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[Illustration: "Say" Cried Frank, "That's a child's face up there!"]

The Boy Scout Camera Club

or

The Confession of a Photograph

By

Scout Master G. Harvey Ralphson

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The Boy Scout Camera Club

or

The Confession of a Photograph

CHAPTER I

LOST: A FOREIGN PRINCE!

"Two Black Bears!"

"Two Wolves!"

"Three Eagles!"

"Five Moose!"

"Quite a mixture of wild creatures to be found in a splendid clubroom in the city of New York!" exclaimed Ned Nestor, a handsome, muscular boy of seventeen. "How many of these denizens of the forests are ready to join the Boy Scout Camera Club?"

"You may put my name down twice—in red ink!" shouted Jimmie McGraw, of the Wolf Patrol. "I wouldn't miss it to be president of the United States!"

"One Wolf," Ned said, writing the name down.

"Two Wolves!" cried Jimmie, red-headed, freckled of face and as active as a red squirrel, "two wolves! You're a Wolf yourself, Ned Nestor!"

"Two Wolves, then!" laughed Ned. "Of course Jimmie and I can form a club all by ourselves, and he can be the officers and I can be the members, but we'd rather have a menagerie of large size, as we are going into the mountains of Virginia, West Virginia, North Carolina, Kentucky and Tennessee."

The boys who had not yet spoken were on their feet in an instant, all clamoring for membership in the Boy Scout Camera Club. Ned lifted a hand for silence.

"Why this present rush?" he asked. "I've been thinking that Jimmie and I would have to go to the mountains alone! Why this impetuosity?"

"The mountains!" shouted Frank Shaw, of the Black Bear Patrol. "It is the mountains that get us! We've been thinking that the club you were organizing wouldn't get outside of little old New York, but would loaf around taking snap-shots of the slums and the trees in the parks. But when you mention mountains, why—"

"I'm going right down stairs and pack my camera!" Jack Bosworth, of the Black Bear Patrol, declared. "When it comes to mountains!"

The clubroom of the Black Bear Patrol was on the top floor of the handsome residence of Jack's father, who was a famous corporation lawyer, and the boys persuaded Jack to wait until they had completed the organization of the Camera Club before he started in packing for the journey to the mountains!

"You'll want an Eagle, if you're going to the mountains!" shouted Teddy Green, of the Eagle Patrol. "I'll fly home and get my wardrobe right now!"

Teddy Green was the son of a Harvard professor, and was inclined to follow in the footsteps of his father in the matter of learning—after he had first climbed to all the high spots of the world and descended into all the low ones! He insisted on exploring the earth before he learned by rote what others had written about it!

"All right!" Ned grinned. "We'll need an Eagle!"

"And a Bull Moose!" yelled Oliver Yentsch, of the Moose Patrol. "You've got to have a Moose along with you!"

Oliver was the son of a ship builder, and had a launch and a yacht of his own. He was liked by all his associates in spite of his tendency to grumble at trifles. However, if he complained at small things, he met large troubles with a smile on his bright face. He now seized Teddy about the waist and waltzed around the room with him.

"And that's all!" Ned decided, closing the book. "We can't take more than six."

A wail went up from the others, but they were promised a chance at the next "hike" into the hills, and soon departed, leaving the six members of the Camera Club to perfect arrangements for their departure. It was a warm May night, still Ned closed the door leading out into the wide corridor which ran through the house on that floor.

"We can't afford to take others into our plans," he said, "for this is to be another Secret Service expedition."

"For the Government?" demanded Frank Shaw. "Then," he added, without waiting for a reply, "I'll call up dad's editorial rooms and have a reporter sent up here. Top of column, first page, illustrated! That's our Camera Club in the morning newspaper!"

Frank's father was owner and editor of one of the big New York dailies, and the boy always took along, on his trips, plenty of blank paper for "copy," but never sent in a line! His letters to his father's newspaper were usually addressed to the financial department, upon which he had permission to draw at will!

"Huh!" Jimmie commented, wrinkling his freckled nose, "if you should ever furnish an item for your daddy's newspaper he'd never live it down! You've been on all our trips with Ned, and never wired in a word!"

The Boy Scouts of the Black Bear and Wolf Patrols had been through many exciting experiences with Ned Nestor, who, young as he was, was often in the employ of the Secret Service department of the United States government. Frank, as Jimmie said, had been with Ned from the start, and had never sent in a line of "copy" for the paper.

"I'm going to furnish a column a day this trip!" Frank declared, making a motion to seize Jimmie. "We're going to take pictures, aren't we? We'll take 'em by the acre, and dad's newspaper is going to catch every one of them."

"Huh!" Jimmie declared, with a freckled nose in the air. "I'm a newspaper man, too. You needn't think you're the only cherry in the pie! I used to sell newspapers before I got into the Secret Service with Ned!"

From his earliest years Jimmie had indeed been a newsboy on the Bowery. He had never had a home except that provided by himself, and this, in the early days of his life, had as often been a box or barrel in an alley as anything else.

"Why the mountains?" asked Frank Shaw, presently. "Do you have to go to the hills on this trip? I'm glad if you do, of course, but I'd like to know something about it before we start. Dad will have to be shown this time, I reckon! He thinks we rather *overdid* the stunt when we went to Lady Franklin bay!"

"Never had so much fun in my life!" laughed Jimmie. "When you get where it is forty below, there's some delight in living!"

"What are we going to take pictures of?" demanded Teddy Green.

"Moonshiners!" laughed Frank. "Isn't that right, Ned?"

"Not exactly," was the answer. "This is not a whisky case at all."

"Counterfeiters, then?" queried Oliver. "They live in the hills!"

"No, not counterfeiters, either," Ned replied. "The government has plenty of men to look after counterfeiters and moonshiners. All we've got to do is to go into the mountains and take pictures, and keep our eyes open."

"Open for what?" insisted Jimmie. "My peepers will be open for a venison steak about the first thing! You remember how fine the venison steaks were up in British Columbia? That Columbia river trip was some exciting! What?"

"Well," Ned began, "you all know that I'm in the Secret Service, for you've been with me, some of you, at Panama, in China, and under the ocean, so we'll let the details go without explanation. I'm going to the mountains to look after a precious package stolen from Washington—from almost under the eyes of the president—three days ago!"

"Papers?" asked Jimmie. "You know we went to Lady Franklin bay after papers."

"And they think the mountaineers stole this package?" asked Oliver.

"Tell us what it was that was taken first!" insisted Frank. "I'm beginning to see a front-page story in this, right now!"

"The package stolen," Ned went on, with a smile, "was more precious than any bundle of papers could be! It wasn't of gold, silver, diamonds, or anything possessing that kind of value. It was of flesh and blood!"

"A child stolen!" cried Frank. "This goes to dad's sheet right now!"

"Boy or girl?" asked Oliver. "Age, please!"

"Boy," answered Ned. "A boy belonging to one of the ambassadors! Age seven!"

"But why should the mountaineers steal such a child?" asked Jimmie.

"I said the boy belonged to one of the ambassadors," Ned corrected himself. "I should have said he belonged at one of the foreign embassies."

"The son of one of the attaches?" asked Teddy. "That's strange! Why?"

"Teddy," reproved Jimmie, "you can ask more questions in a minute than a motion picture machine can take in a hundred years."

"The stolen boy is in no ways related to any one in this country," Ned answered, "yet his safety is of the utmost importance. It is up to us to find him."

"But why should the mountain men make a grab at a kid?" insisted Jimmie. "I've asked that question

numerous times now," he added, with a wrinkled nose.

"It is not believed that the mountain men know anything about the matter," Ned replied. "No one suspects them of taking the child. Mountain men are not up to that sort of thing, as a rule. They will make moonshine—some of them will—and may hide a counterfeiter, but they don't steal children!"

"Then who did steal him?" asked Frank. "Don't be so mysterious."

"I want the matter to sink deep into your alleged minds!" was Ned's smiling rejoinder, "and that is the reason I'm drawing the explanation out. It is thought the boy was stolen by some one who came over the sea to do the job—some one never before in this country."

"I twig!" Jimmie declared, skipping about the room. "The stolen boy is next of succession to some measly old throne! What? And he was sent out here to get him out of the zone of danger, and now he's been nipped?"

The boys looked at Ned with redoubled interest. It had been interesting, the very idea of going into the mountains in quest of an abducted child, but the thought of going after a boy who would one day be a king! That was exciting indeed!

"I can't tell you who the boy is." Ned went on, "but I can tell you that he must be found! The Secret Service men at Washington have a pretty good idea as to who got him, and they believe the criminals are not above committing the crime of murder. In a certain sense, this boy is in the way in the old country!"

"Oh, they wouldn't kill a kid like that!" Jimmie asserted.

"Wouldn't they?" demanded Teddy Green. "If you read up on history, you'll soon find out whether ambitious men will murder children who stand in their way! I half believe the boy was murdered at the very moment he was taken!"

"He has been seen alive since that time," Ned responded. "This is Thursday. He was taken on Monday, and was seen yesterday. Or a boy believed to be the prince was seen yesterday, on a launch on the Potomac river."

"Prince, eh?" cried Frank. "It is a prince, is it? Say, but won't dad be glad to hear about this? I'd like to write the headlines!"

"We may as well call him the prince," Ned laughed.

Before more could be said, a servant knocked at the door and Jack opened it so as to look out. In a moment he turned back inside with a flushed face.

"Say, boys," he said, "there's something strange going on here to-night!"

CHAPTER II

THE HOLE IN THE ATTIC FLOOR

Ned sprang to his feet in an instant and beckoned Jack to one side. The others gathered around, but Ned motioned them back.

"Let us find out exactly what Jack means before any remarks are made," he said.

"Well," Jack began, almost in a whisper, "the servant who came to the door said—"

"Wait a moment!" Ned requested. "Let us get this at first hand. Is the servant you refer to still out in the corridor? Look and see."

Jack opened the door an inch and looked out.

"Yes," he reported, facing Ned, with the door still ajar, "he is still there."

"Then ask him to come in here," Ned suggested, "and you, boys," he added, turning to the wondering faces at the other side of the apartment, "you get as close as you wish while this man is talking, but don't interrupt. It may be that we shall have to do something right soon. I reckon our hunt for the prince starts right here, in the Black Bear Patrol clubroom, in the heart of little old New York."

The servant Jack had beckoned to now entered the room and stood with his back to the door, looking from one boyish face to another. He was a heavily built, muscular fellow, evidently an Irishman, judging from his face and manner.

"Will you kindly come over here and sit down?" Ned asked.

The servant complied and the others gathered around him.

"Now," Jack began, "tell Ned what you just told me—about the man in the attic, and about the hole in the ceiling."

Every eye in the room was instantly turned toward the lofty ceiling, but nothing out of the ordinary was to be seen there.

"The hole he refers to," Jack, smiling, explained, "is not in sight. It is under the ornamental brass piece that circles the rod from which the chandelier hangs. It was made to listen at, and not to see through, I take it!"

"That makes a good starter," Ned smiled, "so go on."

"Half an hour ago," the servant began, "I was called to this floor by one of the maids, Mary Murphy it was, and she was that scared she looked like a bag of flour! She pointed to the staircase leading to the attic and asked me to go up there.

"So I says to her: 'Why do you want me to go up there? If there's a haunt there, or a burglar, or a man after one of the girls, why should I risk the precious neck of me, when it's the only one I've got, with no prospect of ever getting another in case this one was damaged beyond repair?' So she says to me, she says—"

"Never mind what she said," Ned interrupted, fearful of a long, involved dialogue between the two servants. "Tell me what you did."

"I went up the staircase, three steps at a jump, an' bumped the head of me on the edge of the door at the top of it. You can see the dent in my coco now!"

"And what did you find there?" asked Ned.

