the shod hoofs clattered out a metallic accompaniment to the droning air.

"Can we ride ahead a bit?" asked Ralph after a while, for the monotony of keeping pace with the pack animals and the constant repetition of Mountain Jim's song began to grow wearisome.

"Sure; go ahead. You can't get lost. The trail runs straight ahead. The only way to get off it is to fall off," said Jim cheerfully, drawing out and filling with black tobacco a villainous-looking old pipe.

"Don't get into any trouble," warned the professor, who had been provided with a quiet horse, and who was intent, as he rode along, on a volume dealing with the geological formation of the Canadian Rockies.

"We'll be careful! So long! Come on, boys," shouted back Ralph, as he struck his heels into his pony.

Off they clattered up the trail, the rocks ringing with their excited voices till the sound died away in the distance. Jimmie alone remained behind. He felt that his duty as general assistant demanded it. When the last echo of the ponies' hoofs had died out, Mountain Jim turned to the professor with a profound wink.

[53]

"I can see where we have our hands full this trip, professor," he remarked, as they ambled easily along.

The professor looked up from his book and sighed.

"Really, I wonder my hair is not snow white," he said mildly. "But surely that is a fine specimen of *Aethusa Cijnapium* I see yonder!"

"Oh, that," said Mountain Jim, gazing at the feathery plant indicated, which grew in great profusion at the trail side, "that's 'fool's parsley.'"

"O-h-h!" said the professor.

He might have said more, but at that instant from the trail ahead, came a series of shouts and yells that made it appear as if a troop of rampant Indians was on the war-path. The sharp crack of a rifle sounded, followed by silence.

[54]



## CHAPTER VI.

### ALONG THE TRAIL.

When they left the main body of the party behind, Ralph, Harry Ware, and young Simmons had kicked their ponies into a brisk "lope," which speedily carried them some distance ahead. As they rode along, they gazed admiringly about them at the beauties of the rugged trail. The rough way soon left the tunnel-like formation of spruce and tamarack, and emerged on a muskeg, or patch of swampy ground, where rank, green reeds and flowers of gorgeous red, yellow and blue grew in the wetter places.

As they cantered into the midst of this pretty bit of scenery, a striped animal sprang from behind a patch of brush with a snort, and dashed off into the timber on the hillside beyond.

With a whoop and yell the boys, headed by Ralph, were after it. [56]

"A wild cat!" shouted Ralph. "After him, boys!"

Their lively little ponies appeared quite to enter into the spirit of the chase. At any rate, they needed no urging, but darted off as nimbly as mountain goats among the trees. The gray and reddish form of the wild cat was speedily lost sight of; but Ralph, who had slipped his rifle from its holster, still kept on under the shadows of the forest, followed by the others.

Suddenly he thought he saw an elusive form slipping among the timbers ahead of him. Flinging the reins of his pony over the creature's head, in Western fashion, he dismounted. Hardware and Persimmons followed his example. The eyes of all three boys were shining with the excitement of this, their first adventure in the Canadian wilds.

"Cantering cayuses, boys, but we'll have a fine skin to take home before we've been on the trail ten minutes!" exclaimed Persimmons under his breath, as they crept along behind Ralph. [57]

"Don't count your skins before you get 'em," was Hardware's advice.

At this moment there was a sudden commotion among the ponies. They snorted and sniffed as if in terror of something, and Ralph rightly guessed that they had just scented the wild cat.

"You fellows go back and quiet 'em; I'll keep on," he said.

Dearly as his two companions would have liked to continue on the trail of the wild cat, there was nothing for them to do but to obey; for if the ponies stampeded they knew that Mountain Jim would have something to say that might not sound pleasant.

"Be careful now, Ralph," warned Hardware, as their comrade kept on alone. "Wild cats are pretty ugly customers sometimes."

But Ralph did not reply. With a grim look on his face and with his rifle clutched tightly, he slipped from trunk to trunk, his feet hardly making any noise on the soft woodland carpet of pine needles. [58]

Suddenly, from a patch of brush right ahead of him, came a sort of yelping cry, not unlike that of a dog in pain or excitement.

"What on earth is up now?" he wondered to himself, coming to a halt and searching the scene in front of him with eager eyes.

Then came sounds of a furious commotion. The brush was agitated and there were noises as if two animals were in mortal combat in front of him. But still he could see nothing. All at once came distinctly the crunching of bones.

"It's that wild cat and she's made a kill of some sort, a rabbit probably," mused Ralph. "Well, I'll catch her red-handed and revenge poor Molly Cottontail."

He cautiously tiptoed forward, making as little noise as possible. He was well aware that a cornered wild cat can make a formidable opponent, and he did not mean to risk wounding the animal slightly and infuriating it. He was raising his rifle with a view to having it ready the instant he should sight the savage wood's creature, when he stepped on a dead branch. [59]

It emitted a sharp crack, almost like a pistol shot, and Ralph bit his lip with vexation.

"That cat's going to run now, taking its prey along, and I'll not get within a mile of it," was his thought.

But no such thing happened. Instead, from the bushes, there

came an angry, snarling growl as the crunching of bones abruptly ceased. Ralph's heart began to beat a little quicker. It appeared that the cat, far from fleeing, was going to show fight. But Ralph, after his first surprise, did not worry: He knew his automatic would be more than a match for the wild cat if it came down to a fight.

With this thought in his mind he pressed boldly forward, parting the bushes as he went. He had not advanced more than a few yards when he came upon a curious sight. A lithe, tawny creature of reddish color, with oddly tufted ears, was crouched over the dead and torn body of a rabbit. It had been savagely rending the smaller animal, and as Ralph took all this in he realized, too, another fact. It was no wild cat that he had disturbed, but another and a far more formidable animal.

"Great juniper! A Canadian lynx, and a whumper, too!" gasped the boy to himself as he gazed at the creature which was almost as large as a good sized dog.

For a moment the realization that he was face to face with an animal that some hunters have described as being more formidable than a mountain lion, made Ralph pause, while his heart thumped in lively fashion. The great yellow eyes of the lynx, whose tufted ears lay flat against its head, regarded him with blazing hatred. Its teeth were bared under its reddened fangs, and Ralph saw that it was ready to spring at him. It was only waiting to measure its distance accurately.

"I'll give her all I've got in the gun," thought Ralph, bringing the weapon to bear; "my only chance is to finish her quick."

His finger pressed the trigger, but, to his amazement, no report followed.

"Great guns! The mechanism has stuck and I've not got an instant to fuss with it," was the thought that flashed through his mind as the rifle failed to go off.

He had no time for more. With a growl and snarl the tawny body was launched into the air, as if propelled toward him by chilled steel springs. Ralph gave a hasty, almost involuntary step backward. His foot caught in an out-cropping root and the next instant he measured his length on the ground.

As he fell he was conscious of a flash passing before his face and caught a glimpse of two yellow eyes blazing with deadly hate and anger. The next instant there was a crash in the brush just beyond where he lay, and the boy realized that his fall had been the luckiest thing in the world for him. The lynx had overleaped him; but he knew that the respite would not last the fraction of a minute. He was in as great peril as before unless he acted and that quickly.

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## CHAPTER VII.

### TREED BY A LYNX.

There was but one thing to do and Ralph did it. In the molecule of time granted to him, he got on his feet. At the same time he uttered a yell which had the intended effect of checking the second onslaught of the lynx for an instant.

Of that instant Ralph took good advantage. He bounded at full speed toward the nearest tree which looked as if it might sustain his weight. Luckily, there was one not far off—a dead cedar. He managed to reach it just ahead of the lynx and began scrambling into the low growing branches. The rifle that had failed him in that critical moment, he abandoned as useless; anyhow he could not have climbed, encumbered with the heavy weapon.

"If I ever get out of this I'll stick to the old-fashioned repeater," was his thought as he flung the weapon full at the head of the lynx, missing her, in his agitation, by a good foot. [64]

Under the circumstances, Ralph had done what he thought best in making for the tree. In reality, though, had he had time for reflection, he would better have taken his chances in a race toward his companions, for of course a lynx can climb as well as any wild cat. In fact, Ralph had hardly gained a second's security before the creature flung herself furiously against the foot of the tree and began climbing after the boy.

"She's coming after me, sure as fate!" gasped Ralph desperately. "Gracious, look at those claws! I've got to stop her in some way; but I'd like to know how."

By this time he had clambered some distance up the tree, an easy task, for the branches grew fairly thick, and as the tree was dead there were no leafy boughs to encumber his progress. But unfortunately, this made it equally easy for his assailant to pursue him. Ralph saw that unless he did something decisive pretty quickly, he would be driven to the upper part of the tree where it would be unsafe for his weight. [65]

Just above him, at this juncture, he spied a fairly heavy branch which, it seemed, he might break off easily. Reaching above him, the boy gave it a stout tug, and found that he had at least a good, thick club in his possession.

The lynx was just below him. Ralph raised his luckily found weapon and brought it down with a resounding crack on her skull.

With a howl of rage the creature dropped; but caught on a lower branch and clinging there, glared up at him more menacingly than before. Far from injuring her as the boy had hoped, the blow had only served to infuriate the creature.

Suddenly, as if determined to bring the contest to a speedy termination, the lynx began climbing again. Once more Ralph raised his club and as the animal came within striking distance he brought it down again with all his force. [66]

"I hope I crack your ugly head," he muttered vindictively as he struck.

But by bad luck, Ralph's hopes were doomed to be blasted. He had struck a good, hard blow and one that sent the lynx, snarling and spitting, scurrying down the tree. But with such good will had he delivered the blow that his club had broken in two. The best part of it went crashing to the ground, leaving him with only a stump in his hand.

"If she comes back at me now, I'm done for," thought Ralph, as he looked downward.

But for the moment it appeared that the creature had no such intention. Perhaps the two blows had stunned and confused her. At any rate she lay on one of the lower boughs seemingly stupefied. As Ralph gingerly prepared to descend, however, hoping to pass by the brute, she gave a snarl and slipped with cat-like agility to the ground. There, at the foot of the tree she lay, gazing upward with malicious eyes. Evidently she had given up her first method of attack, but meant to lie there like a sentinel and let Ralph make the next move. [67]

"Gracious!" thought the boy as he saw this, "I am in a fine pickle. I can't fire any shots to attract the attention of the bunch and I

guess shouting won't do much good. They may come to look for me, but they won't know in what direction to search."

Nevertheless, Ralph inhaled a good, deep breath and shouted with all his lung power. But no result was manifest, except that the lynx growled and snarled and lashed its stumpy tail angrily. Once it set up a dreary howl and the unpleasant thought occurred to Ralph that the creature might be calling its mate.

"If two of them come at me—" he thought; but he didn't dwell on that thought.

Instead, he cut himself another club and then sitting back, thought the situation over with all his might. As if in search of an inspiration he began rummaging his pockets. How he wished he had brought his revolver along, or even the ammonia "squirt-gun" that he carried occasionally when traveling as a protection against ugly-natured dogs. All at once, in an inside pocket, his hand encountered a small bottle. Ralph almost uttered a cry of joy. A sudden flash of inspiration had come to him. In the bottle was some concentrated ammonia. He had filled his "squirt-gun" that morning before placing it in the pack, and in the hurry of leaving the train at Pine Pass had shoved the bottle into his pocket.

"It's an awfully long chance," he thought as he drew out the bottle, "but, by Jove, I'll try it. Desperate situations call for desperate remedies, and this is sure a tough predicament that I'm in."

His movements had attracted the attention of the lynx, and it reared up on its hind legs and began clambering toward him once more. With trembling fingers Ralph drew the cork of the bottle, and a pungent odor filled the air. The reek of the ardent drug made the boy's eyes water; but he was glad the stuff was so strong. It suited his purpose all the better.

What he had to do now was nerve-racking in the extreme. He did not dare to try to put his plan into execution till the lynx got closer to him, and to sit still and watch the ugly brute clambering toward him was enough to upset the stoutest nature. Ralph waited till the animal was on a branch directly below him and was glaring up at him as if making up its mind for the final onslaught.

Then suddenly he cried out:

"Take that, you brute!"

With a swift, sure aim he doused the contents of the ammonia bottle full in the face of the lynx. The effect was immediate and startling. With a scream of rage and pain the blinded animal dropped, clawing and scratching through the dead limbs, to the ground. Landing on all fours she began clawing up the earth in a frenzy of pain. The sharp, pungent ammonia was eating into her eyes like a red-hot flame.

Suddenly, above the yelps and howls of the maddened creature, there came another sound, a hail off in the woods.

"Ralph! oh, Ralph!"

"Here I am, fellows! This way! Come on quick!" shouted Ralph at the top of his voice.

Then as they grew closer, still shouting, he added a word of caution:

"Have your guns ready! I'm treed by a lynx!"

Through the trees the two boys burst into view. At the same instant the lynx dashed madly off toward the trail. As she dashed along she pawed her tingling eyes, trying in vain to rid them of the smarting fluid that Ralph's lucky throw had filled them with.

Ralph slid to the ground and picking up his faithless rifle joined his chums in a wild chase after the animal. Yelling like Comanches they dashed after, making the uproar that had alarmed and startled the professor and Mountain Jim and their young companion. But it was not till they reached the trail, beyond the now tethered horses, that they came within shooting distance of it. Then Persimmons raised his rifle and fired.

As the shot echoed across the muskeg the lynx bounded into the air, turned a somersault, and just as the rest of the party rode up, lay twitching in death with Persimmons bending proudly over it.

"Larruping lynxes," he was shouting, "I guess we've got at least one skin to take home!"

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## A WALKING PINCUSHION.

Ralph's story was soon told, with the accompaniment of a running fire of sarcasms from Mountain Jim concerning automatic rifles and all connected with them. An examination of Ralph's weapon showed that a cartridge from the magazine had become jammed just at the critical instant that he faced the lynx.

"There ain't nuthin' better than this old Winchester of mine," declared Mountain Jim, taking his well-oiled and polished, albeit ancient model rifle from its holster and patting it lovingly. "I've carried it through the Rockies for fifteen years and it's never failed me yet."

Nevertheless, the boys did not condemn their automatics on that account. In fact, Ralph blamed his own ignorance of the action of his new weapon more for its failure to work than any fault lying with the rifle itself. [73]

With a few quick strokes of his knife and a tug at the hide, Mountain Jim had the lynx skinned with almost incredible rapidity. Salt was sprinkled liberally on the skin, and it was rolled up and tied behind Persimmons' saddle, to be carefully scraped of all fat and skin later on.

It was sunset when they left the well-traveled trail, along which, however, they had encountered no human being but a wandering packer on his way to an extension of the Canadian Pacific Railroad with provisions and blasting powder, borne by his sure-footed animals.

In the brief twilight they pushed on till they reached a spot that appeared favorable for a camp. A spring gushed from a wall of rock and formed one of an almost innumerable number of small streams that fed a creek, which, in turn, was later to pour its waters into the mighty Columbia. Ralph needed no instructions on how to turn the horses out, and while he and the rest, acting under his directions, attended to this, Mountain Jim got supper ready. By the time the boys had completed their "chores" and the tents were up, the guide had their evening meal of bannocks, beans and bacon, and boiling hot tea ready for them. For dessert they had stewed dried prunes and apples, and the boys voted the meal an excellent one. Indeed, they had been hungry enough to eat almost anything. [74]

Supper despatched, it was not long before they were ready to turn into their blankets, which were of the heavy army type, for the nights in the Rockies are cool. To the music of a near-by waterfall, they sank into profound slumber, and before the moon was up the camp was wrapped in silence.

It was about midnight that they were aroused by a loud wail of distress from the tent which Persimmons shared with his two chums. Mountain Jim rolled out of his blankets—he disdained tents—and Jimmie, who likewise was content with a makeshift by the fire, started up as quickly. From the door of the professor's tent appeared an odd-looking figure in striped pajamas. [75]

"Great Blue Bells of Scotland! What's up?" roared Mountain Jim.

"Wow! Ouch! He's sticking me! Ow-w-w-w!" came in a series of yells from Persimmons. "Ouch! Prancing pincushions, come quick!"

"Is that boy in trouble again?" demanded the professor, as he slipped on a pair of slippers and advanced with Mountain Jim toward the scene of the disturbance. The air was now filled with boyish shouts, echoing and re-echoing among the craggy hills that surrounded the small canyon in which the camp was pitched.

As they neared the tent, from under the sod-cloth a small dark form came shuffling forth. It grunted as it went, like a diminutive pig. Jim jerked his old Winchester to his shoulder and the death struggle of the small animal immediately followed the rifle's report. [76]

Simultaneously, the three boys clad in their underclothing, dashed out of the tent door.

"Is it Indians?" shouted Hardware.

"A bear?" yelled Ralph, who had his automatic in hand.

"More like a walking pincushion," yelled Persimmons, dancing about and nursing one of his hands, "look here!"

He held out his hand and they saw several objects which, in the

moonlight, looked like so many knitting needles projecting from it.

"Ha! ha! ha!" laughed Mountain Jim, whose mirth aroused Persimmons' secret indignation, "I reckon it was a walking pincushion, all right. Boy, don't never put your hand on a porcupine again, they always leave souvenirs."

"A porcupine!" cried the professor.

"Sure enough," rejoined the guide, and he rolled to their feet with his rifle barrel the body of the small animal he had shot. [77]

It was surely enough one of those spiny and familiar denizens of the north woods.

"Nodding needles! No wonder I felt as if I'd struck a pincushion," cried poor Persimmons, who had, by this, drawn the last of the offending quills from his hand. "I heard something grunting and nosing about my blankets, and when I put my hand out I got it full of stickers."

"I'll put some peroxide on," said the professor, hastening to his tent for the medicine chest.

"They aren't poisonous, are they?" asked Ralph, referring to the quills.

"No; just sharp, that's all," responded Mountain Jim. "Porcupines are the greediest and stupidest cusses in the woods. I reckon this one smelled grub and was investigating when he ran into Master Simmons here."

"You mean that Persimmons ran into him," corrected Ralph.

"Guggling geese, no!" expostulated Persimmons, holding out his hand to be dressed, for the wounds made by the sharp quills were bleeding, "he ran into me, don't ever mistake that." [78]

It was some time before the camp quieted down again, but finally peace was restored and a tranquil night, undisturbed by any more nocturnal adventures, was passed.

Bright and early the next day they set out once more, traveling now off the beaten track and making for their destination, the Big Bend of the Columbia River. The professor was on the lookout for what he called metamorphic specimens of rock, which, in plain English, means bits of stone and so forth that show traces of the new world in the making. For, as he had explained to the boys, the Canadian Rockies are, from a geologist's standpoint, of recent formation. Unlike many chains of like character, they are not supposed to be volcanic in formation. The final cause of the uplifting of their giant crests is generally attributed to the shrinkage of the earth's interior by loss of heat or some other action. It is also supposed that eons ago the Rockies were as lofty as the Himalayas or the Andes, but that the various destructive forces that worked and still work amidst their rugged bosoms, have diminished their stature by thousands of feet. [79]

It was at the close of their second day's travel that the first of a series of mysterious happenings, destined to puzzle them greatly in the future, occurred. Ralph, who had been disturbed by the noise of some nocturnal animal trampling about in the brush, rose from his blankets and emerged into the moonlight with his rifle, his thoughts centered on the notion that his long-cherished hope of shooting a grizzly had materialized.

Not far from the camp, and overlooking it, a lofty rock towered above the floor of the valley through which they were then traveling. In the moonlight its dark form was silhouetted blackly against the night sky. Ralph's heart gave a leap as he saw, or thought he saw, something moving on the summit of the great boulder. [80]

He raised his rifle to fire and stood with beating pulses awaiting the opportunity.

Suddenly a form moved into view on the summit of the rock. The boy's finger was just about to press the trigger, when he gave a gasp of astonishment and the rifle almost fell from his hands.

It was the form of a man that had appeared, blackly outlined against the moonlight. For one instant the figure stood there and then, as Ralph hailed it in a quavering voice, it wheeled, and like an alarmed wild beast, slipped off into the forest.

## CHAPTER IX.

### A MOUNTAIN MYSTERY.

Ralph said nothing of his adventure of the night till the next morning. As he had expected, his young chums put it down to a feverish imagination. Even the professor suggested a dose of quinine; but Mountain Jim walked over after the morning meal to where the boy had seen the apparition, which, Ralph was beginning to believe, the figure must have been.

The lad accompanied the mountaineer, who had expected to find some tracks or traces by which Ralph's adventure might be verified. But the ground was rocky, and the soft bed of the forest beyond held no tracks, so that they were disappointed in their anticipation of finding some clew to the strange appearance of the night.

"You're certain sure, dead certain sure that you did see something. Didn't just dream it?" questioned Mountain Jim as they made their way back to camp where the others were busy packing the ponies, even Persimmons being by this time able to cast a "diamond hitch."

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"I'm positive," declared Ralph firmly; "if I hadn't been so certain that what I saw was a man, I would have fired. But who could it have been?" he added in a perplexed voice. Jim shook his blond head.

"Great Blue Bells of Scotland, I dunno, boy," he said, thoughtfully puffing at his pipe. "You ain't the sort of lad to dream things, I can see that. But it's got me. If we'd been in the gold country now it might have been a prospector, but nobody goes through here, not even hunters, for right where we are now is a bad place for game."

So, for the time being, the mystery of the midnight visitor was unsolved and almost forgotten. It was destined to be recalled later in a startling manner, but for the present even Ralph began to believe that he might have been the victim of some sort of an hallucination, caused, possibly, by the fact that he was only half awake when he had beheld the figure on the rock.

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As Mountain Jim had said, the country through which they were now traveling was indeed a bad section for hunters. Although the boys made several detours after game, not so much as a rabbit did they see. The day following the night on which Ralph had seen, or thought he had seen, the figure of the watching man, they encountered, for the first time, a tract of country common enough in the Canadian wilds but particularly unpleasant to travel through, namely, a *brulee* or vast tract of woods through which a forest fire has swept, leaving desolation in its path.

Nothing more depressing can be imagined than these burned forests. Naked, blackened trees, with rags of scorched bark peeling from their bare trunks, tower out of a desert expanse of gray-black ash. Horses or foot travelers passing through, churn up clouds of this ashen dust which chokes the nostrils, burns the eyes and blackens everything with which it comes in contact.