"There was a rug on the floor and a hole in the floor, and a twinkle of light shining into the attic from this room. Some one had been listening there!"

"You saw no one?"

"Never a soul! I'm that sorry I can't express it!"

"When were you in that attic before—the last time before to-night?"

"Late yesterday afternoon it was."

"Was there a rug in the middle of the floor at that time?" Ned went on.

"No more than there is a bold lion in the middle of this floor, sir."

"Well, what did you do after you got up there to-night?"

"I hunted around for the man who had been lying there listening to the talk in this room, but I didn't find him, sir."

"Did you ascertain where all the servants were at the time the listening must have been going on?" asked Jack, after a short pause.

"All but one," was the reply.

"And that one? Where is he now? That is, tell, if you know where he is?"

"I don't know, sir. He has left the house, I reckon—bag and baggage."

"Who was it?" demanded Jack, moving toward the door.

"Chang Chu, the Chink, may the Evil One get into his bed!"

"And then you came here and notified Jack?" asked Ned. "As soon as you learned that Chang Chu was not in the house?"

"Indeed I did—within a minute and a half."

"Where is this girl, Mary Murphy?" asked Ned, turning to Jack. "We must get hold of her right away. I want to hear her story of what she saw in the attic."

Jack went out of the room, but was back in a minute with the girl, a pretty, modest maid of about eighteen. She looked frightened at finding herself the center of interest, but was soon in the midst of her story.

"I went up to the attic to get a piece of cloth for a bandage, Sally having cut her hand with the bread knife. When I got to the door of that room I heard some one inside of it. I listened at the crack there is between the panel and the stile and heard footsteps, slow and soft like. I thought it was one of the maids, and opened the door quick, so as to give her a scare."

The girl paused and wiped her face with a white apron bordered with pink.

"Go on," Ned requested. "Tell us what you saw in the attic."

"It wasn't much, sir," was the agitated answer. "I saw just a flash of dark blue, coming at me like the lightning express, and then I was keeled over—just as if I had been a bag of meal, sir!"

"He bunted into you, did he?" asked Jack. "Who was it?"

"Indeed I don't know, sir," was the reply. "It was dim in the room, there being only the light from the hall as I opened the door. Then he came at me with such a bunt that it took the breath out of me body!"

"And what followed?" asked Ned.

"She wint down f'r the count!" chuckled the servant who had been first questioned.

"I did not!" was the indignant retort. "When I got up the man was still on the stairs leading to this floor, and I picked up the great shears which had tumbled out of me hand and heaved thim at him. I had brought the shears up to cut a bandage, sir."

"Did you hit him?" asked Jack with a smile. "Where are the shears?"

"I never went back after them!" answered the girl. "I'll go this minute."

"Wait," Ned said, "and I'll get them. Now, you say you saw a blue streak coming at you, head-on! Who wears blue clothes around the house?"

"Chang Chu, the Chink, sir."

"You saw him dressed in blue to-day?" asked Ned.

"All in blue he was!" the male servant interrupted, "with his shirt on the outside of his trousers, like the bloody heathen he is."

"And so you looked for him and failed to find him on the premises?" asked Jack.

"He's gone, bag and baggage," answered Terance, the coachman. "Bad luck to him!"

"Still, you don't really know that it was the Chinaman?" asked Ned.

"He was dressed like the Chink," was the reply. "He smelled like a saloon!"

"Does the Chinaman drink?" asked Ned, facing Terance. "Does he get drunk?"

"He does not," was the reply. "He doesn't know the taste of good liquor!"

"That's all," Ned concluded. "Now you two keep on looking for the Chinaman. He may be hiding in the house, or he may be at some of the dens such people frequent. You, Mary, look for him in the house, and you, Terance, see if you can learn where he usually went when he left the house."

"Pell street!" cried Jimmie. "Look in Pell street!"

"Or Doyers!" Jack exclaimed. "Look in the dumps in Doyers street."

The two went away, forgetting all about the shears which Mary had hurled at the mysterious man she had caught in the attic. Asking the boys to remain where they were, Ned went out to the staircase and secured the article. Taking it carefully by the handle, he returned to the room and held up one blade.

Jack looked at the blade casually at first, then cried out that there was blood on it, and that Mary had speared the sneak.

"Yes," Ned explained, "there is blood on it. Mary hit the fellow on the head with this blade. What else do you see on the steel?" he asked with a smile.

Jimmie looked and backed away in disgust. His freckled face was thrust out of the door for an instant, and they heard him calling to Mary, who, being in the kitchen, beyond sound of his voice, did not respond.

"What do you want of Mary?" demanded Jack. "Shall I call her?"

"She said it was the Chink, didn't she?" the boy asked. "Or, she said it was a man dressed like the Chink? Well, it wasn't the Chink."

Ned laughed and looked at the boy admiringly.

"How do you know that?" he asked. "Why are you so sure it was not the Chink?"

Jimmie looked up into Ned's face with a provoking grin.

"You know just as well as I do that it wasn't the Chink," he said. "Just you look on that blade again! Ever see a Chink with light brown hair?"

"Now, what do you think of that?" roared Jack. "Sometimes this boy, Jimmie, seems to me to be possessed of almost human intelligence!" The lads gathered closer around the shears, one blade of which Ned was still holding out for inspection. There was the blood, and there was the long, blonde hair!

"Hit him on the belfry!" Jimmie grinned. "Knocked off a shingle and brought away a piece of it! Now, why did the Chink run away? That's what I'd like to know!"

"Where did the man get the Chink's dress?" asked Oliver. "That's what you'd better be asking? Why did the Chink let him in and then loan him the dress?"

"I rather think that's why the Chinaman ran away!" laughed Ned. "You boys seem to have reasoned it all out. He might have let the sneak in and then let him have some of his own clothes to wear! And that will make trouble for us!"

"Do you think the fellow heard about the Camera Club trip, and the object of it?" asked Oliver. "If he was scared away half an hour ago he didn't learn much, for we hadn't begun to talk much about it at that time!"

"He may not have heard anything important," Ned replied, "but the fact that he was sent here to listen is significant! Some one in Washington knows that we have been chosen to search the mountains for the prince! Some one knows that we are going out as an innocent-looking Boy Scout Camera Club, but really to find the boy. Now, what will that person do to the Camera Club, after we get out into the mountains?"

"The question in my mind," Jimmie broke in, "is what we shall do to him!"

"I'm sorry the information about our going leaked out," Ned said, gravely. "As boy snapshot friends we might have been able to do things which the Secret Service men could not do. No one would pay much attention to a group of boys roaming over the mountains. But now I'm afraid our investigations will be all in the limelight!"

"Tell you what," Jimmie cut in, "suppose we find the Chink and make him point out the man who was in the house—listening?"

CHAPTER III

WHAT THE BOX CONTAINED

"All right," Oliver encouraged. "Let's go out and make a throw at finding him, anyway! He may be in the garage, or the carriage house right this minute."

Jimmie and Oliver rushed away to find Terance, the coachman, and undertake the search suggested, while Ned, Jack, Frank and Teddy sat at the open windows looking out on the street.

"Chang Chu was at liberty to go into the attic at any time?" asked Ned, tentatively.

"Oh, yes," Jack answered, "the other servants sent him about on errands. He is a handy man about the premises—or was, rather."

"Is he a man to do such a thing as we are accusing him of?" Ned then asked.

"I never thought so," was the puzzled reply. "I hope you don't think that he was beaten up by the man who secured his blue clothes! That would be tough on the fellow."

"I have been thinking of that," Ned responded, "and while the boys are looking for the Chinaman in the outbuildings suppose we look for him in the upper part of the house."

"But if the sneak could get into the upper part of the house without the use of the disguise," reasoned Jack, "he wouldn't need it at all, would he?"

"He might have been surprised while at work by the Chinaman," Ned suggested. "In that case he might have taken the clothes as an afterthought. Suppose we look and see?"

Leaving Frank and Teddy sitting by the window, looking out on a perfect May night, Ned and Jack climbed the staircase to the attic and entered the room directly over the Black Bear Patrol clubroom. It was a large room, more of a storeroom than an attic, with a hardwood floor and papered walls and ceiling.

A great sack upon which clothing and odds and ends of all descriptions were hanging stood at the south end of the apartment, while a long row of boxes and packing trunks occupied the floor at the north end. The rug, which had been thrown down on the floor near the hole bored through a plank, was still there where the servants had seen it. The listener had, at least, a good notion of personal comfort!

"Where was this rug taken from?" asked Ned.

"It was on the rack the last time I saw it," Jack answered.

"Was it clean at that time?" Ned continued, examining the rug with a glass.

"What do you mean by clean? It was dusty, of course, like everything else here."

"Were there any stains on it—stains like blood?" Ned went on, dragging the rug under the electric lights which had been switched on.

"Why, of course not. It was originally in the little den off the library, but father became tired of it and told Terance to bring it here."

"How long ago was that?"

"Oh, a month or two. I can't be exact as to the date, you know."

Ned handed his chum the glass and indicated a certain portion of the rug.

"What do you call that?" he asked. "What does it look like?"

"It looks like a spot of blood," Jack declared. "And it is wet, too! What do you make of this, Ned? Was Chang Chu attacked and killed by that sneak thief?"

"That is for us to find out," Ned answered. "At the present moment, it looks as if Chang Chu wouldn't be found on Pell or Doyers street. What is there in those boxes—the large ones sitting against the wall?"

"About everything, I take it. I never looked into them. Why?"

"We may as well see what they contain," Ned replied, advancing to the largest box and throwing up the cover. "What do you think now?" he asked, as a huddled figure stirred in the box and opened a pair of suffering eyes. "This is the Chink, I suppose?"

Before Jack could reply, Ned had the man out of the box, with the cords cut from his hands and feet, the cruel gag removed from his mouth. His blue blouse was gone! Chang Chu tumbled over on the floor when Ned tried to stand him on his feet. There was a small cut on his head.

"Chang velly much bum!" he said, with his hands on his stomach.

"Chang never forgets a word of slang," Jack laughed. "He will remember the slang word for anything when he forgets the real word! What did they do to you, Chang?" he continued, addressing the Chinaman.

Chang pressed his hands to his nose significantly and dropped his head back.

"Chloroform!" Ned declared, sniffing at the contents of the box.

The Chinaman could not describe the man who had attacked him. He had been alone in the attic, putting away old clothes, when he had been struck and seized from behind by a man he described as a giant for strength, stripped of his blouse, and lifted bodily into the box. There he had been bound, gagged and rendered unconscious by the use of the drug.

"The man who did it," mused Ned, "is an adept at crime, resourceful, daring. The chloroform would have attracted the attention of the servants at once if it had been administered in the open air. Then his taking the Chink's blouse as a disguise shows that he is quick to take advantage of his opportunities. A clever man."

"And he left no clue!" Jack complained. "Just our luck, Ned!"

"All we know is that he is tall, has light brown hair, and is very strong," Ned replied. "But there are ten thousand people in New York this minute who answer to that description."

"How do you know he is tall?" demanded Jack.

"When he lay on the rug," Ned explained, "he stretched out on his stomach to look through the hole, if he could. He couldn't; he could only listen, for the cut was made so as to be hidden by the ornamental brass piece that circles the rod from which the chandelier swings. The marks of his elbows and toes were on the soft fiber of the rug, showing him to be a man at least six feet tall."

Ned walked over to the large box again and bent over it.

"Crumbs!" he exclaimed, in a second. "Crumbs!"

"Then he must have brought a lunch up with him," Jack exclaimed excitedly. "There is no knowing how long he was here!"

"Some one in Washington has leaked!" Ned declared, angrily.

"Why Washington?" demanded Jack. "Why not New York?"

"Because no one in this city knows about our being engaged to hunt down the abductor. My instructions have all come in cypher, and some of them have, as you know, been addressed to this house. And there you are!"

Chang Chu arose limply, rubbing a small wound in his head from which blood had come, and tottered off toward the staircase. As he did so, Ned noticed that his pigtail was very black, very long, and very greasy.

"Did he take you by the cue?" asked the boy. "Did he pull your hair?"

"Velly much lough-neck pull—dam!" answered the Chinaman.

Ned went back to the box where the Chink had been hidden and began taking out the articles it held, slowly and one by one.

"The cloth he poured the chloroform on must be here," he said. "He would naturally throw it into the box before shutting down the cover, as there might still be enough of the drug in it to put the Chink to sleep."

"Here it is," Jack said, reaching into the box and lifting out a rag and smelling of it. "Here is the dope cloth, all right and pretty strong yet."

"That's it, all right," Ned answered. "A worn white handkerchief, eh?"

"Name or mark on it?" asked Jack, passing the cloth to Ned.

"Nothing of the sort," was the answer, "but there's something better. When the fellow pulled at the Chink's greasy pigtail he got his hand smeared with oil. Then he grasped this white cloth fiercely, and there you are! See! The mark of the thumb couldn't be plainer if it had been printed on. Observe the long cicatrice on the ball of the thumb? I'll take this down and photograph it."

"Tall, strong, blonde, scar on the thumb!" laughed Jack. "We are getting on."

"It would be interesting to know how he got into the house," Ned mused.

"If we could only catch him and shut his mouth," Jack muttered, "we wouldn't have such a rotten bad time in the mountains."

"It is not what he knows," Ned suggested. "It is what his master as Washington knows. We might put this chap under ten feet of earth, but the opposition from Washington would go right on."

"When was the child abducted?" asked Jack. "When and how?"

"He was taken from in front of the embassy early in the morning. The ambassador brought him out for a spin in his automobile and left him out in front a moment. When he went back to continue his morning ride the automobile and the boy were nowhere to be seen! This was before nine o'clock Monday morning. Yesterday, along about noon, the boy—or a lad very much resembling him—was seen by a lieutenant of infantry in a motor boat, speeding up the Potomac."

"Why didn't he catch him, then?" asked Jack.

"Because he did not know at that time that the prince had been kidnapped. The authorities kept everything quiet! I presume they thought the thief didn't know that he had committed a crime, and were afraid the newspapers would tell him about it!"

"Tell that to Frank!" laughed Jack. "He'll go up in the air!"

The boys found Jimmie and Oliver in the club-room when they went down. The garage and carriage house had been searched—in vain, of course, for the boys had encountered the Chinaman on his way down to the basement as they ascended the stairs, the elevator being closed for the night.

"I believe that Chink had something to do with it, all the same," declared Jimmie. "He ought to be watched every minute of the time!"

"Now, here's another point I don't understand," Jack said, going back to the conversation he had had with Ned in the attic. "Why do the authorities think the boy has been taken to the mountains?"

"Because that would be a natural place for the thieves to hide," Ned answered. "The mountains are easily within reach of Washington, and they are virtually inaccessible to known officers of the law—at least so it is reported. The mountains run from central Pennsylvania to central Alabama, a distance of about a thousand miles, and afford many desirable hiding places."

"Yes, and we're likely to get our crusts split down there!" Teddy grinned. "We will if they find out that we belong to the Secret Service!"

"The Potomac river rises in West Virginia," continued Ned, "and the prince may have been taken to the foothills in the launch he was seen in."

"Are we going in a motor boat?" asked Jimmie.

"We are going by rail as far as we can go," Ned answered, "and then take shank's horses for the wild country, with mules to tote the baggage. In the eastern part of West Virginia, we are likely to travel forty miles without seeing a cabin."

"Where do we get our eatings?" demanded Jimmie. "It makes me hungry to climb mountains. We'll have to have a relief expedition sent after us if we don't get plenty of eatings," he added, with a wink at Teddy.

"Plenty of game up there," Ned grinned. "Plenty of deer, turkeys, coon, rabbits, birds and bears! We

can dodge the game laws! Also a few wildcats are reported to have been seen there. And there is said to be plenty of moonshine in the caves, too. Oh, we'll have a sweet old vacation, boys. And we start tomorrow!"

CHAPTER IV

A CAMP IN THE MOUNTAINS

It was early June, and the members of the Boy Scout Camera Club were camped on a mountain top in West Virginia. They had spent about two weeks in making the trip to the point where they had established camp.

Three mules, divested of their burdens now, were "staked out" in a little corral fragrant with grass down near the timber line. The tent they had carried was a short distance below the summit, on the eastern slope, with packages and bags and boxes of provisions piled around it.

To the south lay Virginia, to the north, east and west stretched the mountainous district of West Virginia. Far below them ran the North Fork of the Potomac river.

What they saw was a wild and lonely country, with more deer, wild turkeys, and raccoons than human beings. On their hard and frequently delayed journey in they had passed cabins, surrounded here and there by rail fences, but there were none in sight from where they now stood.

The sun, a round ball of fire in the west, would be out of sight in half an hour, and then the desolate darkness of the mountains would surround them. A wild turkey called to its mate in the distance, and small creatures of the air fluttered about, as if determined to know what human beings were doing there, in their ordinarily safe retreat.

The boys had visited Washington the day following the incidents at the clubroom of the Black Bear Patrol, but had learned nothing of importance there. The launch in which the young prince had been seen had been traced up the river to the vicinity of Cumberland, but there the trail had ended.

"It is a case of needle-in-the-haystack," the Secret Service chief had said to Ned, on the morning of his departure for the mountains. "We have men looking over every inch of the large cities. We want you to rake those mountains with a fine-tooth comb! Personally, I believe that the prince is there."

"But," Ned had replied, "how are we to communicate with you in case we require more definite instructions?"

"You know what Sherman did when he left Atlanta?" laughed the chief.

"Why, he cut the wires," returned Ned, "so as not to have his movements hampered by orders from men who, not being on the ground, could not possibly know as much as he did of what ought to be done."

"That is what I want you to do!" the chief continued. "Cut the wires."

"But that is assuming a great responsibility," urged the boy.

"Very true, but I have an idea that you want to work in your own way, so go to it. A mess of lively boys running up and down the mountain sides looking for game and snap-shots ought not to arouse the suspicion of the thieves if they are there. Make friends with the mountain people if you can. They are naturally suspicious, but good as gold at heart."

That was his last talk with the chief. After that supplies had been bought and transported by rail to the nearest point, and there the mules had been bought and the difficult journey begun. They had just made their first permanent camp.

"I wouldn't mind living here a few years!" Teddy said. "It beats the hot old city! If I had plenty of reading matter and a full larder, I don't think I would ever go back. I wish Dad could step out of that Harvard thing and eat supper with us!"

The shrill scream of a mule now came up from the feeding ground below, and a commotion at the tent

showed that one of the animals was kicking up a row there.

"That's that long-eared Uncle Ike," Jimmie McGraw exclaimed. "I feel in my bones that I'm going to love that mule! He's so worthless! If he had two legs less he'd beat Jesse James to the tall timber in piracy! He won't work if you don't watch him, and he'll steal everything he gets his eyes on! Yes, sir, I feel that there's a common sympathy between that mule and me, yet I know that we'll have a falling out some day! He's so open and above-board in his mischief."

"Can you see what he's doing now?" asked Teddy.

"Why, I saw him knocking at the door of the tent, and I presume that by this time he is sitting in my chair picking his teeth, after devouring the bread! That sure is some highwayman, that mule, yet I feel that I'm going to love and admonish him!"

The boys dashed down the slope to the tent and found Uncle Ike, as Jimmie insisted on calling a tall, ungainly, raw-boned mule, chewing at a slice of ham which he had pilfered from a box by the side of the fire.

"There's one thing about Uncle Ike," Jimmie grinned, as Ned drove the animal away with a club. "He always looks like he had been sent for to lead an experience meeting! He'll put on a face as long as a cable to a freight train, and then he'll turn to me and wink one eye, as if explaining that it was all for a joke."

"That's your ham he's chewing, Jimmie!" Ned declared.

"I suppose so," the boy replied. "That's what you get by being brother to a long-eared mule that for cussedness has Becker's gunmen backed up a creek with the oars lost!"

While the mule was being restored to his companions, Jimmie and Teddy began getting supper. They had plenty of tinned goods, plenty of flour, potatoes, meal and ham and bacon. Still, they thought they ought to have something in the way of game.

"I saw a wild turkey back there," Teddy volunteered.

"And I saw a coon," Jimmie added.

"Is there any law on turkeys and coons?" asked Jack, who was trying to make the fire burn bright with lengths of green wood.

"There ain't no law of any kind up here," Frank insisted.

"Then we'll go and get a coon," Jimmie declared. "You boys get a red-hot fire and I'll have the bird here before Ned gets that mule tied up!"

"Guess I'll go along," Teddy suggested. "I never did like to have anyone else go to the trouble of getting my wild meat for me! I'll go along, and Frank and Ned and Oliver can get supper."

Without waiting for any affirmative replies from their companions, the two lads darted away, and were soon lost in a canyon which ran at right angles with the ridge much farther down. Frank and Oliver began piling dry wood on the fire.

"Those boys will be back here in time for breakfast—just about!" Frank commented, as the coffee water boiled and the bacon began sizzling in the pan. "If they get any supper here they'll have to cook it!"

Presently Ned came back from the little valley where the mules were feeding and took a field glass from the tent.

"What's up now?" Teddy asked, as Ned walked back to the ridge and looked down into the valley of the North Fork. "Ned must be seeing, things!"

Ned remained on the summit a long time, until the sun sank behind the range to the west and the valleys became ribbons of black between the lighter crests of the mountains.

Presently Frank scrambled up the yards of rugged, rock-strewn slope which led to the summit where Ned was standing, still with his field glass in his hand.

"Anything in sight over that way?" the boy asked, as he came to Ned's side.

"There is a column of smoke in the valley," Ned answered. "I thought at first that there were two, but

I may have been mistaken. Do you remember what two columns of smoke would have indicated?"

"Of course!" laughed Frank. "If I should become lost in woods or mountains, or anywhere, I'd build two fires and get wet wood to make smudge, good and plenty. That would mean that I was lost and needed assistance. That's the Boy Scout Indian signal for help. I remember when we saw it north of the Arctic Circle, don't you?"

"I won't be apt to forget it right away," was the reply.

The boys remained standing on the summit for some moments, although it was now too dark for them to distinguish objects in the valley below. All around the June night called to them with its silences and its sharp and sudden rasp of sounds. There were the mountains, brooding, heavy, mysterious, and there were the fleets of flying clouds reaching down to wrap their summits!

"It is simply great up here!" Ned exclaimed presently. "That is the only word that seems to express it—great!"

"Yes, it is fine for a change," Frank admitted, "though I don't believe in the wilds as a permanent thing! Everything in the mountains and forests seems to me to be crude and half done. This, I presume, is because the world isn't finished yet. Those who come to places like this catch the Creator with his sleeves rolled up, if that isn't a coarse way of saying it."

"I like it, just the same!" Ned declared. "It is glorious! It is life!"

"It is healthful so far as animal life goes," laughed Frank, "but what about mental life? There would never have been anything wonderful in the way of inventions—like the wireless, and the telephone, and the uses of electricity—if mankind had been content to live and die in the wilds! It is crude, as I said before, unfinished, out of line with all the decrees of art. I'll take the city for mine, with its marble buildings, its wonderful art galleries, its beautiful parks!"

"Say, you mooners!" came a voice from the camp below, "if you've got done surveying the beautiful black landscape, suppose you come down to supper?"

The boys went down to the tent to find Jimmie and Teddy still absent.

"There are two things we'll have to set aside time for," Ned declared, as he took a seat on the ground before the blaze, with a great plate of food in his lap. "We'll have to arrange for keeping Uncle Ike, the mule, out of mischief, and for keeping track of Jimmie and Teddy. Those boys will get lost in the mountains yet, and go hungry for a few days. That would be punishment enough for Jimmie—hunger!"