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Our travelers found themselves on the outskirts of such a place some time before noon on the day mentioned. Mountain Jim had at first thought of making a detour up a mountain side, but after a consultation it was decided to press on through the desolate waste, where charred trunks stuck up like the blackened stumps of teeth in an old man's jaws.

As they plunged into the *brulee* they found their ponies sinking over the fetlocks in the ashes. In places, huge piles of trunks, burned through at the base, lay like barriers across their path, and it was necessary to go around them to find a passable way. Long before they were out of the wretched place the water in their canteens was gone, and their throats were clogged and lips cracked from the dry, acrid dust that rose in clouds. From time to time the boys were compelled to rub their eyes to relieve the tingling smart in them, and speedily their faces were blackened like those of coal heavers. A more sorry-looking party it would be hard to imagine than that which, hour after hour, painfully wended its way through the burned forest. Not a sprig of green, not a rill of water refreshed their sight. No birds or animals could be seen or heard. On every side was nothing but black desolation.

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Ralph and young Ware rode ahead, side by side, while behind

straggled the rest of the party. Mountain Jim brought up the rear behind the pack animals, which needed urging with whip and voice through the desolation of the *brulee*. Now and then, far off, they could hear the crash of some forest giant as its burned-through trunk gave way and it came smashing to the ground with a roar like thunder, not infrequently bringing two or three of its mates with it.

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Jim had warned the boys and the professor to be on the lookout for such things, and as Ralph and Harry Ware rode along they kept a bright and vigilant watch for any tree that looked as if its fall was imminent.

"Gee whiz! I feel like an ant that has lost its way in the ashes of a camper's fire," was the graphic way in which Hardware expressed his feelings, as for the twentieth time that morning he tried to clear his throat of ashes.

They ate a hasty lunch, of which, the boys declared, ashes formed the chief ingredient, for the dry, implacable gray dust appeared to sift into every mouthful they tasted. A long stop was out of the question. There was no knowing how far the *brulee* extended and they must push on and get to water, for already the ponies were beginning to show signs of distress. The poor animals' sweaty sides were caked with gray dust till they all appeared of one uniform drab color. For the matter of that, the travelers themselves were no better off. Like a dull monochrome, they were cloaked in ashen gray from head to foot.

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Hardly speaking, for their spirits were at the lowest ebb in this ghastly ruin of a majestic forest, they pushed on. The only life in the *brulee* appeared to be the black flies and mosquitoes which bit till they drew blood, further annoying them.

"I thought I'd rough it in the West," muttered Ralph once as his pony tumbled over a blackened trunk that lay across the trail, "but this beats anything I've ever experienced,—pah!" and he spat out a mouthful of ashy dust.

The afternoon wore on, and still they stumbled along through the *brulee* without any signs of its coming to an end. As far as they could see the forest of blackened trunks extended, the same carpet of ashen dust was everywhere. The sun, growing lower, hung like a glowing ball of copper in a red sky, seen through the dust that they kicked up as they moved painfully along.

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The horses were driven half mad by the biting flies, and their fetlocks were cruelly bruised and cut by the charred logs and rocks. It was heartbreaking traveling, but of a kind that must befall sooner or later everyone who ventures into the wilds of the Canadian Rockies.

Tired, choked and irritable, Harry Ware was lagging behind Ralph, who was now riding in advance alone. Behind him he could hear the voice of Mountain Jim unceasingly urging on the pack animals. Mountain Jim never swore, but his range of words which were forceful and expressive without being profane, was amazing. Evidently, too, his adjurations had their effect on the jaded ponies, for they stumbled bravely on leaping logs and dodging stones with renewed agility every time the guide's voice boomed through that blackened, fire-swept wilderness.

Ralph had fallen into a semi-doze. The deadly monotony of the half-calcined columns on every hand, the close heat of the *brulee* made him drowsy. The voice of Mountain Jim fell more and more faintly on his ears. Harry Ware, kicking his pony viciously, passed him.

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"I'm going to be the first out of this beastly place," he remarked with emphasis as he rode by.

"Well, don't kick any more dust in my face than you can help," rejoined Ralph, only a shade less irritably.

"Oh, shut up!" snapped Harry, ordinarily the best and most even-tempered of boys.

Ralph flushed angrily for an instant and his hand clenched as a cloud of choking dust was spurned in his face by the heels of Harry Ware's mount. But the next instant he gained control of himself.

"Pshaw! I guess we're all losing our tempers," he murmured to himself, "and it's a fact that this place would make a saint cross—Hold up there, pony! Not much longer now."

Content with his spurt ahead, Hardware slowed his pony down to a walk a few paces in front of Ralph. He did not apologize for his unthinking act of smothering Ralph with dust. Instead, he gazed

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sullenly straight ahead of him.

He was hot, thirsty, and bitten mercilessly by black flies. The lad was in no mood to go around obstacles. Rather was he in that savage humor that rushes recklessly on, although he had been warned of the dangers of the *brulee*. In fact, the frequent crashing of half burned-through trees, as a vagrant wind caught them and snapped them off, would have been sufficient indication that a sharp lookout was necessary to anyone in a less irritable mood. But Harry didn't think of this. Instead, he urged his tired pony viciously over blackened logs with quirt and heel.

Suddenly Ralph, whose vigilance had not relaxed although he was fearfully drowsy, thought he saw a great blackened trunk directly ahead of them lean over a trifle. He was sure of it in another moment. [91]

"Pull out!" he yelled to Harry, who was driving his pony straight in a path which would bring him under the swaying trunk.

"Oh, mind your own business!" flung back Hardware crossly, and drove his little mount right on.

Ralph did not hesitate a minute. He wore spurs, the same blunt-rowelled pair he had used on the border. He drove these into his pony's side and brought down his quirt with a crack that made the little animal snort angrily and plunge forward.

In front of him he saw the mighty column sway and oscillate as though in a vain attempt to recover its equipoise. Directly under it was Harry Ware, sullenly riding on with his eyes on the ground. Once more Ralph yelled and his pony gave a wild leap forward.

Suddenly the mighty trunk rushed earthward. Simultaneously Ralph's hand fell on Hardware's bridle. He gave a tug that brought the latter's pony up on its haunches. It reared wildly, almost toppling backward. [92]

At the same instant a cold wind fanned both boys as the trunk swept down. There was a deafening crash almost under the feet of the plunging ponies, and both lads were shrouded in a cloud of black dust that rose up like a dark veil.

"Good heavens! They're killed!" shouted the professor dashing forward.

About the two boys the dust whirled and eddied. The ponies plunged wildly, almost unseating them, but Ralph held on till he had dragged Hardware's mount out of the black dust cloud.

As he did so, from ahead of them, came crash after crash with a startling suddenness. The *brulee* was filled with shocks of sound that rang in thunderous reverberations along the steep rocks. The echoes flung back and forth till the uproar was deafening. In the meantime the party, including the two lads who had been saved from what appeared certain death, stood fast. [93]

They hardly breathed till the crashes grew less and less frequent and a brooding silence settled down over the *brulee* once more.

Then Hardware, shaking all over, gazed at the great trunk lying recumbent not two yards from them. His eyes filled with tears. He held out a blackened hand to Ralph, who smiled at him through his mask of gray ash.

"I—I—I don't know how to thank you, Ralph, old man," he choked out. "If it hadn't been for you, in my silly temper I'd have gone right on without minding you, and—and—"

He could not go further, but Ralph's fingers closed on his outstretched hand.

"That's all right, old man," was all he said; but between both boys a thrill ran as their fingers clasped. Hardware had learned a lesson there in the *brulee* that all the schools in Christendom couldn't have taught him, and he knew it. [94]

"A mighty near thing," said Mountain Jim, as the others rode up, "I guess I'll have a smoke."

His voice was steady enough, but his hands shook as he filled his old brier. Death had swept by too closely for any of them to recover their nerve for half an hour or more. By that time, as they rode on, the charred trunks were fewer and fewer, and an hour before sundown they came out of that "Valley of Desolation" into a wide canon, carpeted with lush, green grass and watered by a crystal clear stream. On each side towered rocky scraps of cliff clothed with dark pines and balsams.

Boys and men broke into a cheer, and even the dispirited ponies

fell into a brisk gait without urging. The travelers forgot their trials as they laved in the fresh, cold water of the mountain stream and watched Jim getting supper, assisted by Jimmie, while the ponies ravenously cropped the fresh, juicy grass. But it was days before the last trace of ashes was removed from their belongings, and one at least of the party was destined never to forget that *brulee* in the Rockies as long as he might live.

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# CHAPTER X.

## THE PONIES VANISH.

Ralph's first act on wakening the next morning was to pull open the flap of the tent and gaze out. His next was to utter a shout of surprise. Of the ponies which had been turned out to graze the evening before, not a sign was to be seen. As usual, they had been driven out with old Baldy, the leader of the pack horses, as the "bell" pony. Like most ponies in the wilds, they had hitherto stuck closely to Baldy who, for his part, was usually quite content to remain around camp so long as the grazing was good.

But although Ralph listened closely, he could not catch even the familiar tinkle of the bell that would have told him that Baldy and the rest were somewhere near at hand.

"Well, this is a nice pickle," he thought, as he set off to stir Jim into wakefulness, "it means a day's delay while we hunt for the ponies; however, there appears to be plenty of rock in this vicinity for the professor to explore and hammer away at, so I suppose he'll be happy."

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Jim greeted Ralph's news without much surprise. It appeared that in years of packing he had grown used to such eccentricities on the part of ponies.

"We'll track 'em down after breakfast," he said, rolling out of his blanket and pulling on his boots.

In the meantime Ralph had aroused the others, and they set off for a cool plunge in the stream. The water was icy and made them gasp, but they felt a hundred per cent. better after their bath. As Persimmons put it, "They began to feel as if the world was made of something else than ashes." While the professor made less strenuous ablutions, the boys rubbed each other into a warm glow and then indulged in a merry game of tag on the springy turf, and yet they were ready to respond eagerly to Jim's breakfast call of:—"Come and get it!" accompanied by a vigorous solo on the wash tin performed by Jimmie.

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It was wonderful what a difference there was in the New York waif already. The crisp mountain air had reddened his pale cheeks and the rough but plentiful "grub" had had its effect in nourishing his skinny frame. The old wistful look still lurked in his eyes, and all the boys' attempts to drag from him the reason for his desire to penetrate the Rockies were in vain. So, perforce, they had to allow it to remain a mystery till such time as the lad himself chose to enlighten them. Bits of his history he had already imparted to them. The lad had enlivened many a camp fire with stories of his experiences in the saw-dust ring, and in selling papers in New York. Besides this, he had worked at peddling soap powder and household goods, and he had some amusing narratives of his experiences among the farmers of the Catskills where he had worked as an "agent." And as he lived with the boys, he adopted their language and ways as though he had been born to them.

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"There's a treat for you fellows this morning," said Jimmie with a mysterious air, as the hungry boys squatted down and prepared to pass up their tin plates for their shares of bacon, bannocks and beans.

"What may that be, Jimmie?" inquired Ralph, while Mountain Jim grinned expansively.

Persimmons sniffed the air anticipatively.

"Seems to me I do smell something good," he remarked.

"How would pancakes go?" inquired Jimmie.

"Great! Jimmie, you ought to be in Delmonico's," cried Hardware hungrily.

"I've been on the outside lookin' in, many a time," said Jimmie with a grin, as he turned to the "spider" and began dishing up the thin, brown batter cakes.

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Mountain Jim was on hand with a tin of maple syrup fashioned like a miniature log-cabin, the chimney forming the spout.

"Eat hearty, boys," he said, as he passed it along, "and try to forget the black flies for a while."

Early as the hour was, those pests were already at work, in spite of the "smudge" that Mountain Jim had built.

"Wish I'd put some of that black-fly dope on my hands," muttered Hardware, "it's great stuff."

"Even if it does smell like cold storage eggs with the lid off," laughed Ralph.

As he spoke he poured a liberal amount of syrup on his cakes. With hearty appetite he cut off a big slice of the top cake and eagerly took it into his mouth. For an instant a puzzled expression played over his features, and then he gave a yell.

"Wow! Oh!" he ejaculated, and bolted from the "table."

"What's up? What's the trouble?" asked the others.

"Been bit by a snake?" asked Mountain Jim apprehensively. "Better get out your medicine chest, professor."

Ralph was frantically gulping down several dipperfuls of water from the bucket Jimmie had brought from the creek. They watched him with some alarm, holding bits of pancake suspended on their forks.

"Oh-h-h-h!" sputtered Ralph, and then turned to Jimmie, who stood looking on with undisguised amazement.

"Say, you," he gasped out, "did you put any of that fly dope on your hands this morning?"

"Y-y-y-yes," stammered Jimmie, a guilty flush spreading over his face, "I did and—"

"And you forgot to wash it off before you mixed the batter for these cakes," sputtered Ralph. "Fellows, pancakes flavored with fly dope are the worst ever."

"Shucks!" grunted Hardware, "and I was counting on pancakes!"

"Dancing dish rags!" growled Persimmons. "What sort of a cook are you anyhow, Jimmie? Flavored with fly dope,—wow! wow!"

Jimmie looked ready to cry, and sniffed his fingers remorsefully.

"Guess you're right," he admitted dolefully. "I'm sorry, fellows, but I reckon as a cook I'm a failure."

"I hope it isn't poison, that's all," groaned Hardware, with a glance at Ralph. "Feel any symptoms, Ralph?"

"None that can't be stopped by plenty of coffee and a big plateful of grub," laughed Ralph good-naturedly.

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# CHAPTER XI.

## RALPH'S VOLCANO.

Mountain Jim's examination of the trails left by the errant ponies showed that they had scattered in three distinct directions. This confirmed him, he said, in a belief he had previously formed that the animals had been frightened during the night by a bear or mountain lion, the latter called, in that part of the country, a cougar.

No tracks of either wild beast was to be seen, but that by no means proved that they had not been in the vicinity. Horses can scent either a cougar or a bear at a considerable distance when the wind is toward them, and there are few things that more terrify a pony than the near presence of one of these denizens of the northern wilds.

Jim assigned himself to one trail, Persimmons and Hardware to another and Ralph to a third. The professor and Jimmie were to remain in camp and wash dishes and set things to rights, and then Jimmie was to assist the professor in gathering specimens of rock from the cliffs in the vicinity. [104]

It was odd to see how, in an emergency, a man like Mountain Jim, who probably had little more scholarship than would suffice to write his own name, took absolute leadership over the party. The professor, whose name was known to a score of scientific bodies all over the country as a savant of unusual attainments, obeyed the son of the Rockies implicitly. Such men as Jim are natural leaders, and in situations that call for action automatically assume the supremacy over men of theory and book learning.

Jim explained his reason for assigning Ralph to follow a lone trail while the other two lads had been ordered to accompany each other. Ralph had plainly shown his skill as a ranger and had the experience of his life on the Border behind him. The other two, while self-reliant and plucky, had not had the same experience, and therefore the guide deemed it best not to send either out alone. [105]

With hearty "So-longs" the three searching parties set out, striking off in a different direction up the mountain side. It was rough country, with beetling masses of gray rock cropping out now and then amidst the somber green of the Douglas firs and great pines. Here and there cliffs of great height and as smooth as the side of a wall, towered sharply above the forest, and beyond lay a "hog-back" ridge of considerable height. Beyond this, although they could not see them from the valley, the boys knew that mountain range after mountain range was piled up like the billows of an angry sea, with the higher peaks of the Rockies raising their crests like snow-crowned monarchs beyond and above all.

Each boy carried a canteen of water, his rifle, and a supply of bread and chocolates. Of course they also carried their small axes, slung in canvas cases at their belts, and matches in waterproof boxes. These same waterproof match safes were, in fact, among the few "Dingbats" approved by Mountain Jim. [106]

"Dry matches have saved many a man's life," he was wont to say.

It was lonesome in the deep woods into which Ralph plunged, after bidding adieu to his comrades. The trail, too, was hard to follow, and kept the lad on the alert, which was as well perhaps, for it kept him from thinking of the solitude of the mountain side. No one who has not penetrated the vast solitudes of the Canadian Rockies can picture just what the boding silence, the utter solitude of the untrodden woods is like. And yet the life in the wilds grows upon men till they love it, as witness the solitary prospectors, packers and trappers to be met in all the wilder parts of the American continent.

As he trudged along toilsomely, Ralph kept a look out for game as well as for the trail, for the camp larder needed replenishing with fresh meat, and he was anxious to bring home his share. In this way he covered some three or four miles, now losing the elusive trail, now picking it up again. The mountain side was steep and rocky and strewn with the fallen trunks of forest giants. But Ralph's muscles were tough, and clean living and athletics had given him sinew and staying power, so that he was conscious of but little fatigue after a long stretch of such traveling. [107]

Almost as skillfully as Coyote Pete might have done in those days

in the southwest, the boy read the trail. Here the ponies had galloped. There they had paused and nibbled grass; in other places, broken boughs or abrasions on a fallen tree trunk marked their path. There were two of the ponies; but just which pair they were, Ralph had, of course, no means of determining.

One thing was plain, they must have been badly frightened; for as has been said in the mountain solitudes, as a rule, ponies will stick close to camp. They appear to dread being separated from human companionship, and few packers or trailers ever find it necessary to tether their animals.

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At last the ridge was topped and beyond him, by clambering on a rock, Ralph looked into a deep valley with ridge on ridge of mountains rising beyond it, and beyond them again some snow-capped peaks of considerable height. He scanned the valley as closely as he could, but big timber grew thickly on its sides and bottom and he was not able to see much. There were some open spaces, it is true, but in none of these could he see anything of the missing ponies.

Ralph sat himself down on the flat-topped rock he had climbed, and pulling a bit of chocolate out of his pocket, began to nibble it. He was munching away on his lunch when he saw an odd-looking gray bird, not unlike a partridge, sitting in a hemlock not far from him. The bird did not appear to be scared and regarded the boy with its head cocked inquisitively on one side.

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"Well, here goes Number One for the pot," thought Ralph to himself.

He raised his rifle, and taking careful aim fired at the gray bird. But his hand was shaking somewhat from the exertions of his climb, during which he had had to haul himself over many rough places by grabbing branches, and his bullet flew wide.

"Bother it all," exclaimed the boy impatiently. "I am a muff for fair."

But to his astonishment, although the bullet had nicked off some leaves and showered them over the bird's head, it had not moved. It still sat there giving from time to time an odd sort of croaking sound, not unlike the clucking of a barnyard "biddy."

"I know what you are now," chuckled Ralph to himself, for the fact that the bird did not stir helped him to recognize its species from a description given the night before by Mountain Jim, "you're a 'fool-hen,' and you are certainly living up to your name."

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He fired again, and this time the "fool-hen" paid the penalty of its stupidity, for it fell out of the tree dead. Ralph ran forward, picked it up and thrust it into the hunting pocket of his khaki coat.

"It was a shame to shoot you," he muttered to himself; "too easy. I believe the stories that Jim told about knocking fool-hens out of trees with stones, now that I've seen what dumb birds they are. But this isn't finding those ponies," he went on to himself. "Guess I'll strike off down in the valley. There may be some sort of pasture there where they'll have stopped to feed."

Suddenly he stopped and sniffed the air suspiciously. An odd, rank odor was borne to him on the light wind.

"Sulphur spring!" he exclaimed half aloud. "Reckon I'll take a look at it. It can't be far off; it's strong enough to be right under my feet. At any rate I shan't need any other guide than my nose to find it."

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Sniffing the tainted air like a hound on the trail, Ralph set out down the mountain side. As he went the odor grew more pronounced. A few minutes later he came upon a pile of rocks heaped in an untidy mass on the mountain side. From the midst of them a stream of yellowish white fluid was flowing.

"Phew!" exclaimed the boy, "here's my sulphur spring, sure enough. I guess if it was near to civilization there'd be a big health resort here. Smells bad enough to be good for anything that ails you; but—not for me, thank you.—Hullo! What in the world was that?"

Ralph paused and listened intently. Through the forest came a dull booming sound, and the earth appeared to shake as if agitated by a small earthquake. The boy looked about him apprehensively.

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"Well, what in the world!" he began. And then, "It can't be anybody blasting. Mountain Jim said there was no mining hereabouts. What can it be?"

For some odd reason the recollection of the man on the rock

recurred to him. His heart began to pound rather faster than was comfortable.

"Pshaw!" he exclaimed, to quiet his nerves, "I've got nothing to fear. I've got my rifle and—Great Scott! It's raining!"

That was the boy's first thought as a gentle pattering resounded amidst the trees about where he stood.

He looked upward; but the sky was clear; the sun shining brightly. Clearly the pattering was not caused by rain.

"What in the world can it be?" he exclaimed, considerably startled. "Sounds as if somebody was throwing stones or gravel at me."

The next minute a large globule of mud struck him in his upturned face. Apparently it had fallen from the sky. It was followed by a perfect storm of the mud dobs. They pattered about him in a shower, spattering his clothes and hands.

"It's raining mud!" gasped the astonished boy, completely at a loss to account for the phenomenon.

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## CHAPTER XII.

### JUST IN TIME.

Once more the odd booming sound was borne to Ralph's ears. It came from off to his left. The mud fell again in showers all about him.

"It's some sort of a boiling spring!" exclaimed Ralph suddenly. "I'll bet a doughnut that's what it is. What a chump I was to think that the man on the rock had anything to do with it. Yet it did give me a scare for a minute, too."

He dashed off in the direction of the booming sound, eager to see what he was certain now had caused the shower of mud. He soon came upon it. In a little clear space amidst the pines he found himself in marshy ground. Rank green grass and flowers of bright colors grew here, and brilliantly colored dragon-flies shot hither and thither through the moist, warm air. The atmosphere held a steamy, unwholesome sort of dampness. [115]

Suddenly there came a rumbling sound which quickly changed to a roar like that of a locomotive blowing off steam, and from the center of the clearing there shot up a clear stream of steaming water. But in a flash its purity was sullied and it turned a dark muddy color. The rumbling increased in violence and a miniature geyser of mud and steaming hot water was shot upward to a considerable height.