The boys sat by the campfire a long time, heaping dry wood on the blaze until they were obliged to widen the circle about it. There was only the light of the stars, looking down from a cloud-flecked sky, but there would be a moon shortly after ten o'clock.

"If the boys don't return before long," Frank broke out, after a moment of silence, "I'm going to take a searchlight and go out looking for them."

The boy expressed the thought which was brooding in the minds of them all. They were more than anxious for the safety of the two truants. Oliver arose and walked away from the fire up the slope, until his figure was out of sight, but shortly came back and sat down again, his face expressing impatience as well as anxiety.

"There's no reason why they shouldn't see this fire," he said. "I walked over the summit a bit to see if the light was reflected over there. It is. If anywhere within two miles, they ought to see this blaze or the glow from it. They're just doing this to make us worry. I'd like to get them by the neck, this minute," he added.

Uncle Ike, the mule, gave vent to a vicious scream at that moment, and Ned arose and started in the direction of the feeding ground. When he reached the spot he saw that the mules were agitated, weaving about on the tying lines in either fear or anger.

"Uncle Ike," Ned said, patting the ugly beast on the neck, "what is it about your sleeping chamber that you don't like? Or is it your supper you object to?"

Uncle Ike thrust his long ears forward and elevated his heels, as if kicking at some imaginary object back of him. Then Ned saw a figure moving in the darkness.

"Come out of that!" he called. "Why are you sneaking around here?"

The figure advanced toward the boy then—the figure of an old woman!

CHAPTER V

JIMMIE AND TEDDY MISS A MEAL

"I was scared to come up until I heard your voice," the old lady said, as she came close to Ned. "I didn't know you were only a boy."

The woman appeared to be very old. Her hair was white and her lean face was wrinkled and leathery with time and storm and exposure to the winds of the hills. Still, old as she seemed to be, she walked alertly, with the swinging grace of the true mountain woman. She was very plainly dressed in a one-piece gown of dark calico. Her head was not covered at all, and the white hair took on a tinge of gold from the distant campfire. Her black eyes were sharp, yet kindly in expression.

"Good evening, mother," Ned said, removing his cap as he greeted the old lady, "we didn't expect to meet ladies here. Do you live in this locality?"

"Quite a step," the old lady said, in a gentle, hesitating tone, "quite a bit down the slope is where I live. I wanted to know what the fire meant, and so I came up. You don't mind my being here, do you?"

"Glad to have you come!" Ned responded, truthfully. "If you care to come up to our camp we'll be glad to give you a cup of tea and whatever else you want."

"I'll be glad to get a cup of tea," the woman declared. "We don't get tea up here in the mountains—not very often. We don't have the money to pay for it, and, then it is such a long way to go after it. Yes, I'll go with you."

Ned noted that the woman did not speak the dialect of the mountains. He wondered how long she had lived there, and if she lived alone. She did not long leave him in doubt on these points, for she seemed anxious to talk.

"I'm Mary Brady," she said, as they ascended the slope toward the fire. "I came here years ago with my husband, Michael Brady, to live in peace. Mike was a good man when he was himself, but the saloon men of New York were always after him when he had any money. We came here to be rid of them."

"That was the correct thing to do, it strikes me," Ned said, for want of something better, as she seemed to expect some friendly comment.

"I don't know," she went on. "We meant it for the best—but there was the moonshine! I didn't know about the moonshine when we came here. All I thought of was to get away from Houston street! He fell one day and they brought him home dead."

Ned was strangely interested in this simple life history. The poor old woman living there, probably alone and in want, after such an ending to a hopeful plan!

"And you kept on here?" he asked. "Why didn't you go back to the city?"

"There was the boy," she answered. "He was ten when we came here. I didn't want him to get the thirst! After Mike died I lived here to keep him in the good path. He is a good boy, but when he was twenty they got him, too—the moonshiners!"

"And he left you?" asked Ned.

"He said he couldn't make anything of himself here, so he went to Washington. He's never come back, though I've always kept a home for him, and never ceased to look for him. He writes me now and then that he's coming home, but he doesn't come! When I saw your fire I thought he might be with you."

By this time they were at the camp, and Mary Brady was presented to the boys and made comfortable by the fire, with tea and canned fruit before her. She enjoyed the lunch immensely and looked the gratitude she did not speak.

"When did you hear from your boy last?" asked Frank, by way of keeping the conversation going. "Did he write from Washington? Was it to Washington you said he went?"

"It was Washington," was the reply. "He wrote me a month or more ago that he would be here with friends in June. I thought he might be with you. He has been married since he left home, and has a child, though his wife is dead."

"And he said he was thinking of bringing the child here?" asked Ned, glancing significantly at Frank. "Did he say that in his last letter?"

"Yes, that he was thinking of bringing the boy here. It is only a mite of a boy—not more than seven years old, he said. I'm anxious for him to come."

Jack and Oliver gathered closer about the old lady in order to hear every word that was spoken. One brought her more tea and the other filled the sauce dish with peaches. Ned motioned to them to remain silent.

"And so you expect him to drop down on you any time?" Ned asked.

"Yes, my son and the boy. He's a cute little chap, Mike says. Mike was named for his father, and the lad's name is Mike, too. I'm anxious for him to get here. And I'm wondering whether he's light and blonde, with brown hair and blue eyes like his father, or dark, like my side of the family.

"What do you make of it?" Jack whispered to Oliver.

"What do I make of what?" demanded the other.

"Of the old lady and her three Mikes?" replied Jack, scornfully. "Have you been asleep all this time?"

"I was waiting for you to express an opinion," Oliver declared. "Do you think it possible that they would change the name of a prince of the royal blood to Mike?"

"So you've caught on, at last!" whispered Jack. "Do you really think we've tumbled on a streak of luck at the send-off?"

"I don't know," was the hesitating reply. "We'll have to cultivate this old lady."

"Sure thing!"

"Did she say where her cottage is?" asked Oliver, directly. "We ought to verify her story, it seems to me. I'd like to hear Ned's opinion!"

"Do you remember what she said about Mike II. having blonde hair and blue eyes?" asked Jack, presently.

"Sure!" was the answer. "That made me sit up and take notice. It brought back to my memory the light brown hair on the bloody blade of the shears."

"Same here," announced Jack. "If this Mike II. comes here we'll have to find out if he has a cicatrice on the right thumb and a scar on the head, a scar which might have been brought about by a pair of shears thrown by a frightened maid in the city of New York!"

"Think of a crown prince being called Mike!" chuckled Oliver.

"Ned didn't say it was a crown prince!"

"He might just as well have said it! He didn't dispute me when I asked if it was a crown prince who had been abducted."

"If Jimmie and Teddy don't return soon," Jack said, changing the subject, "we'll have to start the Boy Scout Camera Club out looking for them."

"They'll be back when they get hungry!" laughed the other.

But Jimmie and Teddy were still away when the moon rose over the ridge to the east. Mrs. Brady was still by the campfire. She appeared to delight in the companionship of the boys. Having lived alone for years, she would have been delighted at any companionship whatever, but the boys were full of life and vitality, they were sympathetic, and, besides, they were from her old home—New York!

As the moon showed her round face over the summit of the range to the east she arose and stretched out a withered hand to Ned.

"I'm going," she said. "I've had a pleasant evening. You don't know how much it has been to me to sit

here and talk with you! If you'll come down to my cabin some day I'll try to make it pleasant for you!"

"Some day," laughed Ned. "What do you say to my going right now? Of course I've got to see you home! Couldn't think of letting you go away alone."

"I've walked these mountains night and day for more than twenty years," faltered the old lady, "and I'm not afraid now!"

"You don't object to my going?" asked Ned.

"I'm awful glad to have you go," was the reply. "But you'll find it a long walk, there and back," she added.

"If it is too far for me to walk back," Ned laughed, "you may give me a bunk on the floor! Anyway, I'm going to see you home!"

As the boy spoke he beckoned to Frank to step to one side with him.

"Of course this looks all straight, on the face of it," he said, when the two were alone together, "but one can never tell. We've got to be pretty careful, for we are in a strange country, and are here for a purpose which may be resented by the mountaineers. We can't afford to take any chances."

"Do you suspect the old lady?" asked Frank, in amazement.

"I don't know what to think," was the hesitating reply. "The first night we spend in a permanent camp, up she comes with a story about a son being about to bring in a boy of seven for her to mother! Then, as if that wasn't enough of a bait for us to snap at, she goes on to say that the son is blonde, with light brown hair and blue eyes. Looks like we were being led on!"

"You bet it does," Frank replied. "Jimmie and Teddy have disappeared, and this may be a frame-up, and so I wouldn't go off alone with her. And, look here," Frank went on, "do you believe Uncle Ike would have kicked, and screamed, and made a row generally, if only this old lady had approached him? Do you, now?"

"She might have frightened him," Ned replied, "for he may not be used to women. Still, she may have had some one with her! I was thinking that Uncle Ike sounded a warning on slight cause," he added.

"Well, if I were you, I wouldn't go away alone with her," advised Frank. "Let me go with you if you insist on going."

"Of course I've got to go now," Ned went on. "I've promised her, and she is expecting me to go. But I'll tell you what you may do. You can wait until I have gone some distance and then follow on behind, not so as to be seen by any other person trailing us, but still close enough to be available in case of trouble."

"All right," Frank agreed. "I'll keep back far enough to see any one who might be following the two of you! I wish Jimmie was here! He'd be just the one to go with me. And there's always something doing when Jimmie is around!"

"I'm worried about those boys!" Ned answered. "I'm going to keep a sharp lookout for them, all the way to the cabin."

"There's something wrong," Frank hastened to say. "They never would have remained away from camp like this. And without supper, too! Jimmie is particular to be on hand when it comes to eating time. There! There's Uncle Ike talking in his sleep! I wonder what's eating him now? Shall I go and see?"

"No," Ned said, hastily, seizing Frank by the arm. "Don't even look in that direction. Watch Mrs. Mary Brady!"

The old woman's face was turned toward the spot where the mules were staked out, her figure was straight, tense, alert. She appeared to be listening and watching for some agreed-upon signal from the corral. Ned moved over toward her cautiously.

Once the old woman moved, involuntarily, toward the mules, but she drew back in a moment and stood, waiting, with her eyes on the boys, now in a little group not far from the spot where she stood.

CHAPTER VI

SIGNALS IN THE CANYON

Jimmie and Teddy passed over the summit to the west of the camp and took their way down a difficult incline toward the headwaters of the Greenbrier river. They traveled some distance, walking, sliding, creeping, before they came in sight of a copse which appeared to be worth looking over for wild game.

"I don't know about this wild turkey business," Teddy said, as the boys stood on an elevation lifting above the patch of timber. "If I've got it right, wild turkeys are precious birds in West Virginia."

"I never once thought of that!" Jimmie exclaimed. "Why, we won't have any fun hunting at all! I wonder if there is a closed season for coons?"

Teddy took out a memorandum book and turned to an insert pasted on the inside of the cover. Dropping to the ground, so as not to attract the attention of any natives who might be near by, he read the slip by the aid of his electric searchlight.

"Open season for wild turkeys in West Virginia from October fifteen to December one," he read. "Now, what do you know about that? Rotten, eh?"

"I guess we can get one to eat, all right," grumbled Jimmie. "Who's going to know anything about it if we do, I'd like to know? Away off here in the mountains!"

"I presume there are constables and justices up here who would be glad to soak us for fifty or a hundred apiece!" Teddy grinned. "I reckon we'd better eat hens, and coon, and fresh fish—if we can get them! And deer! We get no venison steaks!"

"Not this season!" Jimmie grunted. "They'd take great joy, as you say, in getting us into jail and extracting all our vacation money! I'm going to take photographs of the West Virginia game laws. A man is about the only creature one can shoot down here during the summer and get away with it! I'll have Frank put that idea in his dad's newspaper!"

"We've got enough to eat, anyway," laughed Teddy. "The question before the house right now is how are we going to get down into that patch of trees?"

"The laws of gravity will take us down!" answered Jimmie. "Just step off this ledge and see if I'm not right. What do we want to go down there for, anyway, if we can't shoot a wild turkey after we get there? I'm going back to camp."

The night was falling fast, and stars were showing between masses of clouds. The boys had traveled farther from the camp than they had intended, and the return journey was all up hill. They surveyed the prospect gloomily.

"I could eat the top off one of the mountains!" Jimmie declared, as they turned to make the climb. "I never was so hungry in my life. Wish we were back in camp!"

Teddy, who had turned to look down into the valley, now caught Jimmie by the arm and pointed downward, where a low-lying ridge jutted out of the general slope and made a small canyon between itself and the body of the mountains, a canyon in which a trickle of water showed.

"Do you see that column of smoke?" he asked, as Jimmie turned.

"There must be a camp there," Jimmie exclaimed. "I thought we would be all alone up here for a time—until we got a line on the men who stole the prince."

"Wait a minute!" Teddy answered. "There! Now do you see two columns of smoke?"

The two columns lifted skyward for only a second, then died down.

"That's the Boy Scout signal for help!" Jimmie commented. "I wonder what shut it off so quickly? It would be strange if we found Boy Scouts here in the mountains—eh?"

"According to all reports," Teddy answered, "you boys found Scouts in all parts of the world, even in China and the Philippines! If it is a Scout making that Indian sign for help, he'll get the smoke going again before long. There they are!"

The two columns of smoke were in the air again, ascending from the canyon between the

mountainside and the outcropping ridge. Directly a gleam of fire was seen.

"That's the call for help, all right!" Jimmie cried. "What shall we do about it?"

"We ought to go right there. The boy may have been injured in a fall, and may be starving! We ought to get there as soon as possible."

"Without going back to camp to tell the boys?" asked Jimmie. "We have been gone a long time now, remember. They will be worrying about us pretty soon."

"But we ought to go right now!" insisted Teddy. "The boy may be in trouble."

"Something else coming!" cried Jimmie, then. "See that blazing stick working overtime? He's going to talk in the Myer code! Now count right and left."

"There's one to the right!" Teddy said. "I've lost track of the code already."

"No. 1 motion is to the right," Jimmie quoted from the wig-wag lesson he had learned on first becoming a Boy Scout. "It should embrace an arc of ninety degrees, starting at the vertical and returning to it without pause, and should be made in a plane exactly at right angles to the line connecting the two stations."

"And No. 2 motion is the same, only on the left side. And three is the same, only the signal goes to the ground and comes back to the vertical! Now I've got it! Then he wig-wags again I'll tell you what he says. You read, too, and see if we agree."

"One to the right!" cried Jimmie, "and two to the left!"

"That means H," Teddy translated. "What comes next?"

"No. 1 and then No. 2," replied Jimmie. "That's plain enough!"

"It stands for E," Teddy went on, "and I know what the next letter will be, too."

"No. 2, No. 2, No. 1! I knew it! That is L. The other will be P!"

"No. 1, No. 2, No. 1, No. 2!" read Teddy, following the flight of the blazing stick as it moved through the darkness. "That's L, and the word is HELP!"

"And here we go to see about it!" Jimmie decided, moving down the slope. "The boy can't be very far off. I'd like to know how a Boy Scout got lost out here."

"We may become lost ourselves," laughed Teddy, "if we don't look out where we are going. I wouldn't know where to head for if I wanted to go back to camp right now."

"All we would have to do would be to climb the mountain," Jimmie declared.

"There's more than one summit," persisted Teddy. "We'd better get a line on something to guide ourselves by when we go back."

"We came straight west," the other said, "and if we get lost the moon will tell us which way to go—if it doesn't rise in the west down here!"

The wig-wag code below was still in evidence, always repeating the same word, "Help." The boys hesitated no longer, but went rattling down the slope at a speed which spoke well for their balancing powers! As they entered the little canyon from the north, Jimmie halted and settled back on a rock, his hand on Teddy's shoulder.

"Do you suppose he heard us coming down the slope?" he asked.

"He must have been deaf if he didn't," was the reply. "We brought about half the mountain down with us, it seemed to me. Of course he heard us."

"Well, we ought to have been more cautious," Jimmie declared.

"I guess we aren't likely to frighten him away," suggested Teddy.

"But this may be a frame-up," warned the other. "Look here! The people who sent that spy to Jack's house knew the Boy Scouts were going out to look for the prince, didn't they? We have never seen or heard anything of them since that night, but there is good reasons for believing that they have had us under surveillance."

"And you think this may be a trap for us?" asked Teddy.

"It may be," was the reply. "If they wanted to trap us, they would go about it in just about this way, if they were wise, wouldn't they? Sure they would."

"Then we'd better sneak up to that campfire and find out what is going on before we show ourselves," suggested Teddy. "We ought to have come down here as softly as two flakes of snow? What? We'll know better then to make so much noise next time!"

"There may be no next time," Jimmie advised, as they moved down the canyon, in the middle of which ran a small stream of water, a rivulet connecting with the Greenbrier river farther to the south and west. It was now quite dark, and they were obliged to feel every step of their way, for there were numerous crevices in the floor of the canyon.

Pressing on, slowly, cautiously, their weapons within easy reach, the boys finally turned a little angle of rock and came within sight of a camp-fire not far away.

"There!" Jimmie whispered. "I had a notion that we should find more than one here. Why did the Scout wig-wag for help when there were three husky men with him?"

Teddy opened his eyes wider, but attempted no solution of the puzzle.

"There's a little chap sitting alone by the fire," Jimmie went on, peering through his field-glass, "and there are three men gathered in a huddle on the other side of the fire. They all look like they were listening for something."

"I don't wonder—the way we came down the slope!" The other grinned.

While the boys watched one of the men strode over to where the boy was sitting and, evidently, began questioning him. The watchers were too far away to hear any conversation between the two. Presently the boy sprang up and started to run.

In a moment the heavy hand of the man was on his shoulder and he was dragged back to the fire and dumped down like a sack of grain. He lay quite still for a moment.

"I'd like to know what that means!" Teddy whispered. "That's brutal!"

"That gives me faith in the boy!" exclaimed Jimmie.

"What's the answer to that?" demanded Teddy.

"They probably saw him doing the wig-wag!" was Jimmie's reply.

"They're threatening him."

"And they may have been beating him up for doing it? That may be."

"And, again," the other continued, "that may be a little rehearsal all for our benefit! There are men in the world sharp enough to put up just that kind of a bluff."

"That's very true," was the reply. "We've got to lie here until we know what it all means. We can't go away and leave the little fellow without knowing more about the signals. Those men may be moonshiners. We might get a reward!"

"We'll be lucky if we don't get into jail!" Jimmie grunted. "If we don't, we'll get into an infirmary for the hungry! If I have to lie on this rock much longer with nothing to eat I'll have to be carried back on a stretcher!"

"You always were the brave little man with the knife and fork!" grinned Teddy.

The four figures by the fire remained in the old order for a long time, the men grouped together, the boy alone on the side of the blaze next to the watchers.

"I wish I could get up to him?" Teddy said, as if requesting advice on the question of a nearer approach to the boy. "I'd like to see if it is the prince!"

"The prince isn't a Boy Scout!" declared Jimmie. "Besides, this boy is too old to be the prince! The prince is only seven years old—just a little baby."

"Anyway, I'm going to make a sneak up there," insisted Teddy.

Before Jimmie could stop him he was away, crawling on hands and knees through the heavy shadows

of the cliffs which lay about the camp-fire. Jimmie watched him anxiously for a moment and then started to follow him. The two were not far away from the lad, and were thinking of doing something to attract his attention when a stone rolled into a crevice with a great bumping sound. The boys dropped down on their faces and waited, their hearts beating like trip-hammers as the men around the fire sprang to their feet.

"What was that?" demanded a hoarse voice. "Who is out there?" he added, turning to the darkness beyond. "I'm going to shoot out that way in a minute!"

"I like this!" whispered Jimmie. "This is some adventure! What?"

CHAPTER VII

A MINT IN THE MOUNTAINS

"Why," the old woman said, stepping closer to the group of boys, "that's Buck!"

A heavily-built man with a scraggly beard stepped away from the corral and approached the group by the fire, his stubby fingers twining in and out of his unkempt whiskers as he walked along, his eyes fixed on the fire and those about it.

"That's Buck Skypole," the old woman went on, as the advancing figure stopped. "I didn't know you was to come after me Buck," she added, speaking to the new-comer.

"I 'lowed you'd be right skeered of the dark," the man answered, "so I 'lowed I'd come on up an' tote you home."

He rubbed his left thigh carefully for a moment and then spoke to Ned.

"That's a right pert mule," he said.

"Did Uncle Ike kick you?" asked Jack, nudging Oliver in the ribs with an elbow. "We'll have to wallop him a bit, if he did."

"I reckon I ain't got no mad at the creeter," Buck replied. "A man must keep out'n reach of a mule. Seein' the mule's got only a few feet of play in his laigs, he ought to be able to do that! No; I ain't goin' to recommend no beatin's f'r the mule!"

"Buck," said the old lady, "these are boys from New York, my old home! They're taking pictures of the mountains."

"They c'n take the mountains, too!" Buck laughed. "F'r all me!"

"I thought Mike might have come in with them," the old lady went on. "He isn't here, but I've had a real pleasant time with the boys. I'm much obliged to you, lads," she added, facing Ned. "I'm grateful for the tea and the fruit. They're rare here."

"I reckoned you wouldn't find Mike here," Buck chuckled, "f'r while you was gone a message come from Mike. He can't get here now, but he's sent the kid!"

"He has?" cried the woman, joyfully. "Do you mean to tell me, Buck, that the boy is right down there this minute, in my cabin?"

"Sure I do," was the reply, "an' a bright little feller he is."

"Give us a guess on that," whispered Jack to Oliver. "Is the kid in the cabin Mike III., or is he the prince? Give you three guesses!"

"I give it up!" the boy whispered back.

"Why didn't you bring the kid along with you?" asked Frank. "We all want to see him. His grandmother has been telling us about him."

"It's a right smart walk for a little one!" Buck answered.

"You're welcome to come down and see him," Mrs. Brady said. "I'd be proud to give you all a snack in the morning."

"Suppose we do go and see the kid?" asked Oliver. "I'm curious to know all about the little shaver!"

"I'm for it!" Frank exclaimed.

"And I'll be the first one there!" Jack put in. "I always liked kids—from Washington! No one will molest the camp while we are gone."

"I wouldn't leave it alone, if I were you," advised the old lady. "There's a heap of bad people come into the mountains sometimes. Don't all leave at once."

"That's good advice, mother," Ned said. "Two will go and two will remain here. In a short time the two out in the hills will return, and then there will be a good-sized guard for what little stuff we have."

"All right," Jack declared, "if any one is going to stay here, it will be me! Come to think of it, I'm too blamed tired to walk another step to-night. Eh, Oliver?"

"I'll remain here if you do," the boy replied. "I'm worn out up to my knees now, climbing mountains. And, besides, Uncle Ike would be lonesome without me away!"

"Very well," Ned agreed. "That leaves Frank and me for the visit. When Jimmie and Teddy come, put them to bed without supper!"

"You'll know when they come, then," laughed Jack, "for Jimmie going to bed without supper will be a noisy proposition. You can hear him for ten miles."

"I'm anxious about the boys," Ned went on. "I'm afraid something is wrong with them. They should have been back here hours ago."