Ralph made a swift dash for the shelter of a Douglas fir and looked on curiously while the convulsion of nature lasted. Then he ventured out to examine the geyser more closely. To his disappointment he found that he could not approach the depression from which the mud and water had been spouted upward. The ground was far too swampy to permit such a proceeding and the boy was compelled to look on at the strange sight from a distance.

The convulsions occurred with almost clock-like regularity, at intervals of about ten minutes. As he watched, Ralph thought of the professor, and how delighted the man of science would have been to behold such a sight. He made careful mental notes of the operations of the mud geyser, however, so that he could be sure to give an accurate account of it to the professor when he returned. [116]

Suddenly, behind him, he heard an odd, rustling sort of noise and noticed a movement in the tall grass. He parted the vegetation to see what could be causing the disturbance. The next instant he leaped backward with a spring that would have done credit to a gymnast.

He had almost stepped on a huge rattlesnake that was coiled in the grass. All at once he became aware that in his backward spring he had nearly landed on another of the reptiles, a snake fully five feet in length. This caused the boy to beat a precipitate retreat, choosing open ground for the purpose. It was not till then that he began to notice that the entire vicinity of the hot springs was fairly alive with the scaly reptiles. Undoubtedly they had been attracted there by the warmth of the ground and had a den in the neighborhood. [117]

"Ugh!" exclaimed the boy with a shudder, "I never did like snakes. I guess I'll get out of this as quickly as possible. Some of those fellows beat anything I saw in Arizona. I don't fancy their company."

He retraced his steps to the point where he had left the trail of the missing ponies and took it up once more. It led down into the valley and Ralph, thinking of the scores of serpents that must haunt the vicinity of the geyser, followed it with a thankful feeling that he had seen the rattlers in time to avoid them.

The traveling down the side of the ridge on which he was now was almost as hard as his clamber up the opposite acclivity. To make matters worse he encountered several muskegs smelling strongly of sulphur, and undoubtedly fed by the sulphurous springs higher up the hill. But the boy was grateful for one thing that the softer ground did for him. It made the traveling harder, but, at the same time, it held the prints of the runaways' hoofs as clear as day; and as well as Ralph could judge from the look of their prints they were fairly fresh, and told him that he could not be far from the strays. [118]

This encouraged him greatly, and he made good time down the hillside, strewn though the way was with obstacles. He was traveling forward thus, when from a patch of flowering shrubs ahead there came a rustle and a crackling.

Ralph's heart jumped into his mouth. Mountain Jim had declared that the ponies had been scared by a cougar or a bear. Could the creature be just beyond him in that clump of shrubs?

He examined his rifle carefully.

"I don't want to be treed again," he said to himself.

[119]

So far as he could see, the rifle was in perfect working order. He stood stock still and waited for a recurrence of the disturbance in the bushes.

But following the rustling that had first attracted his attention no sound came. Ralph's excited imagination showed him a tawny side a dozen times or more, only to be followed by the discovery that it was some dead or faded leaves and not the flank of a bear or cougar that he had spied.

"If something doesn't happen pretty quick, I'm going to blow up!" exclaimed the boy to himself as he waited, hardly daring to breathe.

All at once there came from the patch of bushes a renewed rustling. It was coming toward him. Ralph clutched his rifle tightly and bit his under lip to keep his nerves under control. The sound was growing nearer now. Was it a bear, or a stealthy, cat-like cougar that was destined to emerge in an instant from its place of concealment?

[120]

"It's coming," thought Ralph, with a bound of his heart, "I hope I can shoot straight and finish it with one shot."

He threw up his gun in anticipation and the next instant burst into a loud laugh.

From the bush had emerged, not a bear nor a mountain lion, nor even a deer.

Facing Ralph, and quite as much astonished as he, to judge by its attitude, was a large Canada hare. For an instant boy and hare stood looking at each other, while Ralph shook with laughter over his feelings of trepidation as to what the brush would bring forth.

"Talk about the mountain and the mouse," he chuckled to himself. "This sure is a modern version of the old fable."

"Skip along, bunny," he added the next instant, as the hare, with a spring and a whisk of its stumpy tail, vanished down the mountain side seeking cover, "I wouldn't take as easy a shot as that, especially when I was looking for big game."

[121]

But the next minute he was destined to get another surprise. Something was coming toward him from another direction, from his right. He could hear its footsteps as it advanced somewhat heavily, cracking branches and twigs.

Then among the tree trunks and underbrush he saw something move. A brown object it appeared to be.

"A deer!" flashed through Ralph's mind. "I'm in luck to-day."

With eager eyes riveted on the spot where he had last seen the brown object, Ralph raised his rifle. His hands trembled but he steadied them with an effort, fighting off the attack of "buck fever," as a hunter's excitement at the prospect of big game is termed.

Suddenly the brown object appeared again, bobbing about behind a clump of brambles.

"It's a deer's head, sure!" breathed Ralph.

He drew a careful bead on the object, devoutly hoping that his sights were adjusted right for the range, which was about a hundred yards.

[122]

"Now for it," he said to himself, as he prepared to press the trigger.

But the shot was never fired, for just as Ralph was about to send a bullet crashing from his weapon there stepped into view from behind the brush, *the figure of a man!*

Ralph shook as if from a fever. Another instant and he might have been a murderer! The man had revealed himself in the nick of time. But hardly had Ralph discovered his mistake when the man saw him. Without a word he dashed off like a wild animal, crouching and diving as he went, and in a flash was out of sight.

In the brief interval that Ralph had had to scrutinize the man he had so nearly shot, he had not received more than a general impression as to what he looked like. But this impression was

startling enough. It was of a creature bearded with a hairy growth that reached almost to his waist, half naked and with long, unkempt hair and wild eyes.

[123]

But even so, he had a queer intuition that this half wild creature and the silent watcher on the rock were one and the same individual.

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[124]

## CHAPTER XIII.

### BOYS AND A GRIZZLY.

Hardware and Persimmons found pretty much the same traveling as Ralph. But not as experienced as he in following a trail, they did not advance so fast. Luckily, as it so fell out for them, the pony that they were trailing was one known as White-eye. He was a harum-scarum sort of a brute, and for that reason Mountain Jim had fastened round his neck, the night before, a lariat with a heavy stone attached to it. The stone had left a plainly swept path through the woods, and except in one or two baffling places the boys had followed it without much difficulty.

Instead of keeping to the open mountain side, like Ralph's quarry, White-eye had made his way up a gully that cut deep into the hills, leading in a diagonal slash to the north. The two lads followed the bottom of the gully as far as it led and then, still following the trail of the stone attached to White-eye's neck, they made their way up a rough, rock-strewn slope to the summit of the ridge.

[125]

Unlike the country Ralph had struck, Hardware and his companion found themselves, on the summit of the ridge, in a forest of white birch and shady green timber, amidst which the sunlight filtered down cheerfully. Passing through this they emerged on a rocky hillside thickly grown with "scotch-caps," or sackatoons, Rocky Mountain blueberries and snake berries, while under foot was a carpet of red heather.

The boys ate heartily of the blueberries and scotch caps, but one taste of the snake berries was enough for them. They were bitter and nauseating to a degree, although Mountain Jim had told them that bears preferred them to any other berry.

"No accounting for tastes," commented Hardware in this connection, "and speaking of bears, I wonder if there are any hereabouts?"

[126]

"Bucking blueberries, I hope not," exclaimed Persimmons, looking about him in some trepidation. "I'd like to have Mountain Jim along if we are going to run into anything like that."

"This looks like the sort of country he said bears frequented," was Hardware's response. "I don't see why we should be scared to meet one, either."

"I suppose you'd go right up and say 'Goodmorning, bear,'" snorted Persimmons.

"Well, we've got our rifles, and they are supposed to be powerful enough to bring down any bear, and——"

"Howling hammerheads, what's the matter now?"

The question was a natural one, for Hardware had stopped short and was staring ahead of them down the steep hillside.

"Why, something's moving down there. It may be a bear. Get your rifle ready."

[127]

Hardware's face took on a determined expression and he looked to the mechanism of his rifle and slipped a magazine into place. Persimmons did the same, muttering to himself as he did so that it was no use fighting a bear, and that they'd better give Bruin a wide berth.

But the next instant their anxiety was relieved and gave place to high good humor. The object Hardware had spied moving among the rocks and brambles was not a grizzly, but the recreant White-eye, cropping the grass as he moved about.

Suddenly he looked up and saw the boys. With upraised head and pricked ears he watched their advance.

"Goodness! I hope he will let us get near him," said Hardware. "I don't much fancy a chase through this sort of country."

"He looks as wild as a hawk," was his companion's response.

Indeed White-eye did not appear as if he meant to be docilely captured.

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As the boys cautiously crept forward, trying to avoid any action that might startle him, the pony rolled his eyes back in the manner that had given him his name and extended his nostrils, sniffing the air suspiciously. Both boys had brought along some grain in their

pockets, out of the supply carried for emergencies, and now Hardware dipped his hand into his pocket and extended it, full of oats, for White-eye's inspection.

But seemingly, the pony had no mind to be caught just then. He gave a plunge and snort and dashed off.

"Oh, gracious!" groaned Hardware. "There he goes, lickety-split; it doesn't look as if we'd ever catch him."

"Howling hen-roosts, no!" gasped Persimmons, who had just barked his shin on a sharp rock. "And I tell you one thing, Hardware, I'm not going to chase very far after him. Hullo, what's he doing now?"

[129]

White-eye had paused with startling suddenness in his mad career, and the next minute the boys realized what had caused his abrupt stoppage. His long tether, with the stone attached, had caught around the stump of a sage bush as it bounded down the hill, and twisted round the stump two or three times had captured the runaway as effectually as if he had been tied by human hands.

"Well, that's what I call luck," declared Hardware fervently.

"It's all of that and then some," responded Persimmons puffingly.

"Let's hurry up, he may get loose again," urged his companion, and the two boys hastened forward regardless of brambles or rocks.

In a jiffy they had the lariat untied and were holding tightly on to it, prepared for another wild dash on the part of White-eye. But now that they had hold of the rope, the pony appeared, with equine wisdom, to perceive that further resistance was useless. He followed docilely enough while they led him up the hillside.

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"I hope the others have had as good luck," remarked Hardware as they trudged along.

"I hope so, too," responded Persimmons, "I wouldn't wish my worst enemy any more of this kind of work than could be helped."

But just as they were congratulating themselves on the easy capture of the stray a sudden demon appeared to enter White-eye's being. He started leaping and bucking and snorting as if possessed.

"What on earth is the matter with him now?" gasped Hardware in wonderment.

"Bucking beefsteaks, he acts like he had a bad tummy ache," exclaimed Persimmons; "maybe he's been eating some of those snake berries. They're enough to make anybody cut up if he takes too many of them, and one's a-plenty—wow! Look! Harry! Look there!"



... a great brown form arose on its hind legs and stood looking at them.—Page [131](#).

The cause of White-eye's sudden alarm became startlingly

[131]



apparent. From a patch of blueberries just ahead of them, where he had evidently been feeding, a great brown form arose on its hind legs and stood looking at them.

"A g-g-g-grizzly!" yelled Hardware, quite forgetting his rifle that was slung over his back by a bandolier.

"Run! Run for your life!" shouted Persimmons, equally forgetful of his weapon, which, in order to lead White-eye, he had been compelled to sling over his shoulders in a similar way.

The bear dropped on all fours and began coming toward them without undue haste, but with a sort of deadly deliberation.

## CHAPTER XIV.

### A CAVERN OF MYSTERY.

Snorting and plunging, White-eye wheeled and dashed off down the hillside. When they had first re-captured him, the two boys had, for greater ease in leading him, fastened the rope through their belts. They were heartily sorry for this now.

As the pony turned and plunged off, they only managed to keep their feet by an effort, and the next instant they were perforce flying down the steep mountain side attached to the leading rope of the frightened pony.

Fortunately, the going was too rough for White-eye to be able to make his full speed, otherwise they might have been dragged off their feet and seriously injured. As it was, their united weight and the rugged hillside both combined to slacken the pony's runaway gallop and enabled them to keep upright. But even so, they were hauled through brambles and brush, scratching their hands unmercifully and tearing even the stout fabric of their hunting clothes.

[133]

It was an extraordinary situation. First came the terrified pony, making every effort to escape from the bear. Behind him, towed at the end of the rope and helpless to relieve the stress of their predicament, came the two boys. Behind them again lumbered the bear, apparently not in any particular hurry, but still getting over the ground uncomfortably fast for those he was pursuing.

The two boys had no opportunity to exchange words as they were remorselessly hastened along. Hardware made an effort to reach his knife, but he was unable to do so and carry out his intention of cutting the rope. Even if he could have done this, their situation would not have been much improved. There would still have remained the bear to be reckoned with, and both boys were so badly flustered that it is doubtful if they could have used their rifles effectively.

[134]

Suddenly Harry Ware, who had cast a glance behind him, gave a yell. "He's coming faster!"

The bear had quit his leisurely rolling canter and was now advancing at a pace that appeared incredibly swift for so cumbrous and awkward an animal. He looked like a flying ball of fur as his short legs flashed under his heavy body.

It seemed inevitable that the chase was to come to a sudden termination. Every instant the frightened boys expected to feel the creature's great claws pull them down.

But suddenly, something as startling as it was entirely unexpected occurred.

White-eye vanished from view ahead of them.

One instant they had seen him straining and tugging on the rope by which they were being so unwillingly towed along. The next minute the earth appeared to open and swallow him.

Simultaneously both boys were jerked off their feet by a sharp tug on the rope. They felt themselves being rushed forward over the rough ground and yanked through a clump of scratching "scotch-cap" bushes.

[135]

A moment later they both gave a shout of terror as they felt themselves falling into a dark hole. Then came a plunge and a sudden bump as they fetched up their career through space by abruptly alighting on something soft and warm.

For a time, so badly shaken were they by their fall and by terror, that neither spoke. Then Persimmons' voice came through the darkness.

"Rocketing radishes! are you dead, Hardware?"

"No, are you?" came the answer in a quavering voice.

"Not even scratched. But where under the sun are we?"

"At present we are lying on White-eye's body. Poor brute, I guess he's dead."

"But he saved our lives. If he hadn't fallen first to the bottom of this hole, or whatever it is, we'd have been killed or had our bones broken, sure."

[136]

"Not much doubt of that. But what are we going to do now?"

"Get out of this place."

"But how? Can you suggest a way? Look up above."

Peering over the top of the hole, which was some twenty feet above them, was a shaggy head. As he gazed over into the hole down which his prey had so unexpectedly vanished, the bear gave a growl and shook his great head, while his red jaws slavered and dripped.

"Well, this hole in the ground, or cave, or whatever it is, saved us from that bear at any rate," declared Persimmons.

"Yes; but it looks as if we had got out of the frying pan into the fire," retorted his companion disgustedly. "Why didn't we think to use our rifles? We're a fine pair of hunters, we are."

"We couldn't have used them, anyhow," was Persimmons' response. [137]

"Why not?"

"Because, like Mazeppa, we were hitched to a fiery steed, only we trailed along instead of being on his back. Poor beast, he must have been killed instantly by his tumble."

"I guess so. His head is doubled under his body. His neck must have been broken."

"Well, this is a fine end to our horse hunt. I guess we'll have to wait here till they come along and find us."

"Looks that way," was the moody reply. "At any rate I'm going to have a shot at the cause of all our trouble."

"All right, if you miss, give me a chance at him."

Harry Ware raised his rifle and fired directly at the bear's head as the great, shaggy creature peered down into the dark hole. His shot was echoed almost simultaneously by a report from Persimmons' rifle. There was no need for a third. [138]

The great head sank lifelessly and hung limply over the edge of the hole above them.

"Good work!" cried young Simmons. "Now, if we can only get out of here we can bring back a pelt that will astonish them."

"True enough; but the problem is how to get out."

"Let's light up and see what sort of a place we have got into."

As he spoke Persimmons struck a match from his pocket case and a yellow glow illumined their surroundings. They had fallen into a sort of rift in the hillside with a narrow opening in it through which poor White-eye had plunged, dragging them with him. But the light of the match, even in the brief period it endured, showed them that it would be impossible to clamber out by the way they had so unceremoniously entered. The hole, or rift, was larger at the bottom than the top, and they would have had to be able to walk upside down, like flies on a sloping ceiling, to regain the mouth of the hole. [139]

It was plain that they must find some other means of egress. But how this was to be accomplished was a puzzling question.

## CHAPTER XV.

### THE HUT IN THE WOODS.

Following his first flush of surprise at the strange reappearance and vanishment of the mysterious man, Ralph was conscious of a feeling closely akin to hot indignation.

"I'm going to catch him," thought the lad fiercely. "What does he mean by going on like this? What's he following us for and spying on us? I'd like to find out what sort of tricks he is up to, and I'm going to."

So saying he set off through the woods at a good pace, following as nearly as he could the direction the man had taken. But it soon dawned on him that he had undertaken an almost hopeless task. Judging from the man's appearance, he had been a denizen of the woods for a long period, although just how he lived was not apparent. [141]

At any rate, before he had gone far Ralph was compelled to admit that there did not appear to be much chance of his catching up with the man. No sign of him was visible, and no crackling of brush or sound of footsteps betrayed in what direction he had gone.

"Guess I'll have to give it up," mused Ralph disgustedly. "At any rate I'm sure of one thing now, I've got nothing to fear from this strange customer, whatever may be his object in hanging about us like this. He must have followed us and——"

Ralph paused abruptly. He had last seen the man on the other side of the *brulee*. It was hardly likely that he could have passed through such a tract of country. Yet, on the other hand, the boy could not doubt that the man he had seen on the rock overlooking their camp and the wild figure of the valley were one and the same. There was a deep mystery about it all. One too deep for the boy to fathom, for he broke off his meditations with a sigh. [142]

"It's no use keeping up the chase to-day," he declared to himself with emphasis, "but if that fellow keeps on dodging our tracks he's going to hear from me in no uncertain fashion."

He rose from the stump on which he had sat down to think things over and resumed his search for the stray ponies. As he moved along he munched his bread and chocolate, taking his lunch "on the hoof," so to speak.

Before long he struck the trail of the missing ponies once more. This time it soon led him into a swampy country and he followed it rapidly. Along the floor of the valley he went till suddenly, on coming around a pile of great rocks, hurled from the summit of the ridge in some prehistoric convulsion, he saw something that gave him a big surprise. In a little clearing stood a ruinous log cabin, and tethered outside it was one of the missing ponies! [143]

Of the other there was no trace. All at once Ralph heard a scrambling and clambering among the rocks above him on the steep hillside. He glanced quickly and just in time to see the mysterious man remounted on the other pony, rapidly urging it away from the hut.

"Stop thief!" yelled Ralph, carried away by excitement. "Come back here!"

"Stop or I'll shoot!" he shouted the next instant throbbing with indignation.

He had no intention of hitting the fugitive, but he did mean to frighten him into stopping if he could. For an instant the form of the stolen pony and its rider became visible among the trees through which the afternoon sun was sending down oblique shafts of light.

Ralph raised his rifle, sighted it to carry a bullet well above the fugitive's head and fired.

"The next will come closer," he warned; but the next minute all other thoughts were rushed abruptly out of his mind when a bullet whizzed by his head close enough to fan his ear. The ping-g-g-g-g-g of the ball as it sped by, ruffling his hair, did not appeal to Ralph. Evidently the fugitive was a dead shot and was not inclined to be pursued if he could avoid it by putting his tracker out of the way. [144]

"Jove!" exclaimed Ralph as he slipped behind a tree trunk, "that bullet was a message meant for me, all right. I don't care to be at home to such callers."

He listened an instant and then came the sound of the pony's hoofs making off at a good pace through the trackless forest.

"He's escaped me again," exclaimed Ralph angrily. "Confound him, he's worse than a mystery now. I'll bet that it was he who stampeded the ponies last night and now he turns out to be a miserable horse thief. Wonder if I can't get a clew to him at that hut yonder? At any rate there's Baldy tied up and safe and sound as ever. I suppose I ought to thank our mysterious friend for leaving him behind."

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The boy slipped from behind his tree trunk and made his way toward the hut. Baldy whinnied as the boy approached. It was plain that the pony was glad to see him.

"Good Baldy! Good old pony," exclaimed Ralph, slapping the animal's thigh and then giving him some bread. "I wish you could talk, old fellow, and then maybe you could throw some light on what in creation all this means anyhow."

Ralph then looked all about him with much curiosity. The hut was moss-grown and moldering into decay. Judged from its exterior it had not been lived in for many years. At the rear of it a spring bubbled into a rusty iron pot beside which lay a rust-eaten dipper.

The door of the shack—windows it had none—hung on one crazy hinge made of raw-hide.

"Guess I'll take a look inside," said Ralph, feeling a very lively curiosity, "but from general appearances I don't think our mysterious friend and horse thief actually lives here. Looks to me more as if he used it as a temporary camping place. Yet he could hardly have found his way here unless he previously knew of its existence."

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Cautiously, and with his rifle ready for a surprise, for he did not know what he might encounter next, Ralph entered the hut. It smelled moldy and stuffy, and in the dim light he could not at first see very much of its interior.

Bit by bit the details began to grow out of the gloom. In the center of the shack was a rough board table and on it stood some rusted plates and cups. In a corner hung some old garments and a few moldering furs, skins of raccoons and minks. A rusty stove stood in another corner, one leg missing and sagging drunkenly.

By the door Ralph now noticed a yellow bit of paper tacked up, with some writing on it. He came closer to read it and made out in faded characters:

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"Gone on April 16, 1888, Jess Boody, Trapper."

This inscription made one thing plain to Ralph. The hut had once been occupied by one of those solitaires of the wilds whose trap lines are sometimes forty or fifty miles long. This Jess Boody had been such a man and had either "made his pile," or getting disgusted with the location as a source for peltries had, as he tersely put it, "gone on."

There were no traces of more recent occupancy of the hut, and Ralph was compelled to come back to his first theory; the mysterious man had used the place simply as a convenient shelter from time to time. Some ashes in the stove, that looked fairly fresh, appeared to lend color to this belief. Probably the horse thief had spent the night there.

"Well, if this hasn't the makings of a first-class mystery about it," gasped Ralph, pushing back his sombrero and running one hand through his curly hair.