"You remember the Indian signal for help you saw in the valley?" asked Frank, in a moment. "Well, they may have seen that, too, and taken a notion to find out about it. They went in that direction when they left the camp."

"That may be the reason for their delay," Ned answered. "We should have attended to that signal ourselves," he added. "There may have been some one in serious trouble down there. I hope the boys did go—that is, if nothing happens to them because of their going. Boy Scouts should assist each other at every opportunity."

After a little more talk regarding the boy who had been sent to Mary Brady by her son in Washington, and after Buck had been given a couple of cups of steaming hot coffee, the four started down the slope to the west.

"Did any one say how far it was to the old lady's cabin?" asked Jack of his chum, as they nestled down by the fire, the mountain air being cold, even in June.

"Buck said it was three whoops and a holler!" almost shrieked Oliver. "Do you know what he meant by that?"

"I don't know," answered Jack, "but I should think, from what she said, that the boys won't feel like walking back up the mountain to-night. Therefore, if Jimmie and Teddy don't come, well be alone."

"I wonder if they would know the prince if they met him in the road?" laughed Oliver. "That kid down there is just as much the prince as I am. What did they steal the kid for, anyway?"

"Politics!" yawned Jack.

"What did they send him over here for, anyway?"

"Politics!" with another yawn.

"Aw, go on to bed!" grinned Oliver. "I'll build up another fire, to serve as a sort of lighthouse for the boys and sit up for them."

So Jack went into the tent, pulled down a great heap of blankets, drew off his coat and shoes and stockings, and was soon asleep in a neat little nest!

Oliver sat by the fire for a short time and then went up to the summit to look over the valley. The moon was rising now, and he could see the four who had recently left the camp working their way over a ridge to the south and west.

Straight down, in a canyon made by an outcropping ledge of rock, he saw a faint light, as from a campfire which had been allowed to die down.

"The mountains are full of people to-night!" he mused. "If I thought I could make Uncle Ike behave himself, I'd ride down there and see who those campers are."

The boy stood undecided for some moments, then his eyes opened wider and he moved downward toward the fire. He was thinking of the Boy Scout signals for help which Ned and Frank had mentioned seeing!

"I wonder if Jack would go down there with me!"

When he reached the camp Jack was in the land of dreams, and he decided not to awake him. He could go alone just as well!

He went on down to the feeding ground and presented Uncle Ike with a lump of sugar. The mule thanked him with wiggling ears and dived a soft muzzle into his coat pocket for another lump.

"Not until you come back, Uncle Ike!" Oliver explained. "If you do a good job traveling up and down the mountainside, you're going to have another piece of sugar when we get back!"

The boy saddled and bridled the animal, mounted, and urged him away from the feeding ground. Uncle Ike, thinking his day's work finished, objected to being put into harness again, and reared and kicked until Oliver was obliged to dismount and bribe him with more sugar.

"Will you go now, you fool mule?" he asked.

Uncle Ike finally decided to go, and his sure feet were soon pressing the slope toward the campfire. Oliver struck the canyon just about where Jimmie and Teddy had entered it.

He left Uncle Ike there and advanced toward the campfire on foot. There were only a few embers left, and no signs of the fires which had sent up the two columns of smoke! There was no one in sight from the place where Oliver first came in direct view of the blaze.

He stepped along cautiously, listening as he walked, and soon came to a second fire. This, too, was burned down low. Beyond this he saw the dark opening of a cave in the outcropping ridge.

As Oliver stepped toward it, thinking the boys might have taken refuge there for the night, he stumbled over something which rolled under his foot and nearly fell to the ground. When he stooped over to see what it was that had tripped him, he saw an electric flashlight lying before him.

"The boys have been here, all right," he mused. "Now, I wonder if this was taken from them, or whether they lost it, or whether it was placed here to mark the trail? Either supposition may be the correct one!"

The question was settled in a moment, for a voice which he knew came out of the darkness.

"Found it, eh? Give it to me!"

"Jimmie!" whispered Oliver.

"Get in here out of the light of the fire!" Jimmie whispered, "and bring the electric in with you. Come on in, and see what we've found."

The opening in the ridge was a shallow one, Oliver discovered as he entered it. To his surprise he found three lads there instead of the two he had been looking for.

"You saw the fires?" asked Jimmie, in a low tone.

"Of course I did. Why didn't you come to camp?"

"This is the boy that built the Boy Scout signals!" Jimmie said, bringing the other forward. "His name is Dode Surratt, and he's a bold, bad boy, being at present lookout for a gang of counterfeiter!"

"That's a nice clean job," Oliver replied. "Where are the counterfeiter?"

"At work in a hole in the ground. Hear the click of their machines? They are turning out silver dollars

faster than we can spend them. We hid around until they went to work, then came up to talk with Dode."

Jimmie pointed to a crevice in the rock and invited Oliver to look. A lance of light came up into the cave, and the boy's eyes followed it. He could see a square room below, with a bright fire burning at one end and figures moving about it.

"Making counterfeit money, are they?" asked Oliver.

"That's what they're doing! We were just thinking of getting out when you came. Dode wants to go with us, but we tell him to remain with the gang until they can be rounded up by the officers."

Dode started to make some remark, but Jimmie stopped him.

"They haven't got any consideration coming from you, have they?" he asked. "They stole you, didn't they? They brought you here from Washington to make a thief of you, didn't they?"

"And they beat you up for making the signals, too," Teddy put in. "And they're coming out now!" he added. "So we'll all git—but Dode!"

CHAPTER VIII

UNCLE IKE PRESENTS HIMSELF

Mrs. Brady and Buck walking together, Ned and Frank discussed the situation thoroughly as they descended the mountainside.

"This may be a frame-up," Ned observed, "but it is up to us to see it through. The boy who has just been brought in may be the prince, or he may be the grandson, and we are here to get the answer."

"Or there may be no boy at the cabin at all!" Frank suggested. "The conspirators know that we are in the mountains for the purpose of looking up the prince. What better plan than the one now working could they have settled on? If they are sharp at all, they would understand that a story of a child brought on from Washington would set us in motion—would be likely to get us into a trap!"

They scrambled on down the slope for some distance, too busy keeping upright to do any talking, then Frank went on.

"You know very well that I'm no prophet of evil, Ned, but it looks to me that we have betrayed our mission here by taking such an interest in the child. Would a lot of boys looking for snap-shots trail off in the night to see a boy when they might have taken a look at him the next day?"

"If I know anything about human nature," Ned answered, "those two people ahead of us are honest. If it is a frame-up, they are not in it."

"Anyway," Frank went on, "I'm glad the plans were changed by the arrival of Buck. It is much better for us to meet whatever is coming to us side by side than to have me sneaking back in the distance!"

Ned agreed to this, and the two quickened their pace in order to come up with Buck and Mrs. Brady, who were now turning from the west to the south, keeping along the slope of the mountain. Directly they came to a narrow trail which led into a green valley.

Following this, they soon came to a couple of acres of cleared land, in the middle of which stood a rough cabin of peeled logs. A dim light came from a square window by the door, and there came from the interior the sound of a man's voice humming a song.

The woman drew up and looked suspiciously at Buck.

"Who is that?" she asked. "You didn't tell me my son came, too."

"No," replied Buck, "I didn't, because, you see, Mike didn't come! He sent this young fellow in with the kid, bringing word that he would be along later."

"And who is it?" demanded the woman.

"A likely young chap," was the reply. "He asked me to get you home to-night, because he wants to leave early in the morning."

"He won't leave early in the morning if he sees us here," Ned whispered to Frank. "If that is the prince in there, the man with him may be the fellow who made his way into Jack's house and listened from the attic."

"What are we going to do about it, then?" asked Frank, anxiously.

"We've got to meet him," Ned replied. "Whoever he is, he knows from Buck that Mrs. Brady went up the mountain to visit a camp of strangers. We've got to go in and face him! I wish we had kept away from here to-night."

Mrs. Brady and Buck now opened the door and entered the cabin, the boys close behind them. A log fire was burning on a stone hearth, and a tall, rather handsome young man with light hair and blue eyes was sitting in a homemade chair before it.

He stirred the fire to a brighter blaze as they entered, and the leaping flames disclosed a dark-haired child of perhaps seven years asleep on a bed in a corner of the small room. Without speaking, without so much as a glance at the visitor, the old lady walked swiftly to the bed and took the child in her arms.

The boy opened his eyes and started to cry, but she quieted him with low words and sat down on the edge of the bed, swinging him back and forth with a motion of her arms and shoulders. The man at the fire glanced sharply at the woman and then turned his eyes to the boys, now standing not far from the bed.

"The little dear!" the woman cried, mothering the child. "He's all tired out with his long journey!"

"This is the man that brung the boy in," Buck said, pointing to the figure by the fire. "A mess of a time he must have had of it, too."

"You are the grandmother?" asked the stranger. "Yes, I understand. And are these boys your sons, too?" he added, nodding at Ned and Frank, suspiciously.

"Only New York boys spending a vacation in the mountains," Ned said, answering the question. "Mrs. Brady came to our camp tonight looking for her son and we came home with her. We are looking for good pictures," he added.

The stranger pointed to the old lady, sitting with the sleeping child on her breast.

"There is one," he said.

"Yes, and I'm sorry I haven't my camera with me."

"Are you thinking of remaining in this section long?" the visitor asked.

"We can't say," laughed Ned. "We may move on to-morrow, and may stay here a week."

The man's suspicions seemed to have vanished. He talked frankly with the boys, and occasionally addressed a word to the old lady. He gave her, briefly, a good report of her son's progress in Washington, and handed her a roll of bank-notes.

"He is coming here himself soon," he said, "and he will bring more. He is doing very nicely there."

Ned was wishing the boy would waken when the old lady arose from the bed and laid him gently down. He stirred uneasily in his sleep and she stood by his side, smoothing his dark hair away from his forehead.

"He favors my side of the family, being dark," she said. "The Stileses are all dark. If one of you boys will sit with him a moment," she added, with mountain hospitality, "I'll get you all a snack. It was a long road over the mountains."

Ned accepted the invitation eagerly and sat down by the child. The face was dark and slender, the eyebrows turned up a trifle at the outer comers.

"Is it Mike III., or is it the prince?" he was asking himself when the boy awoke and sat up in bed with a jerk.

"What's comin' off here?" he demanded, rubbing his sleepy eyes. "What kind of a bum game is this? I want my daddy."

The visitor by the fire laughed.

"He's up in city slum talk," he said. "And he's learned something of French, too, knocking around with the boys in school."

"I can talk Franch like a native," asserted the boy.

"And what else?" asked the man by the fire.

"Any old thing!" boasted the child. "They keep me at books all the time. I'm glad I'm with grandmother in the hills. Are you my grandmother?" he asked, pointing to the old woman, now bending over the fire.

"Yes, deary," was the reply. "I'm going to take care of you now."

"I'm glad!"

The boy tumbled back on the bed again and closed his eyes. Frank looked at Ned significantly.

"There's no doubt about it!" his eyes said. "This child is Mike III."

The old lady made hot corn bread and brewed a pot of mountain tea. The boys were not at all hungry, but managed to eat and drink moderately. Then Ned arose.

"We've got to be on our way," he said. "It will be morning before we get back to camp if we don't start pretty soon!"

When the boys, after a cordial good night from Mrs. Brady and Buck, left the cabin the visitor followed them out. Ned stopped breathing, almost, as he took him by the arm.

"There's one thing I want you to explain to the old lady after a time," the man said. "I suppose I might do it myself, but I prefer to let her know from personal observation something of the case first. That boy is not exactly right."

"Not mentally sound, you mean?" asked Ned. "He appeared to be all right just now."