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As there seemed to be no use in making any further investigation of the tumble-down shanty, Ralph untied the pony left behind by the horse thief, and mounting it rode back toward camp in a thoughtful mood. He was deeply puzzled, and small wonder, by the events of the day.

He reached camp that evening shortly before dusk, and found that Mountain Jim had returned with the ponies that he had been after and which he had found in a glade across another ridge. The professor, and Jimmie, too, had had a successful day, having gathered in almost a sackful of what the professor called "specimens," and Mountain Jim "rocks." But of Harry Ware and Percy Simmons there was no sign.

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## CHAPTER XVI.

### "UNDERGROUND!"

Harry Ware struck another match. This time the two imprisoned lads did not bother to look above them. They knew that escape in that direction was an impossibility. Instead, they turned their attention to their immediate surroundings.

Suddenly Percy Simmons gave a cry of triumph.

"Look! See there, Hardware, old boy, isn't that a crack or fissure in the rock?"

"Sure enough," responded his companion, who had just time to notice the crack in the rock wall of their prison before the light of the match died out.

"Maybe we can get out that way," sputtered Persimmons, all agog at the thought that a means of escape had been opened to them. [150]

"Perhaps we can, but it looks pretty narrow," responded Hardware dubiously. "Anyhow, it's worth trying. Strike another match and we'll have a good look at it."

A second inspection showed the boys that the fissure, though narrow, was sufficiently wide for them to squeeze into in all probability. Although in the event that it grew smaller further on, they would be as badly off as before. Still, as Harry Ware had said, it was worth trying, and the two boys clambered off the body of the unfortunate pony and began forcing their way into the fissure. Harry Ware went first and Percy Simmons, who was stouter, followed close behind.

For a distance of some five feet they managed to forge ahead. But suddenly Persimmons gave a grunt.

"I'm stuck, Harry, I can't get any further."

"Too bad; I guess we'll have to turn back," Hardware started to say, when he gave a cry of delight. [151]

"It's all right. It broadens out beyond here. Come on, Percy, you can squeeze through alright."

"I'll try," declared the stouter of the two youths valiantly, and, with a violent effort, he forced himself forward. It cost him almost all the breath in his body, but he succeeded in passing the narrow place and then found himself beside his companion in what appeared to be a much larger space beyond. Another match was struck which revealed the place into which they had forced their way as a circular cave with a dome-like roof from which water dripped in a constant shower.

It was cold and damp and the boys shuddered as the water, which was icy cold, pattered about them as if a violent rainstorm was in progress.

"Ugh! What sort of a place have we landed in now, I'd like to know," muttered Percy Simmons. "Shivering snakes, it's like a Cave of the Rains, or something of that kind." [152]

"That's so. We can't stay here; it's like being in a damp ice box. We must find some way out."

"Where do you suppose we are, anyhow?"

"Evidently in some subterranean cavern or passage that runs under the hillside."

"The question is, where does it come out?"

"That's what we'll have to see. There must be a way out."

"Oh, of course," assented Persimmons with suspicious eagerness.

Neither boy dared to admit, even to himself, that it was altogether a possibility that there might not be any way out; in which case they would be in as bad a fix as before. As for waiting at the bottom of the hole down which White-eye had pulled them, it was beginning to grow painfully apparent that they might stand a good chance of remaining there till Doomsday without anyone discovering their whereabouts. [153]

Once more matches were struck and they gazed eagerly about them. They fully realized now that it was becoming a matter of life and death to them to find some means of escape from this underground prison into which, through no fault of their own, they had blundered.

But rigidly as they inspected their prison, it was some time before they found that on one side of the cavern a low archway in the rock led into what appeared to be another rift in the rocky formation underlying the mountain side.

"Shall we try it?" asked Hardware as his sixth match fluttered out.

"Unanimous unicorns, yes!" was the energetic reply. "We can't stay here, and it's no use going back."

"Good, the word is forward, then."

Hardware, as he spoke, bent low to get under the archway of living rock, which, centuries before, had been tunneled out during some disturbance of the earth, and once more the boys found themselves in a narrow rift through which they could barely squeeze.

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"Gracious, if this gets any narrower we are stuck for fair," gasped Persimmons, as they shoved and panted through the darkness.

"Don't think of that; just say to yourself, 'We've got to get out of this,'" urged young Simmons' companion.

In this way they went forward for some distance further when the rift began to widen once more. Suddenly they collided with a solid wall of rock. It appeared that the rift had come to an end.

"Shivering centipedes, we're stuck!" groaned Persimmons abjectly.

"Hold on a minute," counseled his companion, "wait till I strike another match. Thank goodness, we brought a good supply of them."

"Yes, it's a lucky thing that Mountain Jim insisted on our filling the match safes. We'd be in an awful fix without them."

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To the huge delight of the boys, the light showed them that the rift branched off in two directions at the point they had reached. They had bumped into the rocky wall that formed the apex of the triangle at which the two new passages met the old one.

But now they faced a fresh problem. Which passage would they take? They tossed a coin. Heads would be the right-hand one, tails the left. The coin indicated the right-hand rift and into it, accordingly, they struck off. The floor of the passage appeared to rise abruptly and they soon found their further progress blocked by a rocky wall.

"Perishing panhandles, what'll we do now?" gasped young Simmons.

"Try the other one," was his companion's brief response.

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## CHAPTER XVII.

### A DESPERATE CHANCE.

The other passage proved to be much the same as the one they had tried.

"I hope this doesn't end in nothing," muttered Hardware as they made their way along it.

They took a few steps more when Harry Ware gave a sudden yell of alarm and surprise.

"W-w-what's up now?" gasped out Persimmons; but before Harry could reply both boys found themselves tumbling downward. The bottom appeared suddenly to have dropped out of the cavern passage.

"We're lost!" choked out Persimmons as he felt his feet go from under him.

Neither boy knew anything more till they found themselves lying on the ground, Persimmons stretched across Hardware's recumbent body. [157]

"Whew! The second tumble to-day," gasped out young Simmons, "this place is as full of holes as a porous plaster. Are you hurt, Harry?" For poor Hardware had given a groan.

"Yes, that is, I don't know. Ouch! I've bust my ankle, I think." The boy gave a loud moan, which rang hollowly against the walls of the dismal place.

"Is it badly hurt?" gasped Persimmons in a dismayed tone.

"Get up off me and I'll try to stand up. Give me a hand to rise. That's it—wow, but it's painful!"

"Do you think you can use it, Harry?"

"Y-y-y-yes," came bravely from poor Hardware, who was suffering excruciating pain, "but it feels as if a million little dwarfs were poking needles in it."

"Lean on me a minute. If we could only find some water, I'd bandage it. Say, we seem to be the two most unlucky kids on earth!" [158]

"That's what. I wonder if we'll ever get out of this?"

Young Simmons made no reply. For the life of him he could not have found words just at that moment. It was all he could do to choke back his sobs. He was a plucky enough lad, yet he could hardly be blamed for feeling a pang of black despair clutching at his heart as he revolved in his mind their truly desperate situation. After a minute he regained control of himself, however.

"We'll light up and have a look around," he said, as cheerily as he could. "I want to see what sort of place it is that we've dropped in on so unceremoniously."

He struck a match; but it was instantly blown out. Both lads now noticed for the first time that quite a stiff breeze was blowing against their faces. The air felt fresh and chilly and evidently came from some opening further along. [159]

"Well, this breeze is a good sign," declared Hardware; "it means that this place must open out somewhere along the route."

"Blithering blizzards, that's so!" cried young Simmons with a gleam of his customary cheerfulness. "Do you think you can walk, old man?"

"Oh; I'll hobble along somehow," declared Harry Ware bravely.

"Lean on me and that will make it easier. We'll have to go slow, though. I've a notion that one more drop would finish us."

"Like aviation liniment," responded Harry.

"How's that?"

"One drop is enough," responded Harry with a chuckle, despite his pain.

Both boys laughed, and somehow, as is often the case, it made them feel better. As they advanced, cautiously, as you may imagine after their experiences, the breeze grew stronger till it fanned their faces in a regular gale. Their clothes had got wet in the Cave of the Rains and they felt chilled to the bone. But before long a gray light sifted into the rift which presently opened out above them, and looking up they could catch a glimpse of the sky. [160]

"Hurray! We'll soon be out of here now!" cried Harry squeezing



his comrade's shoulder on which he was leaning heavily.

"I hope so," was the response, "but hark! what's that?"

A roaring sound, not unlike that caused by a train rushing through a tunnel broke on their ears as he spoke.

"Goodness! Sounds like a den of wild beasts!"

But the next instant they found out what it was that caused the roaring sound, and at the same time experienced a shock of disappointment as their hope of speedy release was rudely dashed.

The rift terminated abruptly in a sort of rocky basin with steep sides topped with big trees and brush. The center of this basin was a sort of whirlpool formed by a stream which rushed in at a fissure at one side and out of a similar crack in the rocky walls at the other. A groan fairly forced itself from the lips of both boys as they gazed at the smooth, steep sides of the rock basin and realized the impossibility of scaling them, even had Harry's ankle not been injured.

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The stream entered the basin by a small waterfall which tumbled in a foamy mass over great rocks grown with green moss, and it was the roaring of this that had caused the odd noise they had heard in the tunnel.

"Stuck!" was Harry's exclamation as they stood on the foot-wide strip of beach on the marge of the pool.

Percy Simmons could only echo his companion's exclamation. Utterly disheartened they sank down on the strip of beach, the spray from the waterfall dashing unnoticed in their faces. For the first time since the beginning of their misfortunes the two boys were on the verge of giving way utterly.

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How long they sat thus they didn't know; but it was Harry Ware who broke the silence. Both boys were chilled to the bone, and their clothes needed drying. Besides this, an idea had just struck Harry. He thought that if any search was made for them a column of smoke might be a good thing to attract attention to their whereabouts, and a good fire would serve a double purpose.

The beach was littered with all sorts of drift wood, from big logs to small sticks that the stream had brought down probably during a spring freshet and which had lodged there.

When he had succeeded in rousing Percy from his lethargy of despair, Harry limped briskly about, helping his companion build a roaring fire. The heat was grateful to their chilled skins, and taking off their outer garments they spread them out to dry. It was while they were sitting thus, discussing their situation with more cheerfulness than hitherto they had been able to muster, that Harry's attention was caught by a partridge sitting on a hemlock limb that overhung the rocky basin on their side. Raising his rifle, which had survived all accidents, he fired at it, and rather to his surprise the bird came tumbling down, landing almost at their feet.

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"Come on, we'll have some broiled partridge, bread and chocolate," he cried, addressing the woebegone Persimmons. "It's no good starving, even if we are in a tight fix."

He skinned and cleaned the bird and then broiled it on a flat rock which he had previously heated in the fire. The two boys ate the bird hungrily, although it was not at all overdone, being half raw, in fact. But their appetites were too keen to be discriminating, and after despatching it and eating some of their moist bread and chocolate they felt much better.

By this time it was midafternoon. Their clothes were dry and after putting them on again, they seated themselves on the margin of the pool and discussed their plight.

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"If only we had a boat!" mused Harry, after some discussion.

"Jumping jellyfish, you're right there, Harry," exclaimed Persimmons; "but just the same why don't you wish for an airship while you are at it?"

"Because we can't get an airship and we *can* have a boat."

"What! Have you gone crazy?"

"Never more serious in my life. I mean what I say."

"What, that we've got a boat?"

"No; what I mean is, that we can make one."

"Go on," said Persimmons, staring at his companion as if to make sure that he was in possession of his right senses.

"It's no use looking at me like that, Perce. I'm quite in earnest. The only question is, if we make the boat, have you nerve enough to

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ride on it?"

"I'd ride on anything to get out of this place. I wish that eagle up yonder would come down and offer to carry me out. You'd see how quick I'd take him up. But honest, Harry, do you mean what you say?"

"Surely. See that old log over there? That one with the rope dangling from it?"

"Yes," rejoined his companion anticipatively.

"Well, I reckon it drifted from some old lumber camp or other and the rope came with it. However, that's not the point. The rope is on it and we can ride on it out of this pool through that rift in the rocks."

"But the log will roll over with us."

"That's just where the rope comes in. We'll lash two of the logs together and then take our chances. If we get spilled, why we can both swim and I'm pretty sure that outside this pool we can find a bank to land on."

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"Inventive Indians! You're a wonder, Harry. I'd never have thought of that in a hundred years. Come on, let's get busy. The sun must be getting pretty low, and if we do get out we've got a long hike back to camp. I think"—he broke off abruptly. "I forgot your ankle," he exclaimed, "you can't walk far on that."

"No, but you can leave me some place and get help. That part will be all right. The main thing is to reach some place from which you can strike back to camp."

"That's right. Well, let's get busy and lash two of the logs together and then try to chute the chutes."

A log of about the size of the stick of lumber to which the rope was attached was secured and rolled alongside it on the shelving beach. By using smaller logs as levers the boys raised the large ones and lashed them together as firmly as they could, so as to form a sort of raft. The rope, on testing proved to be lamentably old and rotten; but the lads were not by this time in a mood to be critical. They were crazy to escape from their rock-walled *cul-de-sac*, and would have been willing to dare almost anything that held out even a remote hope of relief.

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At length all was ready, and using their levers they got their crude raft into the water. Then they selected two poles which they thought might come in handy to shove the craft off any obstructions that it might strike. This done, they were ready to make their adventurous dash.

"All ready?" asked Harry, wading out into the water.

"Ready as I'll ever be," was the reply.

"Get aboard then."

Without further words both boys scrambled upon the lashed logs and shoved off with their poles. The next instant the raft was in deep water. An eddy caught it, whirling it swiftly into the middle of the pool.

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"Wow! But it's swifter than I thought," gasped Harry, as a wave swept over the raft.

His companion did not reply. At the instant he was poling hard to keep the raft from being swept against a rock, for he knew that the force of a collision would, in all likelihood, cause the logs to break apart. For a second the raft swung round dizzily, waves and spray breaking over it and drenching the boys afresh. The next minute it was caught in the main current of the stream and, like a flash, it shot through the rocky rift of the basin and was hurtled down a passage between steep cliffs, through which the waters boiled like a mill race.

There was no opportunity to speak. The raft was rushed onward with almost the speed of an express train. Sick and dizzy from the violent motion, drenched through, and thoroughly frightened, the two boys could only crouch close and hang on for dear life. Once a sudden lurch almost caused Harry to roll off, but young Simmons caught him in the nick of time.

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All at once, above the roar of the waters that shot along through the rocky chasm, there came a deeper diapason—a loud, thunderous sound that proceeded from right ahead of them. Louder it grew and louder, till its deafening uproar drowned out all other sounds.

"What is it?" shouted Harry at the top of his lungs, but to his comrade his voice sounded like a whisper.

Then came a sudden shout from young Simmons who had raised his head and glanced beyond the plunging, dizzily swaying raft.

"Great goodness! We're being swept toward a waterfall. Get out the poles."

"Pole off! Pole off!" yelled Harry, forgetting his ankle and seizing up his pole as he rose to his feet.

At the same instant there was a cracking, rending sound, and the two boys were swept asunder on separate logs.

The raft had parted under the strain and they were carried helplessly toward the waterfall of unknown height that boomed and thundered ahead of them.

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**Then came a plunge into a breathless  
abyss.—Page [171](#).**

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## CHAPTER XVIII.

### FACING GRIM DEATH.

Of what occurred then, neither boy had in the retrospect any clear idea. Over and over they were rolled in a vortex of white water, each clinging for dear life to his log. Then came a plunge into a breathless abyss and, after what appeared to be an eternity of submergence, they rose to the surface, half-choked and blinded by their immersion. There followed a fierce fight with the boiling, foaming water at the base of the fall, and then both boys found themselves almost side by side in the quieter outer eddies of the maelstrom.

"Are—you—hurt?" gasped out Harry.

"N-n-n-n-no. Are—you?"

"Not a bit. But—what—sort—of—a—place is—this—anyhow?"

"Don't know. It's—awful—wet—though."

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In spite of his peril, Harry could not help smiling at Persimmons' whimsical rejoinder.

Dashing the water from his eyes he resumed swimming, pushing the log before him, for in some mysterious way throughout the awful buffeting they had received in their tumble through the water, both boys had retained their hold on their logs.

It was a rather difficult task to reach the shore, for their wet clothing hampered them sadly and they were greatly fatigued. At last their feet encountered solid ground. Like two drowned creatures they dragged themselves up the bank of the pool beneath the fall and spread themselves panting, on the grass, incapable for the moment of either thought or speech.

"Woof!" panted Percy Simmons at length, gazing back and upward at the fall, "do you mean to say that we came down that and are still alive?"

"So it seems. It's a good thing we didn't know of the existence of that waterfall before we built the raft."

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"How's that?"

"Because in that case we would never have had the nerve to use it."

"Cantering cascades, I guess you are right! That was the wildest ride I ever took in my life."

"And the wildest you are ever likely to, I reckon."

"Let's hope so, anyhow. Hammering hummingbirds, what a drop!"

Both boys gazed at the fall, which thundered and boomed its white waters from a height that appeared to be fully fifty feet above where they lay, although in all probability the drop was not half that altitude.

"Say, Persimmons," murmured Harry presently.

"Well?"

"Has it struck you that we are mighty lucky to be lying here safe and sound after all we've been through?"

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"You just bet it has," was the hearty response. "Walloping waterfalls, if it wasn't that I'm so hungry I'd think I was dead."

"We'd better be seeing about getting back to camp," said Harry presently. "It's getting late and they'll be worried to death over us."

"Not half so worried as we were over ourselves about twenty minutes ago," breathed Persimmons fervently.

"I don't know about that. But look, the sun is getting low. We'd better start."

"Right you are; but how about your ankle?"

"It doesn't hurt half so much now. I guess I can make it all right."

"All right. But if it hurts you badly, I guess I can carry you a way. Or maybe we can find a hut of some trapper or something where you can stay till I bring help."

"Got your compass?" was Harry's next question.

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"Yes; but the sun would give us our direction in any event. The camp must lie over that ridge to the east."

"Then we came under part of the hill and were brought by that river down into the valley here."

"That's what. It seems funny to think of all we've been through since we left camp this morning, doesn't it? I wish we could have brought back poor old White-eye, though."

"So do I. We'll have to get another pony some place, I guess."

Talking thus, the two boys began to climb the hill under whose rugged surface they had traveled by that strange subterranean route, bored or shaken out there when the world was in its infancy. It was a strange thought that theirs were the first human feet that, almost beyond a doubt, had ever trod those gloomy rifts beneath the earth's surface. But being boys, they did not waste much time on speculations of this kind. Instead, they munched what remained of their chocolate, a sad, pulpy mess, and cheered themselves as they trudged along by thoughts of a camp fire and a hot supper.

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They did not make very rapid progress. Although Harry's ankle was much improved, yet it gave him pain as he walked, and from time to time they were compelled to sit down and rest on a rock or a log. Both boys still carried their rifles by the bandoliers, and an examination had shown that the water had not injured the almost waterproof locks. But the weapons, although lightweight, felt as heavy as lead on their tired backs as they toiled up the rugged steps.

"Well," remarked Harry as they paused, not far from the top of the ridge which they had crossed that morning, "camping in the Canadian Rockies isn't all fun, is it?"

"Galloping grasshoppers, no!" was the fervent rejoinder. "If this is what the professor calls getting experience, I'd rather accumulate mine in less strenuous fashion."

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"I imagine, though, that after a good night's rest and some supper we'll feel different about it."

"Maybe. But to-day we've done nothing but tumble in."

"Yes, and we were lucky to get out again every time as easily as we did."

"True for you. I guess there's not so much to grumble about after all."

"Anyhow, we got a fine bearskin. It will help to remind us of this day every time we look at it."

"Thanks. I don't need any reminder. I can recollect it all perfectly well without a souvenir."

They paused once more to rest Harry's ankle, when suddenly young Simmons gave a glad exclamation.

"Look, Harry! Over yonder among those trees! There's a man on horseback coming toward us. Maybe we can get you a lift into camp!"

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"Perhaps it is some one from the camp. No; it isn't, though. Who can it be?"

Just then the solitary horseman emerged from the shadow of the white birches that stood ghost-like against their dark back-ground of pine. The red glow of the setting sun streamed full upon him, bathing both rider and horse in a flood of crimson light.

"Why,—that's—that's one of our horses!" exclaimed Harry suddenly.

"So it is. Maybe that fellow's been sent out to search for us. Wow, but he's a wild-looking customer, though!"

His shaggy hair, huge, unkempt beard and ragged clothes did, indeed, give the horseman a mysterious, almost uncanny look as, with head bent down, he came riding out of the wood into the sunset light. Suddenly he raised his head and saw the two boys for the first time.

"Hey, mister!" cried young Simmons.

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The next instant, with a wild cry like that of some animal, the uncouth figure wheeled his pony and dashed off into the wood from whence he had come.

"Well, what do you know about that?" gasped Persimmons, gazing after him.

"I don't know what to make of it. He looked like a wild man; but that was one of our ponies, I'll take my oath on that."

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## CHAPTER XIX.

### A STORM AND ITS CONSEQUENCES.

Long after dark that same evening the two lads came limping into camp to the no small relief of the anxious watchers, who had built a roaring fire to guide them back. After a fine supper they told the story of their day's adventures which, as may be imagined, caused no small astonishment among their hearers. The fact that they had recognized the pony on which the wild-looking man rode, together with their description of the man himself, served quite sufficiently to identify him as the same fellow who had been seen by Ralph on the two former occasions. But so far as solving his identity was concerned, they were as far off as ever.

After a late sleep the next day, a visit was paid to the hole down which poor White-eye had terminated his career, thereby causing Harry Ware and young Simmons so much trouble. The carcass of the bear lay there, and although tracks showed that animals—foxes and wolves in all probability—had been sniffing around it, the body had not been molested. When Mountain Jim had skinned it, they had a fine "silver tipped" grizzly's skin to take back with them.

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Harry had remained in camp during this expedition so as to rest his sprained ankle as much as possible. Mountain Jim had collected various herbs and pounded them into a paste which, when laid on the injured member, did it more good than all the liniments in the professor's medicine chest. But it was still painful, for the exertions he had made in getting back to camp on the previous evening had not improved it.

After a consultation it was decided that the party could not well continue to the bow of the Columbia River without getting two more ponies to replace the dead and stolen animals. Mountain Jim said that he knew of a ranch not more than fifteen miles off across the mountains, at which he could purchase the needed animals cheaply. It was decided, therefore, that he and Ralph should leave early the next day for the ranch and bring back two ponies with them. The others would have liked to go along; but in view of the apparent hostility of the mysterious man it was decided best to leave a strong guard in camp.

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Bright and early the next morning the camp was astir. But Mountain Jim was hardly out of his blankets before he gave an angry exclamation and pointed to where the stores had been piled under a canvas.

The cover had been raised during the night, and by the disorder that prevailed among the supplies it was plain that several articles had been taken. But who or what could have done the rifling?

Bears were the culprits, according to Mountain Jim's first declaration, but he revised his opinion when Ralph's quick eyes detected the print of a foot in the soft ground near by. A slight, misty rain had fallen in the night and the ground showed plainly the impression of a human foot, or rather of what was, apparently, a very old and broken pair of boots.

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"Humph!" grunted Mountain Jim, "I guess it's your friend that's been and done this, Master Ralph. Yes, by hooky! there's the hoof print of the pony he stole. I'd know it among a dozen. See here, that off fore shoe is broken."

"Well, of all the nerve!" gasped Ralph. "To visit our camp on a thieving expedition mounted on a stolen pony from our pack train; can you beat it?"

"You can't," chorused the boys.

"Can't even tie it," commented Percy Simmons, standing with his hands in his pockets and legs far apart, surveying the scene of vandalism.

An investigation showed that some flour, beans, and a big hunk of bacon had been taken, besides canned goods.

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"Say, I'd like to get my hands on that fellow for just about five minutes," declared Mountain Jim angrily. "The skunk's broken every law of the woods. If he had been hungry and asked for grub he'd have been welcome, but not to sneak it off this way. I'd just like to get hold of him."

"Couldn't we notify the Northwest Mounted Police?" asked the

professor mildly.

"There ain't no station closer than MacLean's," was the reply, "an' that's a good sixty miles off the other way. Besides that, we don't go much on police in matters of this kind."

Mountain Jim's face took on a grim look. It was just as well for that mysterious individual that he was not within reach of those clenched and knotted fists right then. However, even with the draught that had been made on their stock of provisions, they still had a large enough supply to last them to the Big Bend, where Mountain Jim assured them they could get anything they wanted "from a pin to a threshing machine" at a store kept by a French-Canadian. [185]

However, as they all felt a desire to push onward, they did not waste much time discussing the visit of the thief in the night. Instead, Mountain Jim and Ralph busied themselves with preparations for their start, and soon after breakfast they jogged off to an accompaniment of a chorus of good-wishes and farewells. Their road lay down the little valley in which they had camped, and before long an elbow of craggy cliff shut out the little canvas settlement from view.

The road was level for a short distance and they made good time, the ponies loping along as if they enjoyed it. Soon Mountain Jim consulted his compass and declared that the time had come for climbing a ridge and making "across country" for the ranch where he hoped to get the ponies.

Accordingly, they spurred up a steep mountain side covered with dark and somber pines and tamarack, among which the wind sighed dismally. The going was much the same as Ralph was already getting accustomed to in that rugged, little-traveled country. Rocks, fallen trees and deep crevasses crossed their paths in every direction, causing frequent detours. [186]

Hour after hour they traveled through this sort of country, making but slow progress. At noon they stopped for a bite of lunch, and tethering the ponies in some scant grass which grew in a rocky clearing, they seated themselves on a log for their meal. Their canteens of water came in refreshingly, for they had not passed any streams or springs.

So engrossed had they been in making their way over the difficult country that they had been traversing, that up to this time they had not paid any attention to the weather. They now saw that great black clouds were rolling up beyond the snow-covered summits to the northwest of them. [187]

As they ate, the clouds spread out as if a sable blanket had been drawn across the sky by unseen hands. Before long the sun was blotted out and the forest grew unspeakably gloomy.

"Reckon we're in for a change in the weather," said Mountain Jim dryly, looking up.

"It seems that way," was Ralph's reply; "it's getting as dark as twilight. Hadn't we better be getting along?"

Mountain Jim nodded.

"I'd like to get across the bed of the valley yonder before that hits in," he said. "It looks like it's going to be a hummer, and in that case the water will rise in the creek bed below, uncommon sudden."

They finished their meal hastily and remounted. Before them lay the steep mountain side, at the bottom of which was the creek of which Mountain Jim had spoken. At that time of year it was probably dry, but if the storm proved to be a bad one it might fill with great suddenness, and for a short time be transformed into a roaring torrent, next to impossible to cross. [188]

As they rode down the shaly mountain side, their ponies slipping and sliding and scrambling desperately to keep a footing, there came a low, distant rumble of thunder. The sky to the northwest turned from black to a sort of purplish green. Through this ugly cloud blanket a shaft of lightning zipped with a livid glare. The thunder rolled and rumbled among the mountains, reminding Ralph of Rip Van Winkle's experiences in the far-off Catskills.

"She'll hit in most almighty quick," opined Mountain Jim; "wish we'd brought slickers with us."

"I don't mind a wetting," rejoined Ralph stoutly.

"It's worse than a wetting you'll get, if it's bad; half a drowning is more like it," grunted Mountain Jim. "Geddap, Baldy, shake a foot." [189]

But hasten as they would, before they had gone more than a few

hundred yards further the rain began to fall in huge globules; drops they could not be called, they were too large. The thunder roared closer and a sudden chill struck into the air. The dark woods were lit up in uncanny fashion by the blinding blue glare of the lightning.

Suddenly, there was a flash of brilliant intensity and simultaneously a ripping crash of thunder, followed by a sound like some mighty mass crashing earthward.

"Tree hit yonder," said Mountain Jim laconically, "reckon we'd better be looking for shelter. We came close enough to getting hit in that *brulee*."

Ralph agreed with him. But where were they to go to get from under the lofty trees that invited the lightning to pass through their columnar trunks earthward? Suddenly Mountain Jim gave a shout:

"There we are yonder. *The Hotel de Bothwell*," he cried with a grin.

Ralph looked and saw a small opening under some rocks not far distant. It was only a small cave seemingly, but at least, in case anything in their vicinity was struck, it would keep them out of harm's way.

Amidst incessant flashes of lightning and peals of thunder they made for the place.

"Have to hitch the ponies outside," said Mountain Jim. "Too bad there ain't room to take 'em in, too; but it can't be helped."

However, the space in front of the cave mouth was fairly open and free from trees, so that it was not as bad as if they had had to tie their mounts in the dense forest. In the downpour the mountaineer and the boy made the terrified ponies fast, and then made a dash for the dark mouth of the cave. It appeared to be little more than a recess formed by the piling of a mass of huge rocks one on top of another, reminding one of a giant's game of blocks. Had the professor been there, he would have ascribed the presence of the Titanic rock pile to glacial action; but to Mountain Jim and Ralph, the place stood for nothing more than a welcome means of shelter.

They were just about to enter it when a low moaning groan came from the back of the place and a huge, tawny body flashed past them, almost knocking Ralph over.

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## CHAPTER XX.

### PRISONERS!

"W-w-w-what under the canopy was that?" stammered Ralph as soon as he had recovered himself somewhat from his surprise.

"Mountain lion, cougar, some calls 'em. Lucky she didn't claw you, boy," responded Mountain Jim. "If she hadn't dived off so quick I'd have shot her. But hullo, what's that?"

From the back of the cave came a plaintive sound of mewling, as if there were a litter of kittens concealed there.

"Young ones, by the Blue Bells of Scotland!" exclaimed Mountain Jim. "Say, we're mighty lucky that the old lioness didn't attack us."

"Why didn't she?" asked Ralph.

"Dunno. There's no accountin' for the freaks of wild things. At one time they'd attack a battleship, at another time they'll run like cotton-tails. But I reckon this old lioness is off looking for her mate." [193]

"And they will come back and attack us?"

"That ain't worryin' me. We've got good rifles, and cougars are mostly dumb cowards anyhow."

"I hope these are," said Ralph fervently, "although I'd like a shot at one, all right."

They went to the back of the cave to look at the kittens. There were four of them, pretty little fluffy, fawn-colored creatures, whose eyes had apparently only just opened. They blinked as the lightning flashed and the thunder roared outside the cave.

But the two did not bend over the litter of lion cubs for long. The stench of decaying meat around the den was terrible. The carcasses of at least a dozen deer lay there, besides the bones of smaller creatures.

"The old man goes hunting and brings all that truck back," said Mountain Jim as they sought the front of the cave where the air was fresher. [194]

"I'd like to get one of those cubs and tame it," said Ralph.

"What for? He'd get so savage when you raised him that you couldn't do much with him 'cept shoot him. Puts me in mind of a fellow that used to live back of Bear Mountain long time ago, and trained a grizzly so that he could ride him. Like to hear the yarn?"

There was a twinkle in Mountain Jim's eye as he spoke that warned Ralph to prepare for a wonderful tale of some sort; but anything would serve to pass the time, so as Jim drew out his old brier and lighted up, the boy nodded.

"Well, this here fellow, Abe Brown his name was, Abe J. Brown, caught this grizzly young and trained him so as he was most as good as a saddle horse. Abe and his bear was known all over the country thereabouts, and was accounted no common wonder." [195]

"I should think not. Do you mean to say that this fellow actually rode his bear just like a horse?"

"The very same identical way—Wow, what a flash!—Well, as I was sayin, Abe, he'd ride this bear all about, huntin', fishin', and all. Well, sir, one day Abe goes up on the mountain after a deer. The mountain was a famous place for grizzlies in them days, and what does Abe do but ride plumbbango right into the middle of a convention of sixteen of them that was discussing bear business.

"Well, Abe and his bear got mixed up right away, and Abe's bear got killed in the scrap, being sort of soft from having been raised a pet."

"But what happened to Abe?" asked Ralph.

"He wasn't no ways what you might call communicative about what happened in that canyon on the mountain, Abe wasn't," went on Mountain Jim, fixing Ralph with his eye as if to challenge any doubt in his story, "but the next day Abe come into Baxter's cross-roads ridin' one of them wild bears, and with sixteen skins, includin' that of his tame beast, tied on behind. He was some hunter, Abe was." [196]

"And some story teller, too," laughed Ralph. "Do you believe that, Jim?"

"I ain't sayin' no and I ain't sayin' yes. I'm jes' relatin' the facts as they was told to me," said Jim, with a twinkle in his eye.

Ralph had half a mind to tell Mountain Jim some of the staggering yarns he had heard along the southwestern border during his experiences in that country of tall men and tall stories; but at that instant something happened that quite put everything else out of his head.

Just above the entrance to the cave there was a huge rock which appeared, either from constant frost and thaw or from some other cause, to have slipped from its position among the other giant boulders, for it was now perilously poised just above the small entrance to the cavern. The boy had noticed this rock when they slipped into the cave, but with the excitement of the cougar and the roar and crash of the storm, which was now at its height, he had quite forgotten it.

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He now noticed that all around this rock the water from the hillside above was pouring in a perfect torrent. The rain was coming down so hard that it fairly hissed on the ground as it fell. Under these conditions the whole steep hillside was a roaring sheet of water, but just above the pile of rocks under which they crouched was a small gully which, of course, attracted more water than any part of the hillside in the vicinity.

"That water's coming down in a pretty considerable waterspout," remarked Mountain Jim, as he followed the direction of Ralph's eyes and noticed the cascade of rain water that was pouring like a veil in front of the cave mouth.

"Yes, Jim, and I've noticed something else, too. See that rock up there?"

"Yes, what of it? The water's coming against it and it is dividing the cataract so that it doesn't splash back in here."

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"Not only that; but it's doing something else; something that may make trouble for us."

"How do you mean?"

"Why, I'm certain that I saw the rock move."

"Great Blue Bells of Scotland, you're dreamin', boy. That rock is as solid as the eternal hills."

"I'm not so sure. I'm sure I saw it quiver a minute back, when that roll of thunder shook the ground."

"Guess you're mistaken, boy. Jumpin' Jehosophat! Come back here! Quick!"

Ralph had stepped forward to gaze up at the big poised rock. As he did so, there had come a brilliant flash and an earth-shaking peal of thunder.

The ground quivered and shook, and as it did so the great stone gave a lurch forward. The next instant it crashed downward right upon the spot where Ralph had been standing. But the boy had been snatched back by Jim's muscular arm.

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"Safe! Thank the Lord!" gasped out Mountain Jim fervently.

"But look at the rock, Jim! It has blocked the entrance to this place! We're prisoners!"

It was only too true. The big stone was lodged in front of the small cave mouth, shutting out the light and almost excluding the air except for a small space at the top. To all intents and purposes they were as much captives as if a jailer had clanged a steel gate upon them and locked it securely.

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## CHAPTER XXI.

### INDIANS.

"Well, this is a fine fix!"

"About as bad as it could be."

"What are we going to do?"

"I don't know yet. But we'll find a way out somehow."

Mountain Jim spoke with his accustomed confidence; but it was easy to tell by his puckered brow and anxious eyes that he was by no means quite so certain of finding a way out of their unexpected trouble as he would have it appear.

An examination of the rock showed that it was a huge and heavy boulder that by ill luck happened almost exactly to fit the opening of the cave. Only the crack at the top, which was narrow and irregular admitted light and air.

"Well, we're in a snug enough place now," declared Mountain Jim, with a rueful grin, as he completed his examination, "the only objection is that we're too blamed snug. I could do with a thinner door, for my part."

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Ralph agreed with him. The boy's spirits were considerably dashed by this misfortune which, indeed, appeared to portend serious, even fatal results if some way could not be found out of their quandary.

They tried shoving the great rock, but their efforts were of no more avail than if they had been a couple of puny babes.

"That settles that," grunted Mountain Jim, wiping the sweat off his face as they concluded their efforts. "'No admittance,' that's the sign we ought to have hung outside."

"'No exit,' would be more like it," retorted Ralph, "I don't see why anyone would want to get in here."

He spoke sharply and Mountain Jim looked at him with a quizzical look.

"Now don't blow up, youngster," he said, "things might be a lot worse. For instance, you might be under that rock at this blessed minute."

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"By Jove! That's so, and I owe it to you that I'm not," spoke Ralph quickly, flushing shame-facedly over his exhibition of temper.

"That part of it is all right," responded Mountain Jim easily, "but the point is that I've been in a heap tighter places than this and got out with a whole skin. Let's form ourselves into a Committee of Ways and Means—of getting out of here."

"All right. You start off. Any suggestions?"

"Yep. I've got one right hot off the griddle."

"What's that?"

"Well, the storm seems to have died down a bit now, and you can go outside and take a look and then report back on what you find."

"But how in the world am I going to get out?"

"See that crack at the top there?"

"Yes; but——"

"Hold on. You never know what a narrow place you can squeeze through till you try. It's my opinion that you can slip through that crack as easy as a bit of thread through the eye of a darning needle."

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Ralph eyed the crack between the top of the stone and the roof of the cave dubiously.

"I'll try it," he said, "but first I'll take off my coat. That'll make me thinner."

He shed his stout hunting jacket and took the axe out of his belt. Then, aided by Mountain Jim, he clambered up and looked outside. The storm was rolling away to the southeast, and before long, as he could see, the sun would be shining once more. If only they could get out they could resume their journey without delay.

As Jim had foretold, it was not a hard matter for the lithe, slim boy to wriggle through the crack, narrow as it had appeared to be from below. Ralph stuck his head through and then drew the rest of his body up. In a minute he was on the outside of the cave and free.

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"Oh, Jim," he called back, "can't you make it, too?"

"Not me. My two hundred pounds would never get through that mouse hole," responded Jim with perfect good humor. "I guess I'll have to stay here till I get thin enough to follow you."

Ralph slid down the rough face of the rock and then fell to examining its base eagerly. It rested on a small terrace just in front of the cave, but it didn't take him long to see that no ordinary means would dislodge it.

"How about you?" shouted Jim from within his rocky prison.

"I'm afraid there's no hope, Jim," was the disheartening reply. "It's planted as solidly as Gibraltar, outside here. A giant couldn't move it."

"Well, as there's no giants likely to happen along, that don't much matter," said Jim in his dry way, from within the cave.

"But," he added, "if we had some giant powder, that would be a different thing." [205]

"You mean blasting powder?"

"Yep, 'giant powder' is what we call it up here."

"If we can't do anything else, I'd better ride to some settlement and try to get some."

"Yes, unless any miner or prospector happens along and that's not likely."

"Why not?"

"'Cause this is in the Blood Indians' reservation and the Bloods don't take kindly to strangers roaming around on their property and hunting and prospectin'."

"Are they bad Indians?"

"Well, not exactly. Just ugly, I reckon 'ud be about the name fer it. The gov'ment keeps fire water away from 'em all it can, but they sneak it in somehow and a Blood with whisky in him is a bad proposition. They'll steal ponies, rob houses, do most anything."

"Well, I don't know that I'd mind seeing even a Blood Indian now," said Ralph, "in spite of their ugly name. Maybe they could help us or at any rate ride for help." [206]

"Son, a Blood would just as soon shove you off a cliff if he saw you standing on the edge of one, as he would tell you you were in danger of a tumble. But say, get me a drink of water, will you? I'm as dry as an old crust after shoving at this bloomin' rock."

Ralph went toward the ponies, where the canteens hung to the saddle horns. But both were almost empty and as the creek was raging and roaring not far below him, he determined to go down to it and refill their water containers.

He found the creek much swollen by the rain, and racing and tumbling on its boulderous bed like a miniature torrent. But the water was clear and cold, and he took a long drink before refilling the canteens. This done, he pushed his way among the alders back toward the blocked-up cave. [207]

All at once, off to the right, he heard the sound of hoofs and voices.

"Good enough," thought the lad to himself, "here's some one who can give us a hand to get out of this precious fix we're in."

He hurried forward, but the alders were thick and his hands were occupied so that his progress was slow. From time to time a whipping-back branch would slap him a stinging blow across the face, making it smart painfully.

So it was that he did not emerge into the clearing until the voices he had heard had grown quite close. In fact, the appearance of the boy with the canteens and the emergence of three horsemen into the clearing were simultaneous. But as Ralph beheld those horsemen his heart gave a quick, alarmed bound, and then sank into his boots.

They were Indians! Evidently they had just seen the tethered ponies of the white men and were discussing them with animation. [208]

All three were mounted on wiry ponies. Two wore blankets and soft hats, with much patched trousers poking from under the folds of their gaudy wrappings. The third, who appeared to be some sort of a superior being, was garbed in an old frock coat, several sizes too large for him, and in his soft hat was stuck a long eagle feather, as if to symbolize his rank.

But in spite of their semi-civilized garb, all three had cruel, savage faces and eyed the tethered ponies with gluttonous eyes. As Ralph watched them, the one with the frock coat drew out a bottle

and handed it in turn to his two companions.

"They're Bloods and they've got hold of fire-water some place," murmured Ralph. "We're in for more trouble now, and I left my rifle in the cave!"

He crouched back among the alders, wondering if Jim was aware of what was going forward outside the blockaded cave. So far the Indians had not seen him, and Ralph was not particularly anxious that they should.

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## CHAPTER XXII.

### AN ENCOUNTER WITH "BLOODS."

The Indians appeared to be in no hurry, and from the fact that the carcass of a deer lay across the back of one of their ponies Ralph judged that they were a hunting party. But the appraising glances that they cast at the tethered ponies were by no means reassuring.

They looked about them cautiously for a time, and exchanged some hasty words in their guttural dialect. Then the one who wore the odd-looking frock coat and the eagle feather slipped from his pony and approached those that were tied.

It was high time to interfere apparently; but still Ralph hung back. Unarmed as he was, he was unwilling to show himself until actual necessity called for it. But when the frock-coated Indian deliberately began to unknit the tie ropes of their ponies his intention was only too plain and the boy cast all prudence aside.

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"Hey, you, let go of that pony!" he exclaimed, coming out from the shelter of the alders.

The Indian started and turned, and his two companions did the same. For a minute they were considerably startled, for "red coats" (mounted police) occasionally rode through that part of the country.

But when they saw that it was only a boy who faced them, they quickly recovered their composure.

"Hullo, white boy," said the one that appeared to be the leader, speaking a dialect that cannot be reproduced on paper. "Hullo, white boy, what you want, eh?"

"I want you to leave those ponies alone," spoke back Ralph boldly, "they belong to me and my partner."

"That so, eh? Well, we take them 'long small piece, savee?"

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The rascal coolly bent over the rope and went on unfastening it. Ralph was, for a minute, at a loss what to do. Then he bethought himself of Jim in the cave.

"Jim! oh, Jim!" he cried shrilly.

"Hullo," came a hearty voice in reply, "what's up?"

"Some rascals are stealing——" began Ralph, when one of the mounted Bloods slipped swiftly from his pony and, before the boy could utter an other syllable, grasped him by the throat. Ralph was a powerful boy, but in the hands of the wiry, muscular Blood he was no more than an infant. The man drew an ugly looking knife.

"You keep quiet, eh? Me plentee stickee you, you make any more chac-chac (talk)."

Whether the Indian would really have carried out his threat or not Ralph had no means of guessing, but he deemed it most prudent under the circumstances to obey. The Indian smelled most abominably of liquor, and was evidently in no docile mood. A sort of reckless deviltry danced in his eyes that warned Ralph not to cross him.

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But the next instant, to his unspeakable relief, he heard Jim's voice again.

"I'm trying to climb up the rock. I'll be there in a jiffy. Confound it, but it's slippery!"

Of course Ralph could not reply, but the words cheered him. If Jim would only appear with his rifle maybe he could scare the Bloods off. In an agony of impatience he waited. Luckily the rain had wetted the knots so that they were hard to untie and the Blood leader was having a lot of trouble with them.

Suddenly Ralph heard a sharp cry from the Indian that still remained on horseback. The one that was bending over the knots heard the exclamation and glanced up, as did the one that was threatening Ralph. The boy, too, looked around and soon saw what had alarmed them.

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Creeping into the clearing were two immense, tawny forms. The female cougar had returned with her mate!