"Oh, he's bright enough," answered the other, "but he's been ill and has been in a hospital at Washington, and has been cuddled and humored so long that he likes to boss! Not good people to boss, the attendants in a hospital, you will say, but I guess they let this kid have his way. When he was delirious they told him all sorts of fairy tales about kings and princes, and he actually thinks some of them are true. If he breaks out in any of his tantrums before you leave, kindly tell the old lady what I am telling you, will you?"

Ned almost gasped! So the boy was likely to talk of kings and princes! He was likely to become masterful in his manners!

"I may have to change my mind," he thought. "This may be the prince, and not Mike III. But the boy's English, and there's his street slang! What about that? I reckon that we have a job on our hands!"

The two stood talking together in the moonlight for some moments, the stranger evidently resolved to make a good impression on the boys, while Frank walked on along the trail, looking back now and then to see if his chum was coming.

"This boy's father," the man went on, "has permitted him to have his own way about everything. That was a mistake, of course, but he is trying to rectify it now by placing him under the care of his grandmother, who, if I mistake not, will see that he is properly disciplined."

"It has been a long time since the father left here," Ned suggested.

"Yes, along time."

"He is doing well in Washington?"

"Yes, he is connected with the State department."

Ned made a mental note of that!

"And is receiving a fair salary?" he asked.

"Oh, yes; he's doing nicely, far better than his mother has any notion of."

Here was more food for thought. Why had the father delegated the pleasant duty of taking the boy back to the old mountain home to another if he had been situated so that he might have taken the journey himself?

"Is it the prince, or is it Mike III.?" he kept asking himself.

While they stood there together a great clattering came down the trail, and they saw Frank turn aside and stand at attention, as if waiting for some object, seen in the distance, to come up. Directly the sounds settled down to the rattling of stones and the steady pounding of hoofs.

"Look what's here!" Frank shouted, pointing.

Ned moved forward, closer to the trail, and in a moment caught sight of a tall, lank, ungainly mule coming galloping toward him!

"What do you think of him?" called Frank. "He's come to tell us that it is time we were home and in bed."

"Uncle Ike!" called Ned. "Come here, you foolish mule!"

Uncle Ike, now in plain sight, kicked up his heels in derision but finally came to an abrupt halt in front of Ned, and stood with ears pitched forward and forelegs braced back, evidently very much frightened.

CHAPTER IX

A LANK MULE AS A DECOY

Judd Bradley, the young man who had brought the boy into the mountains, stood for a moment watching the mule curiously. Then he stepped nearer to Ned, who was trying to quiet the fractious animal.

"Be careful," Ned warned, as Bradley approached. "Uncle Ike doesn't take to strangers. He may kick if you come within reach."

"Hell kick you whether you come within reach or not!" grumbled Buck, who had been brought from the cabin by the clatter of the mule's hoofs. "He reached over forty acres of rock to hand me one on the laig!" he added, rubbing his left thigh.

Mrs. Brady came to the doorway of the cabin and stood there, outlined against the red firelight within, with the boy in her arms. The child reached forth his arms impatiently, then began beating the old woman with his small fists.

"Go an' get me the horse!" he commanded. "Mike wants a ride!"

"That's the prince, all right!" whispered Frank to Ned. "That's the prince of some slum alley in Washington. What he needs is a club, applied just before and after meals, and just before retiring, with a dose at intervals during the night!"

"I'm not thinking of the prince now," Ned returned, still in a low tone, for the others were not far off, "I'm wondering how Uncle Ike came to be here."

"Broke away and eloped with himself, probably," laughed Frank.

"Yes," grinned Ned, "and put on saddle and bridle before he started!"

Frank's eyes now began to stick out.

"S-a-a-y!" he whispered. "We'd better be getting back to camp! There's something out of whack there! If the mule could only talk!"

Bradley, who had backed away at Ned's warning, now came up to the mule's head.

"He doesn't kick with his ears, does he?" he asked, with a smile.

"He's an outlaw," Ned answered, wishing Bradley would return to the cabin. "He's thrown one of the boys, and we must be on our way. If you have time before you leave, come up to the camp. We've got the latest things in cameras and photographic material."

"I may get up there in the morning," was the reply.

Bradley and Mrs. Brady entered the house and closed the door, and Ned turned to his chum with an odd look on his face.

"I've seen that man somewhere before tonight!" he said.

"Then you'd better try hard to place him," Frank answered, "for we are going to see more of him in the future, if I'm not mistaken. Perhaps you saw him on one of your visits to Washington."

"That may be," Ned replied. "Anyway, I may be able to think it out before morning."

Uncle Ike laid his nose against Ned's shoulder and gave him a push.

"He's in a hurry!" the boy laughed. "We ought to be, too! Is it possible that one of the boys saddled him for a ride on the mountain in the night?"

"Just like Jack or Oliver. Or Jimmie may have returned and planned one of his midnight expeditions!"

"Get up and ride," Ned advised. "I'll walk and try to place that man's face."

"You might have seen it in the rogue's gallery," suggested Frank, leaping into the saddle and starting away, the mule pulling and rearing every moment.

Finally Ned called out to him to stop, and walked up to his side.

"What is the matter with Uncle Ike?" he asked.

"He insists on keeping down toward the canyon," was Frank's reply. "We came cat-cornering down the slope, didn't we?"

"We certainly did," Ned answered, considering the matter gravely. "Tell you what you do," he went on, "let the mule have his head! Let him go just where he wants to. It is the instinct of animals to follow precedent, same as men. A man will follow a cow path until it becomes a city street, and a cow, a horse, or a mule will follow a trail previously used—if only passed over once! Let the mule have his head, and he may take us to the place where somebody was dumped!"

"Solomon had nothing on you, Ned!" laughed Frank. "Go to it! Uncle Ike, it is you for the scene of the abduction! And you may go just as fast as you please!"

The mule started off at a fast pace, keeping to the bottom of the valley and finally entering the canyon at the south end. Ned walked by Frank's side, his hand on the stirrup, listening for a sound he dreaded to hear. He was afraid one of the boys had been thrown from the animal's back, and might be lying, suffering, in one of the crevices or breaks which marked the bottom of the canyon.

After traveling some little distance in the canyon, Frank drew up and pointed ahead.

"Right over there," he said, "is the spot where we saw the smoke signs!"

"That's a fact!" Ned answered. "One of the boys must have come here to investigate and left Uncle Ike without tying! The mule has been here before, or he wouldn't plod along so steadily. Suppose we leave him here and walk on cautiously?"

"Just what I was about to propose," Frank agreed.

Uncle Ike seemed to resent being left alone in the canyon, which was now almost as light as day, save where the shadows of the mountain to the east lay along the wall on that side. The mule was finally quieted and left in a dark angle.

Moving in the shadows, the boys soon came to an angle in the cut and looked out on the remains of a campfire. They pushed on until they came opposite to it, but saw no one. In order to reach it they would be obliged to cross the canyon, not very wide there, but flooded with moonlight in the center.

While they stood in the shadow of the mountain a man came stumbling down the slope ten yards away from them. At first they thought it was one of their chums, but when the man's figure came into

the moonlight they saw that he was tall, heavily built, and also heavily bearded. He walked straight across to the fire and passed it, turning into a shallow cave there was in the rock of the outcropping ridge.

The boys saw him enter the cave and look sharply around, then he disappeared as suddenly and completely as if he had walked into the solid rock.

"We're getting all the stage effects!" Frank whispered. "That man ducked into a moonshiner's establishment!"

"He ducked in somewhere, all right," Ned answered. "I wish we could get across there without exhibiting ourselves to the whole country."

"I believe the boy that rode the mule is over there!" Frank suggested.

"Yes; and he's probably been picked up by the moonshiners," Ned agreed. "We've got to get over there, so here goes!"

The boys went across the streak of moonlight like a couple of flashes, and drew up at the mouth of the cavern. So far as they could determine no one had observed them.

They crept to the very back of the cave and huddled close together, listening.

"Not a soul in sight!" Frank whispered. "That might have been a ghost!"

"Do ghosts rattle metal?" asked Ned.

There followed another silence, and then the clink of metal came clearer to the ears of the listening boys.

"Where does it come from?" asked Frank. "There's not a crack in sight in this rock."

A puff of soft coal gas wafted into the cave, causing the boys to hold their breaths. Then, in spite of all he could do to prevent it, Frank sneezed.

Almost instantly a dark figure appeared between the place where the boys were hidden and the space of moonlight in front. The man stepped out, looked up and down the canyon, and came slowly back to meet another figure.

"Nothing doing!" a gruff voice said.

"But that wasn't any bird!" insisted another gruff voice.

"Well, you may look for yourself!"

"I tell you," the second speaker went on, "that those boys are still out in the hills! When I was at the camp there was only one in the tent, and he sat there with a gun in his lap, watching for the others to come back."

"Did you speak with him?"

"What for would I speak with him?"

"To get his story. What are they here for? That is worth knowing."

"Well, I didn't show myself because we're not supposed to be here ourselves!" came the other voice. "If you hadn't built the fire outside to-night we'd have been in no danger. Now we've got a lot of boys sneaking around. What did you do with the others?"

"They're in the work-room."

"In the work-room, seeing everything! You're a bright lot! You know now, I suppose that we've got to leave those lads here when we go away?"

"I have known that all along. There are plenty of kids in the world. These won't be missed. It is a bad job, but it must be done!"

"They shouldn't have come sneaking around!"

The two men disappeared again, but this time Ned saw the opening to the work-room, as they had termed the underground apartment, when they swung an imitation rock made of plank aside and

stepped down. For a moment their figures were illumined by the red light of the fire within, and then they were no longer in sight.

"They're a cheerful pair!" Frank whispered.

"Counterfeiters!" Ned whispered, in reply. "And murderers!"

"How are we going to get the boys out?" asked Frank. "They'll be killed if we don't."

"One must raise a ruction on the outside, and the other must sneak in while the outlaws are gone. That is the only way I can think of now. If you go out there and get Uncle Ike, and coax a couple of sobs out of him, and rattle stones, and shoot your automatic like rain, the outlaws may all rush out of the cave."

"I can do all that, but how will you get in?"

"When they run out, they will pass me. Then I'll get in through the door," Ned replied. "If there's no one in there it won't take me long to find the boys and turn them loose."

"But if there is some one in there?"

"Then you'll hear shooting," Ned answered, grimly. "In that case, mount the mule and get back to camp and bring Jack and Oliver and a lot of guns."

"But one of those boys must be in there," Frank insisted. "Some one rode Ike here!"

"We don't know who it is that is here," Ned reflected. "Anyway, you've got to get away with the mule after making all that noise. Don't go in the direction of the Brady cabin. We don't want that man Bradley mixing us up with police officers!"

"Every minute counts!" Frank declared, "I'm off. You'll hear a racket like the blowing up of a world in about three minutes! Good luck!"

The lads shook hands and parted. It seemed to each one that the other was going to his death, but only encouraging words were spoken.

In five minutes a horrible clamor rang down the canyon. Uncle Ike screamed, and the beating of hoofs sounded like a charge of cavalry. Then came sharp, quick pistol shots.

Three men dashed out of the cavern and Ned crept in at the open door!

"I don't know what I shall find in here!" he mused, as he came into the light of a great fire, "but I'll know all about it right soon!"

CHAPTER X

"PACKED AWAY LIKE SARDINES"

Even in that underground room Ned could hear the shooting outside and the screams of the aggravated mule. Several weapons seemed to be pouring out lead, and the boy wondered if the outlaws were getting the range of his chum.

The firing seemed to grow fainter as he advanced into the room. Either the outlaws were pursuing Frank or the shooters were taking refuge behind rocks which deadened the sound.

At first the boy kept his eye out for an attack on himself, but there seemed to be none of the outlaws left in the subterranean place. The fire was built at one side, and the light from it filled the whole apartment. Counterfeit dollars lay about, scattered over the floor as if dropped in great haste.