The Indians gave a series of sharp cries, and the one that held Ralph released his hold and ran for his pony. So did the one that had been bent on stealing the white men's mounts.

Lashing the ground with their tails the lions began to give

utterance to a sort of whining snarl.

This was answered from within the cave by a chorus of mewings and squeals from the cubs. The sound of her young appeared to drive the lioness to fury. She leaped full at the nearest Indian, and landed on the haunches of his terrified pony.

One of the others snatched a rifle from his saddle and fired at the animal, but before he could aim properly the male cougar had attacked him, and the bullet went wild. Evidently the lions thought the Indians were responsible for keeping them from their cubs. [215]

The rifle was an old, single-barrelled one, and having fired the one shot the Indian had no chance to reload. But as the bullet sang by her, the lioness had relaxed her hold on the terrified pony's haunches and slipped to the ground to face this new antagonist. Ralph gazed on with fascinated horror. The scene was unreal, fantastic almost. The three Indians, an instant before bent on thievery, were now fighting for their lives against two creatures urged to fury by the most powerful motive known to the animal kingdom—the love of their young.

"Cheysoyo tanya!" cried the one with the eagle feather, and, urging their ponies to mad flight, the Indians made off at top speed. The lions made two or three bounds after them, but then stopped to listen to the appealing cries of the cubs inside the cave.

They were a badly embarrassed pair of felines. Evidently the manner in which the cave had been sealed up during their absence was a mystery to them. They walked about in front of it sniffing, growling and lashing their tails like gigantic cats in a rage. Dangerous as his position was, Ralph could not but admire the restless grace of the tawny creatures with their smooth, yellowish coats and great green savage eyes. [216]

Suddenly, and without any particular reason that Ralph could see, although they had undoubtedly smelled him, the two cougars came bounding toward the alder thicket into which he had crouched back when first they appeared. Ralph's heart almost stopped beating as they came. He looked toward the cave despairingly.

As he gazed he saw Jim's rugged face appear in the crack above the rock. The mountaineer took in the scene instantly, and, although he could not see Ralph, he called to him.

"Come on the rock, boy! I'll hold them back."

Ralph saw the muzzle of Jim's rifle gleam in the afternoon sun as he thrust it through the crack and sighted with his keen eyes along the barrel. [217]

Instantly his mind was made up as to what he would do. As the lions dived into the alders not far from him he dashed out and made for the rock. In the meantime the tethered ponies were plunging and rearing as if they would break their ropes. But the lions paid no attention to them. Apparently they were only seeking those who had invaded their den.

As Ralph made his dart for safety the lions spied him. With crashing bounds they came out of the underbrush.

Ralph felt a bullet whiz by his ear, but he heard no howl to tell that one of the lions had been hit. Instead, came Jim's voice from above.

"Oh, Lord! This plagued rock juts out too far for me to aim down on 'em."

"Throw me down the rifle, quick!" cried Ralph, an agony in his voice.

He knew he could not clamber up the rock in time to avoid the lions' claws. His one chance lay in the desperate plan he had formed as Jim's exclamation came to his ears. [218]

Jim let the rifle come sliding and clattering down the rock and Ralph caught it up. The strange noise of the weapon as it came to the ground after the startling report halted the lions for an instant. But as he turned to face them Ralph saw that they were all ready for another attack.

He bravely prepared to meet it, although his pulses throbbed and his breath came so fast that he could hardly hold the rifle in the proper position.

## CHAPTER XXIII.

### FIGHTING MOUNTAIN LIONS.

"Steady, boy! Steady!" came Jim's voice from above, vibrant with agitation.

He knew only too well that to the tyro at big game shooting any large animal appears about twice as large and ferocious as it really is. Many lives have been lost and many painful and disfiguring wounds carried to the grave because a man's nerve has failed him at the critical moment when hunting dangerous game.

"You're only shootin' at a mark, boy! That's all! Hold on 'em now! Hold on 'em!"

Jim's voice steadied Ralph's nerves wonderfully. He glanced down the rifle barrel and then, as his finger pressed the trigger the report roared and crashed through the valley.

"Give it to 'em! Oh, give it to 'em!" yelled Jim wildly.

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Following the two sharp, quick reports and mingling with them came a scream full of ferocious agony. Ralph saw a big, tawny body leap high into the air and then, falling back, begin to claw the earth and stones frantically.

"Look out for the other!" roared Jim, and none too soon, for the female, seeing that her mate was stricken by the brave boy's shot, now prepared to spring.

Ralph's attention had been distracted from her by the death agonies of the male cougar. Jim's warning shout recalled the boy to himself.

He fired once more, but this time he did not inflict a mortal wound. Instead, his bullet pierced the lion's shoulder. Apparently she did not care for any more of that sort of punishment, for with a yelp and a howl she turned and dashed off, leaving her mate stark in death on the ground in front of the cave.

Ralph, white and shaking, now that it was all over, reeled for a minute and then leaned against the rock to recover himself a little.

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"Bravely done, lad!" came a voice from above.

It was Jim, but Ralph felt almost too weak from the ordeal he had just passed through to answer.

"The rifle just seemed to go off by itself," he stammered. "I was so scared I couldn't see anything plainly."

"Never mind that. You did the trick, and that's what counts. Wish you'd got both of 'em, though. That lioness wasn't badly hurt and she'll be back for her young ones before long."

"Well, she can't get into the cave," said Ralph with a rather shaky laugh, "any more than you can get out," he added ruefully.

"That's so. I declare for a minute I'd forgotten all about our fix. Say, but those lions served us one good turn when they drove off those Bloods. The fellows were ugly and meant trouble."

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"But won't they be back?"

"Not they. They've had time to think it over by this time, and they'll have come to realize that these ain't early days, and that horse stealing would result in their whole reservation being turned inside out till the culprits were found."

"Hark!" cried Ralph suddenly, "somebody's coming now. Maybe it *is* those Indians coming back, after all."

"Great Blue Bells of Scotland, it's someone on a horse, sure enough. I'll duck down into the cave and get your rifle up."

For it was Jim's "Old Trusty," as he called it, with which Ralph had despatched one lion and wounded the other.

But to Ralph's unspeakable relief it was no band of Bloods that rode into the clearing, but a bearded man on a wild, shaggy pony leading a pack mule by a hair rope. From the pack Ralph could see shovel and pick handles sticking out and both rider and animals appeared to have been roughing it for many months.

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The man wore rough buckskin garments, and his stirrups were made of rope. On his head was a battered old Stetson hat with a leather band around it. Across his saddle bow he carried a long-barrelled rifle, with the stock embossed with silver. He glanced at Ralph in a quick, surprised sort of way.



"Wa'al, what in the 'tarnal's bin goin' on here?" he demanded in a nasal tone, which Ralph recognized as belonging to a native of the States.

"Why, I—that is, we've been mixed up in a sort of scrap with Indians and lions," replied Ralph hesitatingly.

The man looked so wild and uncouth that he did not know but he might have to deal with a highwayman of some sort.

"Do tell," exclaimed the rough-looking stranger, "and you're only a kid, too! Yankee?"

Ralph nodded. Just then Jim reappeared at the crack on the top of the fallen rock, and as his eyes fell on the stranger he uttered a yell of astonishment.

"Great Blue Bells of Scotland," he shouted, "it's Bitter Creek Jones!"

"That's me," rejoined the stranger shifting in his saddle, "but who may you be? Come out and show yourself."

"I can't. My door is locked on the outside, so to speak; but I'm Mountain Jim Bothwell—remember me?"

The stranger broke into a great roar of delight.

"Wa'al, do tell. If this ain't luck. Mountain Jim! I ain't never forgot that day on the Bow River that you saved me from that bunch of huskies that was goin' to hold me up and take my dust away from me. But come on out. Let's shake your paw, old pal!"

"Sorry, but I'm not receiving to-day," responded Mountain Jim. He hastened on to explain what had happened within the last few hours, interrupted constantly by Bitter Creek Jones' astonished exclamations.

"I heard an almighty firin' an' blazin' away from over this neck of the woods," he said, "and I jes' nacherally come over ter see what in Sam Hill was goin' forward. So ye're all walled up, hey? Jes' wait a jiffy while I take a look at that rock. It'll be tough luck if Bitter Creek can't get you out'n that mouse-trap without'n you havin' ter ride fifty miles fer help."

"Do you think you can do anything, Mr. Jones?" asked Ralph, as the odd-looking stranger slipped off his sorry-appearing steed.

"Say, Sonny, I'm plain Bitter Crik to my friends. I'm Mister Jones to them that don't like me, see? So far as gittin' Mountain Jim out'n that hole, it'll be hard luck if I kain't do it. Bitter Crik's got gold out'n tougher places nor that, you kin bet your last red. Lucky I came along this way, too. You see I've bin prospectin' all through here, but it's a rotten country. I'm going back to the States and ship to Alaska, when I git out'n the Rockies."

Talking thus, Bitter Creek, who looked so ferocious, but proved so good-natured, examined the rock from all sides. As he carried on his investigations he hummed to himself like a man in deep thought.

At length he straightened up and hailed Jim.

"I'll get you out'n here, Jim," he said.

"All right, old man, wish you would. These cubs smell like a shoe factory on fire. I ain't particular, but I know a heap of smells that's sweeter, including skunk."

Bitter Creek turned to Ralph.

"Know what I'm goin' ter do, Sonny?" he asked.

Ralph shook his head.

"Well, see here. That rock rests on this little terrace or ledge, don't it?"

"Yes."

"And the ground all slopes away from it toward the creek?"

"It does," rejoined Ralph, seeing that the odd man expected some sort of a reply.

"Well, I'm going to put a slug of giant powder in under that terrace and blow it out from under the rock. Unless I mistake my guess, that's all that's holdin' it. When we blow that to Kingdom Come that ol' rock is jes' nacherally goin' ter start rollin' down ther hill, and out 'ull walk Jim as large as life and twice as nacheral."

"But won't the explosion hurt him?" asked Ralph, to whom this appeared to be a dangerous proceeding.

"May shake him up a bit, but yer see, the force of giant powder works downward, and I'll drive in under the rock for the shot."

The scheme was explained to Mountain Jim, who entirely acquiesced in it. Bitter Creek Jones wasted no more time, but

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hurried off to his mule. From the pack he produced a small box carefully wrapped in various soft cloths. This proved to be filled with excelsior, amidst which nestled sticks of giant powder. From another box came caps and fuse.

Then with a crowbar, the miner drove a deep hole under the terrace on which the rock rested, and this done, capped and fused two sticks of dynamite and "tamped" them into place. Then summoning Ralph they both retreated to a distance, and Bitter Creek bent over and lit the fuse.

"Look out, Jim!" he yelled as it sputtered and sparked. "In about tew minutes there's goin' ter be 'Hail Columbia' round these diggin's."

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## CHAPTER XXIV.

### "BITTER CREEK JONES."

A dull, booming crash that shook the ground under their feet, followed within a few seconds. A cloud of dust and rocks arose from the cave mouth. Suddenly Ralph broke into a shout:

"The rock! The rock! It's moving!"

"Hold on, boy," warned the prospector, laying a hand on Ralph's shoulder. "Watch!"

The big boulder hesitated, swayed, and then, with a reverberating crash, as the blasted terrace under it gave way, it rolled down the hillside. An instant after, Jim Bothwell burst from the cavern and ran toward them. It was all that Ralph, in his joy, could do to keep from embracing him, but just then a sudden shout from Bitter Creek Jones caught and distracted his attention. In their excitement they had forgotten all about the tethered ponies. The great rock was now bounding toward them with great velocity. [230]

It shook the ground as its ponderous weight rumbled down the hillside. The ponies whinnied with terror and tugged and strained at their ropes. But just as it appeared inevitable that they must be crushed, the huge rock struck a smaller one and its course was diverted. Down it went, but on a safe track now, and terminated its career in the clump of thick growing alders that fringed the stream.

"Wow, a narrow escape!" ejaculated Ralph breathlessly.

"Yep, we come pretty durn near killin' two birds—or ponies, rayther—with one stone," grinned Bitter Creek Jones; "but all's well as turns out all right, as the poet says."

"Bitter, you're all right," cried Jim, clutching the hand of the prospector who had turned up so opportunely.

"Shucks! That's all right, Jim. It wasn't much to do fer you, old pal," responded Bitter returning the pressure. "And now," he went on, as if anxious to change the subject, "you'd better skin that lion and be gettin' on yer way. It's drawin' in late, and this is a bad part of the country to get benighted in, more specially with a bunch of Bloods hanging about all lit up with fire-water." [231]

"Reckon you're right, Bitter," was the response as Mountain Jim deftly made the necessary incisions and he and his friend skinned the dead cougar with skillful hands.

It was not long after that they parted company. Bitter Creek Jones continuing toward the south, while Ralph and Mountain Jim swung on to their ponies and resumed their journey toward the northwest. The last they saw of Bitter Creek Jones he was waving a hearty adieu to them and shouting:

"See you in Alaska north of fifty-three, some time."

Then a shoulder of mountain shut him out and they saw him no more. [232]

"There's a white man," said Jim with deep conviction, as the ponies carried them from the scene. "He's rough as a bear, is Bitter, but white right down to his gizzard."

Ralph regretted that he could not have taken one of the cubs along, but on the rough trip that still lay before them it would have been extremely difficult if not impossible to transport it. So the little den of young cougars had to be left behind to await the return of their wounded mother, an event which, Mountain Jim declared, would take place within a short time.

"Maybe I ought to have killed the whole boiling of them young termagents," he said. "They'll grow up and make a heap of trouble for sheepmen, but let 'em be. I ain't got the heart to make away with a lot of babies like them."

It was dark when, on topping a backbone of desolate mountain, they saw in a valley below them a light shining amidst the blackness. Jim declared that this must be the ranch for which they were searching, and they made their best speed toward the lonely beacon. If it had been hard traveling by daylight through the forest, it was doubly difficult to make their way by night. But Jim appeared to possess in a superlative degree that wonderful sense of location peculiar to persons who have passed their lives in the great silent places of the earth. It has been noted by travelers that a young Indian boy, who has apparently not noted in the slightest the course [233]

followed on a hunting expedition into the great woods, has been able, without any apparent mental effort, to guide back to camp the party of which he formed a member. Such a faculty has been ascribed as more due to instinct, the sense that brings a carrier pigeon home over unknown leagues, than to anything else.

Through the darkness they blundered on, through muskegs, fallen timber and swollen creeks—the latter due to the heavy rains of the afternoon. At length, after it appeared to Ralph almost certain that they must have lost their way, they came out on a plateau and saw shining not half a mile from them the light for which Mountain Jim had been aiming.

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A sea captain, with all the resources of highly perfected instruments, could not have made a more successful land-fall. But as they drew nearer to the light, a puzzled expression could have been observed on Mountain Jim's face had it been clearly visible. Ralph, too, soon became aware of a great noise of shouting and singing proceeding from the vicinity of the light.

"Must have some sort of a party going on," he observed to his companion.

"I dunno," was Mountain Jim's rejoinder. "Donald Campbell used to be a bachelor and no great shakes for company. Maybe he's married and they're havin' a pink tea or something."

Soon after, they rode up to a rough looking house, behind which, bulking blackly against the darkness, were the outlines of haystacks. Several horses were hitched in front of the place and the door was open, emitting a ruddy stream of light that fell full on one of the animals. Ralph recognized the cayuse with a start. It was one of those that had been ridden by the Bloods. There was no mistaking the animal's pie-bald coat and wall-eye. He was what is known among cowmen as a "paint-horse."

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Ralph gasped out his information to Mountain Jim. His companion only nodded.

"I've been thinking for some time that there is something queer about this place," he said, "but there's no help for it, we've got to see it through now."

And then a minute later he made an odd inquiry:

"Where've you got the money for the ponies, Ralph?"

"Right in my inside coat pocket. Why?"

"Oh, I dunno. Better put it in a safer place; you might lose it."

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Ralph could not quite understand the drift of his companion's remark, but he shifted the money—one hundred dollars in bills—to his belt, which had a money pocket for such purposes. By this time they were up to the long hitching post where the other ponies were tied and they dismounted and secured their own animals.

"Let me do the talking," warned Mountain Jim as they approached the door. The noise of their arrival had been noticed within, and a short, stocky figure of a man with a flaming red beard blocked the light from the doorway as they approached.

"Great Blue Bells of Scotland, that ain't Donald Campbell, by a long shot!"

"Maybe he's moved on," said Ralph, recollecting the phrasing of the notice in the deserted log cabin.

"Maybe," responded Jim briefly. The next minute the man in the doorway hailed them.

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"Evening, strangers."

"Evening," responded Jim. "Donald Campbell about?"

"Naw. He ain't lived here in quite a spell. Gone up the valley ten miles or more. Lookin' for him?"

"Well, I calculated on seeing him," was Jim's response. "Can we stay here to-night?"

The man hesitated an instant, but then spoke swiftly as if to cover up his momentary vacillation.

"Yep. Come right in. Guess we kin get you supper and a shake-down. That's all you want, ain't it?"

"That's all," responded Jim as they passed the threshold. Inside they found themselves in a rough looking room lighted by a hanging lamp which reeked of kerosene. At a table under it some men had been sitting, but they vanished with what appeared suspicious haste as the two strangers came in. The host left them alone soon after, promising to give them some bacon and eggs and coffee. The noise that they had heard as they drew close to the ranch had died out,

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and now all was as silent as a graveyard. Ralph lowered his voice as he addressed Mountain Jim.

"What sort of a place is this, anyhow?"

In the same low tones Jim made his reply:

"Dunno, but it looks to me like what they call up in this section a 'whisky ranch.' It's the resort of bad characters and is stuck back here in the woods so as to be beyond the ten-mile limit. You see the Canadian government, knowing what harm that stuff does, won't let liquor be sold within ten miles of a public roadway."

"Then that's what brought those Indians here?"

"Looks that way. But this fellow would be in mighty bad if it was found out by the mounted police. But—hush! I reckon he's coming now."

Sure enough the red-bearded man re-entered the room at this juncture. He bore a big dish of bacon and eggs in one hand and in the other he had a blackened tin pot from which came the savory aroma of coffee.

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From a corner cupboard he got tin plates and cups and wooden-handled knives and forks. He asked them what their business was as he laid the table, which required no cloth, being covered with a strip of white oil-cloth.

"We wanted to buy some ponies from Donald Campbell," spoke Ralph before Jim's heavy foot kicked him under the table. For an instant there was a sharp glint in the red-bearded man's eyes.

"Buyin' ponies, eh? Must have lots of money. Ponies is high right now."

"In that case we can't afford 'em," said Jim, taking the conversation into his own hands. He had noticed the momentary flash in the man's eyes when Ralph spoke of buying ponies, and rightly interpreted it. The man stood by them while they ate and told them that he had bought the ranch some time before, but that it was a poor place and he could make nothing out of it. He appeared anxious to impress them that he was a rancher and nothing else, and spoke much of crops and stock. Jim and Ralph listened, replying at intervals.

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When they had finished eating, the red-bearded man offered to escort them to bed. He wanted to put them in separate rooms, but Mountain Jim demurred to this.

"My partner here is a heavy sleeper," he said, "and we've got to be up early to-morrow. I'd rouse up the whole house waking him if you put him in another room."

"All right, I can put you in the attic," said the man, "but you'll not be over comfortable."

"Oh, that's all right," said Jim airily. "We're used to roughing it."

"You may be, but your partner don't look over and above husky," said the red-bearded man, glancing at Ralph's slender form, which rather belied the boy's real strength and activity. He conducted them upstairs and left them in an unceiled attic in which were two rough cots. He took the lamp with him when he went, saying that it was too dangerous to leave a kerosene lamp up there so close to the rafters.

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"Don't sleep too sound," whispered Jim as they got into their cots. "I've a notion that our friend with the vermilion chin coverings isn't any better than he ought to be. I'm sorry you made that crack about buying ponies; it's given him the idea that we are carrying a lot of money. I saw it in his eyes as soon as he spoke."

Ralph hadn't much to say to this. He realized that he had made a bad mistake and blamed himself bitterly. But he determined to try to retrieve his error by keeping awake to watch for any sudden alarm. But try as he would, his exhausted eyelids drooped as if weighted with lead, and before long, tired nature had asserted her sway and the lad was sound asleep on his rough couch.

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Just what hour it was Ralph could not determine, but he was suddenly awakened by a noise as if someone had pushed a chair across the room or had stumbled on it. Broad awake in an instant he sat up in the cot, his every sense alert and his heart throbbing violently.

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## CHAPTER XXV.

### THE OUTLAW RANCH.

Suddenly he was conscious that someone was near his cot. He could hear hard breathing and then he felt a hand creeping over the covers. In a flash he grasped it and yelled aloud to Mountain Jim. Now Jim, no less tired than Ralph, had likewise dropped off to sleep despite his determined efforts to keep awake. But Ralph's cry brought him out of his cot in a bound.

"Great Blue Bells of Scotland! What's up?" he roared.

"There's someone trying to rob me!" yelled Ralph, still clutching the wrist he had caught. The next instant a hand was at his throat and a knee on his chest and he was choked into silence. But his cry had had its effect. Like a runaway steer Mountain Jim came charging through the darkness. [244]

"Who in creation are you, you scallywag? What do you want?" he roared, grabbing hold of Ralph's antagonist, for by good luck he had come straight in the direction of Ralph's cry. Without giving whoever the midnight intruder was any chance to reply, Mountain Jim encircled him with his iron arm and hurled him clear across the room. They could hear a crash and grunt as the fellow fetched up, and then a rush of feet through the darkness followed by the crash of a heavy fall, caused apparently by a violent tumble down the steep stairs leading to the attic.

They listened intently and heard somebody picking himself up and limping off.

"Well, what do you think of that?" exclaimed Mountain Jim. "Serves me right for sleeping, though, Ralph. Are you hurt?"

"Not a bit, but I feel half choked. That fellow had a half Nelson on my neck, all right."

"I guess I had a whole one on his," chuckled Jim. "Strike a match, Ralph, and let's see what we can see." [245]

The match showed a revolver lying on the floor by Ralph's bed apparently just as it had been dropped by the intruder when Jim's mighty arm encircled him.

"Humph! pretty good gun," commented Jim dryly, looking the weapon over. "I'll bet a doughnut that the owner never sees it again, though."

"Who do you think it was?" asked Ralph.

"Old red-whiskers. We'll look him over in the morning, and by that same token it's pretty near dawn now. Hear the roosters? Well, as there's no more sleep for us to-night, we might as well get up and see to the ponies. It would be just like this outfit of scallywags to try to do them some harm or even steal 'em, if your friends, the Bloods, are about."

But the ponies, which had been turned into a corral the night previous, were found to be all right, and by the time the stars paled they had them saddled and re-entered the house. Jim banged loudly on the table of the room where they had had supper the previous night and demanded breakfast. Before long the landlord came shuffling into the room. [246]

In the pale light they could see that under his left eye he had a big purple swelling. His hands shook, too, and altogether he appeared to be very ill at ease.

"How'd you sleep?" he asked.

"Fine," rejoined Jim heartily. "In the night a mosquito or some other kind of low down critter bothered me, but I guess I bunged him up tolerably considerable."

He looked at the red-bearded man with a cheerful grin, and stared him straight in the eyes. The optics of the rascal dropped. He got breakfast in sullen silence and took his pay without a word.

"Oh, by the way," Jim shouted back to him as they rode off, "I found a gun in that attic last night. If the owner wants it, tell him to come to me, will you?" [247]

The landlord looked at them for an instant and his florid skin turned green. He swung on his heel and fairly fled into the house.

"I'll turn it over to the Mounted Police," shouted Jim after him. "I guess they'll be interested in finding the owner."

They arrived at Donald Campbell's new ranch shortly afterward, riding over a fairly good road. The old Scotchman told them that they were lucky that nothing worse had happened to them. The place was suspected to be a "whisky ranch," and its owner had been in trouble with the police on two or three occasions.

"I guess he'll be careful who he tackles next time," remarked Jim with a grin.

The bargain for two tough, hard-looking ponies, broken to pack, was soon struck, and with good wishes from the old Scotchman they rode off. They reached the camp on the return journey that night, and all hands sat up late listening with absorbed interest to the story of their adventures. [248]

The new ponies proved to be anything but tractable the next morning, but eventually they were subdued and their packs firmly "diamanded" to their plunging backs. This done, the way lay clear before the adventurers to the Big Bend of the Columbia River. Mountain Jim had told the boys that their route would skirt the bases of some of the peaks covered with eternal snow, among which the great white Rocky Mountain goat ranges. There might even be a chance, he declared, for a sight of the famous Big Horn sheep, although these animals are now so wild as to be almost inaccessible to hunters.

They set out in high humor, the new ponies being hitched to more sedate companions so as to keep their spirits within bounds. But notwithstanding this, the lively little animals plunged and leaped about till it appeared as if their packs would come off. Throughout the morning they progressed steadily toward the great snow-covered peaks that shone and glittered like diadems toward the northwest. Black ridges of rock appeared among the white coverings of their flanks, giving them an odd, striped appearance. [249]

A stop was made for dinner at the side of a roaring torrent, whose green, cold waters came from the snow-capped peaks toward which their way now lay. While Jim cooked the meal, aided by Jimmie, the boys scattered in every direction gathering firewood or looking at the scenes about them. All at once there came a wild whoop of dismay from Persimmons, who had been entrusted with the duty of tethering Topsy, one of the new ponies.

The little animal had taken fright at the smell of the lion skin, which was rolled up on Baldy's back, and before anyone could stop her she was off toward the torrent. Ralph was in his saddle in a second and after her, swinging his lasso in true cowboy fashion. [250]

"Yip! yip!" he yelled, delighted at the prospect of a brisk chase.

But Topsy, although she hesitated a minute on the brink of the torrent, did not, as Ralph had surmised, turn and dash along the bank. Instead, she plunged right into the seething waters, pack and all, and struck out for the opposite shore.

Ralph only paused a minute and then he was into the stream after her, urging his unwilling pony into the cold water. Reaching the middle of the stream, he slipped off his pony and swam beside him till shallower water was reached.

The swift current carried them down stream for quite a distance, but at last the struggling pony's feet found solid bottom, and he scrambled out not more than a hundred yards behind Topsy. All this had happened so quickly that those left behind had hardly time to realize it before Ralph gained the opposite shore. Then Jim hailed him:

"Can you get her, Ralph?" [251]

"Sure!" hailed back the boy positively, and clapping his big, blunt-rowelled spurs to his pony he was off into the woods after the fleeing pack animal. The wood proved to be only a strip of pine and tamaracks, and beyond was a rocky ledge leading up the side of a high mountain, for by this time they had reached the heart of the Rockies and big peaks towered all about them.

"Yip! yip!" cried Ralph entering fully into the spirit of the chase. As for Topsy, apparently not feeling the weight of the heavy pack at all, she dashed on like a lightning express. Ralph was sorry that the chase was not among the trees, for in the timber Topsy would have found it hard to get along so quickly with the encumbering pack on her back. But up the rocky ledge, which zig-zagged like a trail up the mountain, she fairly flew. The noise of her speeding hoofs was like that of castanets.

"Well, a stern chase is always a long one," thought Ralph, as he [252]

shook a kink out of his rope and spurred after her as fast as his pony was capable of going. The camp was soon left far behind and still the boy found himself on a narrow trail, or shelf of rock, that inclined steeply up the mountain side. Below him the ground dropped off to unknown depths, and on his other hand a wall of rock shot up so steeply that hardly a tree or a bush found footing on it. As they rose higher Ralph experienced a sensation as if he was riding into cloudland. Frequently he would lose sight of Topsy, and then again he could glimpse her as she darted around a shoulder of the mountain, only to be lost to view again.

"Gracious, this is like being slung up between heaven and earth," thought Ralph, as he loped up the trail as fast as his pony could carry him. Glancing down he saw that a sort of blue mist veiled the depths of the abyss below him. He was many feet above the tops of the tallest of the big pines. Afar off, through the crisp, clear air, he could see more ridges, but he appeared far above them. To anyone gazing at him from below, the boy would have looked no larger than a fly on some steep and lofty wall.

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"Fine place to meet anything," he said to himself. "This road was only built for one."

At the same instant another thought flashed across him. Up to this time, in the heat of the chase, he had cast reflection to the winds.

The trail was narrowing. Unless it widened further up, how was he to turn his pony around and retrace his steps?

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## CHAPTER XXVI.

### CARTHEW OF "THE MOUNTED."

This thought had hardly occurred to him when he was saved further pondering by the sight of Topsy coming flying back along the ledge. Her nostrils were distended in a frightened way and her coat was flecked with foam. For a flash he saw her as she turned a shoulder of rock, and then she vanished again as the trail turned inward toward the cliff face. Ralph had only a second in which to act.

He glanced about him. It appeared impossible that two ponies could pass on the narrow trail. Yet he would have to let Topsy get by or else be backed off into the depths below. In emergencies such as the boy now faced, the mind usually rises to the occasion and works with the rapidity necessary to dictate quick action. It was so in Ralph's case. [255]

He swung his pony in toward the cliff face, clinging to it closely, as the only possible salvation. In a flash Topsy came swinging around the turn, going at full gallop. Ralph held his breath as he felt her sides graze his right knee! But she galloped safely by with hardly a fraction of an inch to spare between her hoofs and the edge of the trail!

To his huge joy and relief the emergency was passed, and without accident. In another minute he had swung his pony around, its small, nimble legs bunched together to make the turn, and was off down the trail after the runaway. Almost at the bottom several riders were advancing toward the boy. The recreant Topsy was between him and the newcomers, whom Ralph recognized as his camp mates. Mountain Jim was at their head and they had set out in search of Ralph a short time before.

Topsy, thus hemmed in, allowed herself to be captured without making much resistance, and a much chastened pony was led back into camp, where the professor was awaiting the return of the party. [256]

"Lucky thing that she turned," was Ralph's comment, "for I don't think that ledge went much further up the mountain side."

"Reckon it didn't," was Jim's reply, "and if you had found a spot where it was much narrower, you'd have been in an ugly fix."

"Not a doubt of it," commented Ralph as he thought of his feelings when he was uncertain whether Topsy would be able to pass him or not.

As to what had turned the runaway pony in such a fortunate manner, opinions were divided. Mountain Jim inclined to the belief that the trail had come to an end and that the pony had had sense enough to turn. Ralph, with the recollection of the animal's terror fresh in his mind, was positive that some wild beast had scared the recreant Topsy and caused her to dash back. [257]

The discussion over the exciting incident had hardly ceased, when hoof beats were heard coming along the trail by which they had arrived at their camping place. All looked up with interest, for travelers were few in that wild part of the Rockies. Their curiosity was not long in being gratified.

Through the trees came riding a stalwart figure on a big bay horse. The newcomer was clean shaven, bronzed and capable looking. He wore a big sombrero, riding boots, and trousers with a stripe down the sides. His appearance, for he carried a carbine in a holster and pistols in his belt, was somewhat alarming to the boys, who exchanged hurried whispers. But Mountain Jim soon quieted their fears.

"It's a trooper of the Northwest Mounted Police," he exclaimed, and then, as the rider drew nearer, he cried out in a glad voice:

"Great Blue Bells of Scotland, if it ain't Harry Carthew!" [258]

"By Jove! Jim Bothwell!" cried the new arrival in a gratified tone. "Upon my word, I'm glad to see you. But what brings you here?"

As he spoke, he gazed with some curiosity about the camp and at the youthful faces of the young adventurers.

"Sort of piloting these lads and Professor Wintergreen through the Rockies, Harry," was the rejoinder. "Where are you mushing along to?"

"I'm bound for Muskeg Lake," was the response, "just coming

through from Fort Grainger.”

“Won’t you rest here a while?” asked the professor.

“Don’t mind if I do,” said the big trooper. “The goin’s been rough and both I and Dandy here”—he patted his horse—“are a bit fagged, don’t you know.”

“Sit down and have a bite to eat,” said Jim hospitably. “I guess Dandy can shift for himself all right.” [259]

The trooper unsaddled his mount and was soon seated in the shade of a big tree, his back against its trunk, while he dispatched with gusto the food Jim placed before him. When he had finished, he and Jim lit their pipes and began to talk, while the boys and the professor listened interestedly. The man was a new type to them. Self-reliant, big-limbed, clear-eyed, and active as a cat in all his movements, he appeared a fit person for the hard and often dangerous work of the famous Northwest Mounted.

He and Jim, it seemed, were old friends, the veteran guide having aided him in the years past to corner and make prisoners of a band of cattle rustlers. Jim told him about their experiences at the outlaw ranch and the trooper promised to report the matter to his superior officers at once.

“That red-bearded fellow is a character we’ve been after for a long time,” he said, “and thanks to you, I guess we’ll be able to round him up at last. Nevins of Ours almost had him once years ago, but he slipped through his fingers.” [260]

“What became of Nevins?” asked Jim interestedly. “That man always made me wonder what a chap like him wanted to join the Northwest for.”

Trooper Carthew drew thoughtfully on his pipe. Then after a minute he looked up and spoke softly.

“Nevins has gone on a trail he won’t come back from, Jim.”

“Dead?”

The other nodded.

“How’d it happen?”

“What kills a lot of unseasoned men in the service: snow madness!” was the rejoinder. “It’s a thing I don’t often talk about, but if any of your young men here,” he nodded toward the boys, “think that life in the Northwest Mounted is any cinch it might be a good thing to tell ‘em the yarn.” [261]

“We wish you would,” said Ralph, scenting a story out of the ordinary.

“Well, it happened a dozen winters ago,” began Trooper Carthew, “and it must be fifteen since I’ve seen Jim. Time slips by here in the mountains. Well, as Jim here said, Nevins was a man who ought never to have gone into the Mounted. He was a nervous, harum-scarum kind of man. I don’t know where he came from or what made him join, but anyhow there he was, and it fell to my lot to look after him.

“We were sent on detachment duty up to a place called Bear Rock. Jim knows where it is, and as you don’t, the best way I can describe it to you is to say that a one-horse board-and-canvas town anywhere in the wilds you’ve a mind to place it, would have been a metropolis alongside of it.

“There were a few Cree Indians around—I forgot to say it was up in the Yukon Country—and that was all the society we had. Not even skin thieves or horse rustlers ever came up there. It was too poor pickin’s even for them.” [262]

“Things began to go wrong the first winter. I saw that the loneliness of it all was beginning to prey on young Nevins’ nerves. I call him young, but I expect he was older than he looked. Mind you, he never said anything in the way of complaint, but I’d seen men go that way before, and I saw that he was not built for the job. I tried to get him to go back to division headquarters and report sick, or ask to be transferred or something. But he was a proud cuss, and ‘No,’ says he, ‘I’ll stick it out.’

“Well, if you’ve never been stuck off in the Yukon, sixty miles from any place, with a man whom you suspect is beginning to get snow madness, you’ve no idea what a business it is. Nevins had a nice little habit of getting up in the middle of the night and saying that he saw faces looking at him through the window, and voices calling down the chimney, and little things like that.” [263]

“By the middle of the second winter he got so bad that it began

to get on my nerves, too, and I'd begun to look about and listen and think I heard things. I soon saw that this wouldn't do, and so decided to ride into White Lake, the nearest station, and explain matters. Besides, Nevins was really in need of a doctor. His face was drawn and pale and he could hardly be trusted out by himself on the trail, for he was always shooting at something or other that he thought he saw, but which wasn't there at all. Oh, he was a bad case, I tell you. I began to be scared that some night he might take a fancy to get up and shoot at me. I began to lose sleep and get pretty nearly as peaked as he was.

"When I broke the news to him that we were going back to the station he got mad as a hornet. He was no kid, he said. He could stick it out. All he wanted was to shoot the enemies that were after him, and then he'd be all right. I quieted him down by telling him that our time at the post was up anyhow, and that we were due to report back at White Lake without delay.

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"As soon as he saw, as he thought, that we were not leaving on his account he brightened up wonderfully. He took an interest in getting the shack in order for the next comers and talked about our trip almost all night. I patted myself on the back. He seemed like a cured man already, and when we started out with our parkees on our backs and our snow shoes on our feet, you'd have thought that there wasn't a thing the matter with him.

"Sometimes there was a queer glitter in his eyes, though, that showed me that he wasn't as right as he seemed to be by any means, and that a doctor and some companionship were needed before a thorough cure could be effected. As we left the shack he turned and shook his fist at it without saying a word, but his face showed me how much he had suffered there and how glad he was to be saying good-by to it all.

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"Mushing, as they call traveling in the Yukon, is slow work on a broken trail, and that one from the shack to White Lake was about as bad a specimen as I ever traveled over. But Nevins didn't seem to mind it. He was so eager to get back to civilization—as if you could call White Lake civilization—that he was always ahead of me. But I didn't like his gait. It was awkward, zig-zaggy, not the trail of a man who is sure of himself. Nevins was living on his nerves. I caught myself praying they didn't explode before we reached White Lake!

"Once I offered to take a turn at breaking the trail. But, 'No, what do you think I am? A baby?' says he angrily, and after that we plugged along in silence. Nevins' head was poked forward and he appeared to be in a desperate hurry to get along, almost as if he was afraid something was after him.

"'You'll blow up if you don't slow down, Nevins,' I said once, but he only made an irritable reply and kept right on.

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"I began to be worried. If he did break down I would be in a nasty fix. I'd seen snow madness before and knew what it was. That night I fairly forced him to halt. He was getting so crazy that he wanted to keep on in the dark, but I stuck out at that and he finally quieted down. Yet every now and then as we ate our sough-dough flap-jacks and gulped down our tea before turning in, I saw him keep looking back along the trail we'd come, as if he was scared somebody or something was coming after him to take him back to that shack.

"The next day we mushed on, Nevins still in the lead. We were due at the Lake that night, but I began to doubt if Nevins would make it. He started to talk and mutter to himself, and finally he turned around on me and asked me if I heard anything coming after us down the trail. I laughed the thing off as best I could, but I tell you it's no joke being out in those wilds with a snow-crazed man, especially when he has a rifle, and maybe might take a crazy notion to try his marksmanship in your direction! I watched Nevins mighty close, you can bet.

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"At noon we stopped and ate a half frozen meal, with Nevins staring back up the trail. As we resumed our march he was still muttering to himself and I noticed that he was fumbling with his rifle in a way that was not at all reassuring. I tried to get him to give it to me, making the excuse that it would lighten his load. He looked at me cunningly.

"'I half believe that you're in league with those fellows that want to take me back to that shack,' says he, in a way that made me feel sick, for I knew then that he was crazy, sure enough—and me alone with an armed maniac and miles from any human being!"



## CHAPTER XXVII.

### THE TROOPER'S STORY.

"However, I put the best face I could on the matter and even tried to talk cheerfully to Nevins. But he would have none of my conversation and zig-zagged along on his snow shoes with his queer, swinging gait in the same silent way. It began to grow dusk, and I saw that we should never make the lake that night. I halted Nevins and told him so.

"He gave an odd kind of laugh.

"Not make it? Man alive. I'm going to make it' he grated out in an odd, rasping sort of a voice.

"Don't talk like a fool,' said I. 'Come, here's a place under this ledge that'll make a good camp, and bright and early we'll hit the trail again.'

"He whipped round on me with blazing eyes. If ever a demon shone out of a man's optics it blazed out of his. [269]

"I'm going on, I tell you,' he snarled, 'and what's more, you're going with me.'

"I've been in some pretty tight places, but take my word for it, right then I began to think that I hadn't begun to know what a tight corner was. I could see by the way that poor crazy Nevins gripped his rifle that he meant to have company on his night 'mush,' even if he had to shoot him to get it. I felt as if somebody had dropped a chunk of ice down my back.

"All right, Nevins,' I said, 'I'll go along. Don't get excited.'

"I'm not excited,' he said. And then he added, 'It's only that they'll get us if we don't keep on going.'

"Who's them?' I inquired.

"Those things that have been following us,' he whispered.

"Then he came quite close to me and caught my arm. [270]

"They live back there up in the snow, and they're trying to get me and take me back with them, but they won't.' He broke into a wild laugh that made my scalp tighten till I could almost feel my hat lift on my hair.

"Don't talk nonsense, Nevins,' I snapped. 'We're far ahead of them. They'll never catch us now.'

"He looked sharply at me.

"You're more of a fool than I thought you,' he said contemptuously. 'They've been following us all day. They're close behind us now!'

"I confess that his manner was such that I jumped nervously and looked behind me as he spoke. Of course there was nothing there but the trail, and I told him so, but a contemptuous laugh was all that I got.

"Well, in the course of my career as a trooper I've handled some pretty bad characters and been into some tight places and faced some situations where things looked mighty bad, but I never felt such a feeling of real scare as I had at that moment. Having made this outburst, Nevins started off again. After a while, when it began to get dark, I determined to make a last try to check his crazy plan. I stopped dead. [271]

"Here's where I stop, Nevins,' I said. 'I'm dead beat.'

"He faced round like a wild man, and before I could lift a hand he had his rifle raised, and with the yell of a maniac he fired blindly in my direction. I felt the bullet fan my ear.

"What on earth are you trying to do, Nevins?' I asked in as firm a voice as I could assume, but I'm afraid it was as wobbly as a dish of jelly. 'Are you crazy?'

"Crazy!' he echoed with a wild laugh. 'It's you that are crazy. Come on, follow me. I'll save you from those creatures that are after us.'

"There was nothing to do but to obey. Up I got and started on again after Nevins, who went staggering along, edging from side to side of the trail like a dizzy man. I found myself wondering how it was all going to end. I'm pretty tough and hard to tire, but I felt almost all in, and Nevins, not nearly so strong as I was, must have been going solely on the unnatural strength lent him by his insanity. [272]

"By and by it got dark, but Nevins kept on. He kept shouting back at me, and I'd answer him from time to time. I couldn't let him go on alone, although I was almost dead. After a while his shouts grew less frequent and finally they died out altogether. I guessed what had probably happened. I thought that by and by if I kept on I would stumble over his body lying in the snow.

"For a long time I walked slowly, every minute expecting to come upon him, but he was nowhere on the trail. I don't like to recall that night nor the next day when I went on staggering down the trail till I began to get crazy, too, and hear odd things and voices.

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"If it hadn't been that a party from the station out hunting found me I don't like to think of what might have happened. I soon came round and told all I could about Nevins. A search party started out at once, but returned the next day empty-handed. They had found and then lost tracks of many snow shoes in the woods near the trail. We always suspected that Nevins had wandered off the trail when I missed him, been found dead by Blood Indians, robbed and buried in a drift.... And that, boys, is one incident in the life of a trooper of the Mounted."

"It's a ghastly story," shuddered Ralph, while the others looked grave and sober.

"Chum around with a bunch of troopers some time and you'll hear stranger yarns than that," said Trooper Carthew. "And," he added thoughtfully, knocking the ashes out of his pipe, "the worst of it is, they are all true. There's no need to do any fancy color work on 'em."

Not long after, the trooper rose with the remark that he must "mush along." The party intended moving on, too, so they rode with him till their trails parted. The last they saw of Trooper Carthew was his broad back as his horse surmounted a brow of the trail and disappeared. He turned in his saddle and waved, and then was gone.

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It was a new experience to the boys and it was long before they forgot his story, but such men are met with frequently in the wild places. Real heroes, worthy of world recognition, die fighting a good fight, without hope of reward or praise beyond that bestowed by their mates.

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## CHAPTER XXVIII.

### AFTER MOUNTAIN GOATS.

The two days following were unmarked by any special incident. Jimmie rode with the boys, becoming stronger and lighter-hearted every day. And yet they noticed a curious thing about the waif. Whenever the mysterious man was spoken of he grew somber and silent. It was as if some link existed between himself and this wanderer of the mountains. The boys put this down to the fact that possibly Jimmie felt that, like himself, this outcast of the hills was friendless and alone.

It was on the evening of the second day that they made camp beside one of those beautiful little lakes that nestle in the bosom of the mighty Rockies. Across the sheet of blue water the color of turquoise, a ridge rose steeply from the very water's edge. The pines on it were thinner than usual, and appeared singularly free from underbrush. Far above the lake the smooth ascent broke off abruptly, and there appeared to be beyond it a rocky plateau intervening between it and the farther wall of rock and snow that piled upward till it seemed to brush the sky. [276]

While they were making camp Persimmons was gazing about and suddenly he drew Ralph's attention to some moving objects on the snow-covered crest above the plateau. Mountain Jim was appealed to and decided that the objects were mountain goats.

"A big herd of them, too," he declared.

"Have a look through the binoculars," urged Ralph, borrowing the professor's glasses which he was far too busy with his rock specimens to use. Indeed, he hailed Ralph's excited announcement with only mild interest, being at that moment entering in his notebook a voluminous account of his discovery of some metamorphic rock in a region where none was thought previously to exist. [277]

The glasses revealed the objects as mountain goats beyond a doubt. They were big, white fellows with high, humped shoulders and delicate hind quarters and black hoofs and horns. They looked not unlike miniature bisons, although of course the resemblance was only superficial.

While they still gazed at the moving objects on the snow-capped ridge, Mountain Jim suddenly uttered a sharp exclamation.

"Look close now," said he, "for you'll see something worth looking at in a minute or two, or I miss my guess."

The goats were at the summit of what appeared to be an absolutely precipitous rock wall. From where they watched it did not appear that a fly could have found foothold on its surface. The goats had paused. Ralph drew in a deep breath.

"Gracious! I do believe they are going to try to get down it," he exclaimed.

"And that ain't all," declared Mountain Jim. "They're going to succeed, too. Watch 'em." [278]

The leader of the goats gave a leap that must have been fully twenty feet to a ridge which was hardly perceptible even through the glasses. He stood poised there for a second and then made a breath-catching plunge off into space. The place on the ledge that he had just vacated was immediately occupied by one of his followers, while he himself found footing on nothing, so far as the boys could see. It was a thrilling performance to watch the goats as they made their way down that rock-face to the feeding grounds. Sometimes the leader would take a leap that would make the performance of a flying squirrel seem tame by comparison. And his followers, among them some ewes, were by no means behind him in feats of agility.

"I've seen 'em come down a gully that looked like a chimney with one side out," said Mountain Jim as he watched. "Old hunters say that when they miss their footing they save their heads from being caved in by landing on their horns, but I don't take any stock in that." [279]

"Don't they ever miss their footing?" cried Ralph wonderingly.

"Well, I've traveled aroun' these parts fer a good many years," replied Jim judiciously, "and I ain't never found hair nor hide of a carcass killed that way, and no more I reckon did anybody else."

Jim went on to describe to the boys how wise and cunning the mountain goats are, gifted with an intelligence far beyond that possessed by most wild creatures. He also related to them an anecdote concerning an ewe whom he had seen defend her kid from the attack of an eagle. The eagle had swooped down on the kid and knocked it head over heels. It was about to fix its talons into the fleecy coat and fly off to its eerie with the little creature, when the old mother became aware of what was going on. Like a thunderbolt she charged down on the eagle, which tried in vain to get away. But its own greediness proved its undoing, for its talons were tangled in the young goat's coat and it could not rise, and the mother speedily tramped and butted it to death. While she was doing this some old rams looked on as if it were no concern of theirs. They seemed to know that the mother was quite able to fight her own battles.

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"Think there's any chance of our getting a shot at them?" asked young Ware, vibrant with excitement.

"Don't see why not," responded Mountain Jim. "It's not a hard climb up there, and I reckon they'll stay there till to-morrow anyhow, as there's pasturage and grass on the plateau and they're working down to it."

The professor demurred at first at allowing the boys to go hunting the goats, but after Jim had promised to bring them back safe and sound he gave his consent. Early the next day, therefore, the party set out, leaving only Jimmie and the professor in camp. Jimmie had by this time become quite a valuable assistant to the scientist, and the quiet occupation of collecting specimens appeared to suit him far better than the more strenuous sports the rugged boys enjoyed.

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For a couple of hours, after skirting the little lake, they climbed steadily. Up they went among, apparently, endless banks of climbing pines, and traversed strips of loose gravel here and there that sent clattering pebbles down the slope under their feet.

Then they left the last of the dwindling pine belt behind them and pushed along on a slope strewn with broken rock and debris that made walking arduous.

"Great sport this, hunting mountain goats, ain't it, boys?" said Jim with a grin as the boys begged him to rest a while, for Jim appeared to be made of chilled steel and gristle when it came to climbing.

"I'm all right," declared Harry Ware stoutly, although his panting sides and streaming face belied his words, "but how about lunch?"

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"Yes, cantering crackers! I'm hungry as one of those lions that tried to gobble up Ralph," declared Persimmons, who always had, as may have been noticed, an excellent appetite.

"Don't be thinking of lunch yet," admonished Jim. "You're a fine bunch of hunters. The first thing we want to do is to get a crack at those goats, ain't it? If we don't keep on, they will."

That settled the question of lunch, and after a brief rest they kept pushing on up the mountain side. A chill wind was now blowing from the vast snowfields, and the cool of it fanned their flushed cheeks refreshingly.

They reached a stretch of rocky ground made smooth and slippery by melting snow from the ridges above. The scrap broke off on the verge of an almost precipitous rift, in the depths of which a torrent roared. They stopped for a minute upon the dizzy ledge of rock and gazed down above battalions of somber trees upon the lake below. They could see the camp and the ponies, dwarfed to specks, moving about far beneath. Harry Ware and Percy Simmons shouted and waved their hats, but Jim instantly checked this.

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"Are you hunting goats or out on a picnic," he admonished the abashed boys.

"Huh! Not much of a picnic about this," grunted Hardware in an audible aside.

"Cheer up, it will get worse before it gets better," said Ralph with a laugh.

A short distance further on they came upon some green grass growing in a marshy spot, kept damp by the constant running of silvery threads of melted snow.

"Now look to your rifles," warned Jim. "We'll be using the shooting irons before long, or I miss my guess."

They crept cautiously forward, taking advantage of every bit of cover they could find. They were above timber line now, and only a

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few scattered bits of brush or big rocks afforded them the hiding places they desired.

It was after they had been crouching behind a big rock for some minutes that Mountain Jim, who had just peered over the top, brought them to their feet with a whisper that electrified them.

"They're coming," he said, in a voice that was tense with a hunter's excitement, "don't move or make a sound, and they'll come right on top of us."

The wind was blowing from the goats toward the hunters, and the magnificent animals appeared to have no idea of what lay in store for them beyond the rocks where the boys crouched. There were twenty or more of the goats, including several bucks, great snow-white creatures of regal mien with splendid horns and coats. The boys were conscious of an almost painful excitement as they waited.



**Four rifles cracked and two of the goats sprang into the air and crashed down again dead.—Page 285.**

But Jim, like a good general, knew when to hold his fire. Peering through a crevice in the rocks he watched the advance of the stately creatures. They appeared in no hurry, and under the mighty snow-covered shoulder of the mountain they moved along serenely, cropping the grass and from time to time skipping about playfully.

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"Now!" shouted Mountain Jim suddenly.

Like one lad the three boys leaped to their feet. Four rifles cracked and two of the goats sprang into the air and crashed down again dead. Both Harry Ware and Persimmons had missed their marks. The goats wheeled in wild confusion. They snorted and snorted and mah-h-hed in a terrified manner. With a whoop Percy Simmons dashed toward them, yelling at the top of his voice.

"Come back!" roared Jim frantically, but the boy was far too excited to heed him. He rushed after the fleeing goats at top speed, shouting like an Indian.

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Suddenly one of the old bucks wheeled. The creature was as big as a small calf, and almost as powerful as an ox. It saw Percy and lowered its head.

"Gibbering gondolas! He's coming for me!" exclaimed the boy, and so indeed the infuriated old buck was.

"Fire at him!" roared the others, seeing the boy's predicament, but Persimmons could only stare stupidly at the great buck, as with

lowered horns, it dashed toward him.

“Run! Shoot! Do something!” came from Jim in a volley of shouts.

“Look out!” roared Hardware, as if such a warning was necessary at all.

“Get out of his way!” cried Ralph.

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## CHAPTER XXIX.

### JIMMIE FINDS A FATHER.

The goat itself simplified matters for the frightened boy. Its lowered head collided with his rotund form like a battering ram, and the next instant Persimmons described a graceful parabola above the snowfield. As for the goat, it dashed on, but came to a sudden halt as a shot cracked from Jim's rifle and the bullet sped to its heart.

The boys, however, paid little attention to this at the time. Their minds were concentrated upon poor Persimmons' predicament. The boy had been hurtled head foremost into a pile of snow and all that was visible of him were his two feet feebly waving in the air.

"Gracious, I hope he's not badly hurt!" exclaimed Ralph, as he and the rest ran toward the snow bank. [288]

Thanks to the soft snow, the lad was found to be uninjured, and after he had been hauled out, he sat down on a rock with a comically rueful expression on his face, and picked the snow out of his hair and eyes.

"What do you think you are, anyhow," demanded Harry, "a bullfighter?"

"Ouch, don't joke about it," protested the boy. "I thought an express train had hit me. Wh-wh-what became of the buck?"

"There he lies yonder, dead as that rock, but I don't see where you come in for any credit for killing him."

"You don't, eh? Didn't I attract him this way so you could shoot him?" demanded the other youth indignantly. "I'll tell you, fellows, shooting the chutes, the loop-the-loop and all of them can take a back seat. For pure unadulterated, blown-in-the-bottle excitement, give me a butt by a mountain goat. It's like riding in an airship." [289]

"If you ever take another such ride it may prove your last one, young man," spoke Mountain Jim severely.

"Yes; I wouldn't advise you to get the habit," commented Harry Ware.

Not long after, they watched Jim separate the fine heads of the three dead animals, and, as it proved, there was one for Harry Ware, after all. Mountain Jim had shot so many of the goats in his time that a head more or less meant nothing to him, and he gladly gave his to Harry when he saw the latter's rather long face.

They took the choicest parts of the meat back to camp with them. Not all of a mountain goat is very good eating, some of the flesh being strong flavored and coarse, so that they had no more than they could easily carry amongst them. That night, as you may imagine, Persimmons "rode the goat" all over again amidst much laughter and applause, and the other young hunters told their stories till they all grew so sleepy that it was decided to turn in. [290]

Three days of traveling amidst the big peaks followed, and they all helped the professor collect specimens to his heart's content. His note books were soon bulging, and he declared that his trip had added much to the knowledge of the world concerning the Canadian Rockies.

One evening as they mounted a ridge, Mountain Jim paused and pointed down to the valley below them. Through it swept a great green ribbon of water amidst rocky, pine-clad slopes.

"That's it," declared Jim.

"What?" demanded Persimmons eagerly, not quite understanding.

"The Big Bend of the Columbia River," was the rejoinder.

The party broke into a cheer. The end of one stage of their journey was at hand, for they were to return by a more civilized route. And yet they were half sorry, for they had enjoyed themselves to the full in those last days amidst the great silences. [291]

It is at the Big Bend that the mighty Columbia turns after its erratic northeast course and starts its southern journey to the Pacific Ocean, which it enters near Portland, Oregon.

In the sunset light, which lay glowingly on the great peaks behind them, the heart of whose mysteries they had penetrated, they rode rapidly down the trail, sweeping up to the store in a grand

manner. That night they had an elaborate supper and related some of their adventures to the store-keeper, a French Canadian, who, in turn, told many of his experiences. They were still talking when a man came in and announced himself as Bill Dawkins from "up the trail a ways."

"I heard that one of your party is a doctor or suthin' sim'lar," he said, "and maybe he can do suth'in for a poor cuss that's just been thrown from his horse and had his head busted, up the road a piece."

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"I am not a doctor, but I have some knowledge of medicine," said the professor. "Where is the man?"

"In my cabin. I'll take you to him."

They all streamed out into the night and followed Bill Dawkins up the trail. It was not a great way and they were soon standing at the bedside of a well-built, but pitifully ragged-looking man. His head was bandaged, but enough of his face was visible to cause Ralph to give a great start as they saw him.

"It's the mysterious man! The horse thief!" he cried, clutching Mountain Jim's arm.

"Are you sure?"

"Certain."

Jim turned to the man who had brought them.

"Is the horse that threw him outside?" he asked.

"Sure, pard'ner, right under the shed," was the reply; "good-looking pony, too."

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Jim borrowed a lantern and he and Ralph went out. There was no question about it. One look was enough. It was the missing pony.

"Well, that's what I call poetic justice," said Jim.

"Hark!" cried Ralph suddenly. "What was that?"

"Somebody hollered," declared Jim; "it came from the hut. Maybe that scallywag is dead."

Ralph set off running. The cry had been in Jimmie's voice. He had recognized it. What could have happened?

Inside the hut there was a strange scene. Jimmie was on his knees at the bedside of the wild-looking man and was crying out:

"Father! It's me! Jimmie! Father, don't you know me?"

But the man on the bed was delirious. He shouted incoherently.

"It's silver! I tell you it's silver! Jimmie? Who says Jimmie? Why, that's my boy. But he's dead, is Jimmie. Dead-dead-dead!"

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The cracked voice broke off in a wail. Suddenly the delirious man thrust his hands into his pockets and drew out some fragments of rock.

"Scramble for it, you dogs!" he cried. "It's silver! Jimmie's dead and I don't want it. But they're after me,—after me yet!"

The professor picked up a bit of the rock.

"It's rich in fine silver!" he exclaimed. "This man has found a mine somewhere."

"Yes; but Jimmie called him 'father.' What does it all mean?" demanded Ralph.

"It must remain a puzzle for the present," said the professor. "This man has been badly injured in his fall. I think he will live, but I can't answer for it. Bill Dawkins' partner has ridden off for a doctor. In the meantime. I'll do what I can."

Soon afterward the doctor arrived and they were all ordered from the room. It was then that Jimmie told his story to the curious group that surrounded him.

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His father, whom he had so strangely recovered, had been cashier of a city bank many years before, when Jimmie was a baby. Before that he had followed the sea for a time, and sailor fashion, he had had tattooed on his arms his own initials,—H. R., Horace Ransom,—and the initials of Jimmie's mother,—A. S., Anna Seagrim. There came a day when shortage was discovered in the bank and Jimmie's father, wrongfully suspected, fled to Canada rather than face the chance of being convicted, as he knew that had happened to many another innocent man.

Beyond the fact that he had gone to the Canadian Rockies, then a wilder region even than they are to-day, Jimmie's mother knew nothing. Time went on and it was found out that Horace Ransom was innocent, but he could not be found. Jimmie's mother fell ill and died, but before she passed away she left a paper with her son

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describing the marks on his father's arm and where he had last been heard of.

Jimmie was too young to understand what it all meant then. He was sent to an orphans' home, but ran away as soon as he was old enough to make his escape. He drifted about, selling newspapers, performing with circuses and doing many other things, but all the time he clung to the precious bit of paper his mother had entrusted to him. Jimmie's one ambition had been to find his father if he were alive, and to make him happy. He saved and scrimped and at last got money enough together for railroad fares back to the States for his father and himself. But he had, as we know, to make his way to the Rockies without financial assistance, traveling as best he could.

The boys' stories of the wild man had worked on his imagination and a feeling that the man might be his father had come to possess him. But, of course, he had no proof of the matter till he knelt at the bedside of the raving man and saw the tattoo marks. Such, in brief, was Jimmie's strange story. [297]

With this, our party had to be content for the time being, and leaving Jimmie with the neighborhood doctor at Bill Dawkins' hut, they went down the trail to pitch camp at the Big Bend. They decided to remain at this place at least until Jimmie's new-found father was out of danger and his plans for the future were made.

Some days later Mr. Ransom rallied enough to talk haltingly,— and to Jimmie's joy he talked rationally! The surgeon in attendance declared that, as is not altogether unusual, the sudden blow on the head had restored the man's senses. He felt assured that some particularly severe experience during Mr. Ransom's years of loneliness and hardship in the Rockies had deprived him temporarily of his mental poise, and that he had been subject to periods of wildness. [298]

What the crucial strain was, no one could discover. He seemed very uncertain when questioned about his past and apparently was unable to relate one incident to another as he recalled them.

It was left for Jimmie, who could hardly be tempted to leave his father's bedside, by day or night, to tell him of his early history and to piece together the later experiences as they fell from the injured man's lips.

It seemed that Mr. Ransom had accidentally blundered upon the boys' camp on one of his lone pilgrimages amidst the mountains, for doubtless he had searched only during his sane periods for gold or silver. The sound of boyish voices had evidently stirred memories of his own son, Jimmie, who he had realized must be a grown lad, although he had left him a baby in arms.

But the fear of being arrested for the crime of which, as he supposed, he still stood accused, always haunted him and had made him afraid of meeting the travelers from the States face to face. He had followed them at a distance, his half-crazed brain fascinated by them. In the terrible passage of the *brulee* his own pony had died under him, and the next night he had stampeded the travelers' ponies and stolen one of them. In the same way, when necessity arose, he had stolen some of their provisions. He was still on their trail when the accident that restored to him his son, his senses and the knowledge of his complete clearance of suspicion of the bank shortage, had occurred to him. [299]

But still he could not account for years of his past. Jimmie patiently went over with him the story of his long-ago flight and of his recent mining researches, but between the two experiences yawned a baffling hiatus.

## CHAPTER XXX.

### THE MYSTERY SOLVED.

One day the two were sitting in the doorway of Bill Dawkins' hut, where the hospitable owner still made them welcome. They were looking over the few specimens of rock "rich in fine silver" that Mr. Ransom had produced that first day, when the man thrust his hands into his pockets to see if any more fragments remained there. Finally from an inside pocket he added to the growing pile of treasures a piece of flat, tarnished metal. He gave a little shudder as his fingers released it, and Jimmie glanced up in time to see a sudden change in his father's eye, like a glimpse of suddenly remembered fear.

"What is it, father?" Jimmie cried sharply.

The man started, looked down and then smiled foolishly.

"I don't know, son," he replied slowly.

Jimmie picked up the bit of tarnished metal, and gave a sudden start in his turn. Quickly controlling himself, he asked as quietly as possible, "Where did you get this, father?"

"I don't know, son," repeated the man again. "I don't know. I must have had it a long time,—son,—a long time."

Jimmie looked at the little dull article a moment and then leaning forward fastened it to the breast of his father's coat. Mr. Ransom began to look uneasy and a wild light sprang to his eyes for an instant. Jimmie immediately detached the metal piece and put it in his pocket. Then he began to chat with his father about the trees, the mountains, the hut and kindred matters, and apparently forgot all about the incident.

But the moment that Bill Dawkins returned from his day's hunting in the mountains, Jimmie was off like an arrow from a bow for the camp down on the Big Bend.

The party were just enjoying a quiet evening meal prepared under Mountain Jim's tutelage, when Jimmie burst in upon them.

"See that!" he cried breathlessly, holding up the piece of tarnished metal. "And that!" he added, turning the article over so as to show its blackened under side.

"It's a badge!" cried Persimmons.

"A Northwest Mounted badge!" added Ralph.

"And it has a name scratched on the back!" reported the professor.

"And the name—is—*Nevins!*" concluded Mountain Jim in a tone of awe.

"And *my father* had that in his pocket!" said Jimmie, tears of excitement rolling down his cheeks.

"Could your father—possibly—be—*Nevins?*" asked the professor slowly.

"But *Nevins* died in the snow!" protested Harry Ware.

"No, Carthew only *thought* he died. No one *knew*," said Mountain Jim reminiscently.

"But the Indians?" suggested Ralph.

"Maybe they saved him,—who knows?" said Jimmie, his eyes shining. "And maybe they let him wander away when he got stronger because they saw he was crazy!"

And so the talk went on, one suggestion and one surmise following another until the long evening was spent. The mystery could not be fully solved, but all agreed not to remind Jimmie's father of the horrible experience that had been his, if he were, indeed, the subject of Trooper Carthew's tale.

The next day the faithful doctor approved this decision. He also promised that he would get word to the trooper of this strange sequel to his story.

To digress, for a moment, as we may not linger much longer over the happy ending of Jimmie's search. Time and the trooper proved, that Mr. Ransom and "Nevins of Ours" were, indeed, one and the same. The second name had been assumed as a protection, and so had prevented the finding of Jimmie's father long ago. A year or two after the incidents just related there was a reunion of the two men who had long before faced death together on the solitary trail, and

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by that time the clouds of forgetfulness had been so largely dissipated from Mr. Ransom's befogged brain that he was able to thank the stalwart trooper for his efforts in his behalf.

Although much that had intervened between the time of Mr. Ransom's disappearance in the snow and the time of his mental recovery was never clearly known, yet flashes of memory recalled to him Indians, warm blankets and good food. And his friends concluded that the Indians had really captured and saved him, but through some superstitious regard for his crazed condition, had been kindly disposed toward him and given him his freedom. [305]

But the silver? It was many days before Horace Ransom was strong enough to compel his brain to work backward to locate the spot where he had found the rich ore. Finally he succeeded, and the professor and the boys eventually accompanied him to the recess in the hills where the rich find had been made. The professor declared that the vein was of great richness and would yield a vast amount of silver, and so it subsequently proved.

The new Horace Ransom—the alert, middle-aged man of property that had arisen from the ashes of the mysterious derelict of the mountains—was anxious for the boys and the professor all to take shares in his mine, but they refused. Instead they turned their interest, which Mr. Ransom insisted they possessed, over to Mountain Jim.

All this, of course, did not take place in a day. While Mr. Ransom was convalescing, the boys had much sport on the great Columbia in native canoes. They also had several adventurous hunting trips and memorable mountain climbs. But possibly of all their recollections of the Canadian Rockies the remembrance of the strange reunion of "the boy from nowhere" and his father was destined to stand out as the brightest and best. Little did they imagine when Ralph rescued Jimmie from the hands of the brutal brakeman, that before many years had rolled by the waif would be partner in the "Border Boy" silver mine, answering to the name "Mr. James Ransom." [306]

And here we will break off this tale. Another volume might easily be written relating further doings of these boys in the Canadian Rockies. But space forbids, and we must defer further acquaintance with our lads till we meet them once more in the next volume of this series, *THE BORDER BOYS ON THE ST. LAWRENCE*.

THE END.

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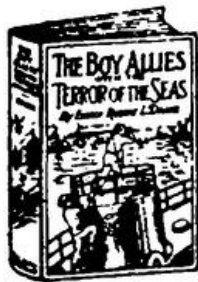
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