Halting in the center of the room, after closing and barring the outer door, Ned put his fingers to his lips and gave out a low whine, one of the signals used by the boys of the Wolf Patrol. While he listened for a response, the firing outside came nearer, or appeared from the sound to do so.

"I'd be in a nice fix if they should seek to retreat to the cave!"
Ned thought.

While he listened an answer came to his call—the low, sharp signal of the Wolves!

"That's Jimmie!" Ned muttered. "He's in some of the holes just outside this room."

"Where are you?" he asked, and the answer came with a giggle.

"We're packed away like sardines! Come get us out! We're only tied with ropes, but the ropes know their business! Here! To the right of the fire!"

Ned soon found that the wall at the point indicated was of plank, like the door, painted and sanded to imitate rock. He had no difficulty in finding the opening, and in a short time the boys were relieved of their bonds. Ned opened his eyes wide at sight of Dode, the fourth boy, and of Oliver, who had been left at the camp.

"What's the shooting outside?" asked Jimmie, stretching his arms, cramped from long confinement. "Who's out there with Uncle Ike? Say, but I was glad to hear the gentle voice of that wicked old mule!"

"And now," Teddy observed, "how about getting out of this? I'm hungry."

"If Frank keeps that racket going," Ned answered, motioning the group toward the door by which he had entered, "we may be able to get out without being seen. You can tell me how you got caged later on. Now we'll try the door."

"Wait!" whispered Jimmie.

"Wait!" said Dode.

Ned turned and faced both boys with enquiring eyes.

"Why wait?" he asked.

"I want my gun!" Jimmie replied. "They searched us and put the plunder in that alcove in the rock on the other side of the fire. We'll need the guns, I take it."

The three boys, Jimmie, Teddy, and Oliver, made a quick rush for the alcove and soon came back with their guns and electrics. The firing outside was again farther away, and the chances for getting out without being attacked appeared to be good.

"What is it?" Ned asked Dode, as he pulled at his sleeve.

"There's another door," the lad explained. "It opens on the slope on the west side of the ridge we are under. We can go that way without being seen."

"That's just the thing!" Jimmie exclaimed. "We can get out and join Frank in the mess outside! Then I reckon we'll put the skids under the outlaws!"

Dode led the way to the opening indicated, passed, with the others at his heels, through a long passage, and finally came to a plank door which was securely fastened on the inside. From this position the racket outside became only a hum.

The boy unfastened the door and swung it inside. Beyond lay the slope, and, beyond that, the valley and the distant mountains. The air of the night was sweet and clear after the close atmosphere of the underground room.

From the other side of the ridge, which was not very high, came shots and the vicious shrieks of a pestered mule! Ned turned to the south, from which direction the clamor came, and passed as swiftly as possible along the slant of the elevation.

"Are you going to attack the outlaws from the rear?" asked Teddy. "We are taking the wrong course if you want to go back to camp."

"Huh!" Jimmie grunted, trudging along puffing at every breath, "we've got to find Frank and Uncle Ike, I guess."

When the party came to the end of the ridge under which the counterfeiter had been working, they faced the valley, some distance away, in which the cabin of Mary Brady stood. Through the moonlight they could just distinguish the crude stone chimney of the structure.

"Now, Ned," Jimmie explained, "if we turn up the slope here and do a little shooting when we reach a good elevation, the counterfeiters will think they are being attacked by a fresh party and duck back to the cave. Then Frank can come along with that blessed old mule. Did you ever hear a lop-eared old rascal of the mule tribe make such a racket? I wonder what Frank was doing to him?"

"I know!" Teddy broke in. "He was tickling him with his heels. That makes Uncle Ike half crazy! There goes another yell! Fine old bird, is Uncle Ike!"

It was plain to the boys that the battle was quite a distance to the south and leading down into the valley, so they began the ascent of the rocky slope and continued up until they were all out of breath. Then they stopped and looked back.

The outlaws came into sight, in a minute, making for their cave. They fired an occasional shot as they retreated, and this fact convinced the boys that Frank had not been wounded by any of the shots which had been fired at him.

"We'll quicken their steps a trifle!" Ned said. "You boys go on up to the next shelf and I'll fire from here. They may charge us, and if they do I can cover your retreat. Besides, you will have a longer start."

"I'm going to stay right here and shoot, too!" Jimmie declared.
"Those men have several bumps coming from me!"

"Ain't he the great little gunman?" snickered Teddy.

"But I need you up there with the others to protect my retreat," urged Ned, so Jimmie unwillingly toiled up the acclivity. They came to a shelf perhaps three hundred feet beyond Ned's stand and crouched down.

Ned's fire, when it came, had the effect of sending the outlaws on a run toward their cave, so the boy joined the others without facing a return fire.

"They'll be out again when they see what's been going on at the cave!" Jimmie predicted, but the prophecy was not a good one, for no figures were seen in the canyon after that, and no more shots were fired from that direction.

"I know what the bogus money-makers will do now," Jimmie snickered. "They'll pack up their tools and vanish! They'll be thinking the whole Secret Service bunch is after them!"

"That's just the trouble," Ned said. "I'm afraid the mountaineers will also think we are Secret Service operatives and spies and make trouble for us."

"We'll have to get busy with our cameras, then," Jimmie went on, "and take pictures of everything in sight. We may be believed if we tell the truth, that we blundered on their cave and they attacked us. I wonder why Frank doesn't show up? He may have been killed or wounded!"

"If he has been hurt," Teddy observed, as the sound of hoofs came
From the south, "Uncle Ike hasn't, for here he comes, ugly as ever."

Believing that Frank was indeed approaching, the boys fired a number of shots to direct his course and waited. The hoofbeats, the labored breathing of the mule, became more distinct directly, and then Frank came into sight.

The greeting he received was a warm one, and Uncle Ike was petted and permitted to search every pocket for sugar!

"I don't see how you escaped being hit," Ned observed. "The outlaws fired enough shots to cripple an army."

"They never saw me," declared Frank. "I kept behind ridges and outcropping rocks, and in the shadows. They were afraid to come too close, for they must have thought a dozen men were attacking them. Whenever I fired I changed my position, and when Uncle Ike yelled I hustled him along! I reckon a good many of the shots you heard came from my gun! When you began shooting that settled it! They will be fifty miles from here by tomorrow noon!"

"That's likely, for they won't dare remain here after they have been caught at their work," Ned admitted. "Moonshiners might remain and fight, but counterfeiters will get away right soon. I take it they don't belong to this section anyway."

On the way to the camp, during the brief rests, Jimmie explained how they had been surprised while in the outer cave and had been taken inside and tied up. The boy Dode was overjoyed at his escape

from the gang, and explained that they had captured him not far from Washington and forced him to accompany them, the idea being to use him in the future in getting rid of the spurious coins.

"They are making a lot of it," he declared, "and the country will be flooded with their work if the government doesn't catch them."

It may be well to state here that the reasoning of the boys with regard to the future actions of the outlaws was correct, as they disappeared from that section that night. When the lads visited the cave later on some of the counterfeit coin which had been made was still scattered about the subterranean room.

When they first reached the camp Jack was not in sight, but he soon appeared, coming from a hiding place near the summit.

"I thought I'd better not expose myself by remaining in the tent," he explained, "so ducked away and hid where I could watch the mules and the provisions without being seen. I had about made up my mind that the state militia had been called out, you made such a racket!"

"We're going to give Uncle Ike a medal, also a barrel of sugar, for heroic conduct in the face of the enemy!" Jimmie declared, and the mule, for once in his life, found a full pocket when he nosed about for sweet lumps!

While the lads were eating a delayed supper, Jack turned to Oliver with a mock frown on his face.

"The next time you go away in the night and leave me alone in camp," he said, "I'm going to break your dial in! I might have been shot while asleep. According to the conversation between the outlaws, just related by Jimmie, one of the toughs came up here! Don't you ever do that again, if you want to keep a whole hide."

"I guess Uncle Ike has a larger kick coming than you have!" Jimmie remarked.

When the boys compared notes and thoughts concerning the child, the old lady, and the blonde stranger, they could not agree at all. Some of them insisted that the boy was Mike III., while the others declared that he was the prince!

"If he isn't the grandson," one asked, "why this American slang?"

"And if he is," questioned another, "why this talk about French and other foreign languages? Mike III. wouldn't know a foreign tongue, would he?"

CHAPTER XI

JACK'S ELEGANT CHICKEN PIE

The sun was high over the mountains when Ned awoke on the morning following the adventure with the counterfeiters. Leaving Jimmie, Frank, Teddy and Oliver in their bunks and Dode, the new acquisition to the party, curled up in a nest of blankets, he issued forth from the tent and looked about for Jack, who had been left on guard.

The boy was nowhere in sight at first, then he saw him at a spring which bubbled out of the mountain not far from the corral. It was the water from this spring which brought forth the tender grass upon which the mules were feeding.

Jack looked up with a shout when he saw Ned, and came running up to the camp, carrying in one hand a pail in which three large-sized chickens lay, nicely boiled, carved and washed.

"What do you think of that?" he demanded, pushing the pail up under Ned's nose. "I guess we're some hustlers for sustenance!"

"Where did you get the hens?" asked Ned. "They sure look good to me."

"You couldn't guess in a thousand years!" Jack replied. "So I'm going to tell you, right off the handle! Judd Bradley, the blonde fellow who brought the boy in, came up with them, with the compliments of Mrs. Brady, about an hour ago. He brought the boy up with him, too. What do you know about that?"

"Is it the prince, or is it Mike III.?" asked Ned, with a smile.

"If you leave it to me," Jack answered quite positively, "it is the prince!"

"How does he look and act this morning?"

"Like a kid raised under restraint, now free and full of the de—Old Nick!"

"And Bradley?" asked Ned.

"That's another point! He watches the kid every second of the time, and when the boy speaks a word of French he looks daggers at him! I reckon the son of Mike II. wouldn't be talking French! Nor he wouldn't be here with a chaperon from Washington. We have found the prince, all right, and I'm sorry for it! It makes our work too easy!"

"Don't crow until you're out of the woods!" laughed Ned. "There may be a few adventures in store for us yet! So this seven-year-old boy talks French, does he?"

"You bet he does! Like a native!"

"Where are they now—Bradley and the boy, I mean?"

"Down by the mules! The boy, who is constantly called Mike—ostentatiously called by that name—wants to ride Uncle Ike! Fat time he'll have if he gets aboard of that argumentative brute!"

"Are they going to help eat the chicken?" asked Ned.

"Sure! I told them to stick around until I got the most beautiful chicken pie built they ever touched tongue to. They're going to stay. You go and talk with them while I make the pie. It is going to be a corker—melt in your mouth, make you dream of the old red barn down on the farm!"

"Ever make a chicken pie?" asked Ned.

"Of course not! There's got to be a first time to everything! But I know how. I've got a recipe here which is used by the chef at Sherry's."

"Go to it!" laughed Ned. "I'll take my chances on having canned meat for dinner."

"You just wait!" roared Jack, as Ned dashed down to the spring.

Jack stood a moment, pail in hand, watching Ned washing at the spring, and then went on to the fire, leaving Ned to proceed to the corral and entertain the guests.

Jimmie was just tumbling out of the tent when Jack came up with the chicken. That young man immediately set up a shout which awakened the others and brought them out rubbing their eyes.

"Chicken for breakfast!" he shouted.

"Chicken pie for dinner!" Jack corrected.

"All right!" sighed the boy. "Then I'll cook a couple of pounds of ham and a couple of dozen eggs for breakfast! That ought to keep us alive until you get the pie ready!"

"How do you make chicken pie?" demanded Frank. "I've always wanted to know how to make a pie out of a hen."

"You just watch me," Jack answered, not without a touch of pride, "and I'll show how it is done. Here, young man, don't set down on my dough! That's for the crust."

Jimmie bounded off a camp stool where the cook had deposited his crust-dough on a clean white paper and watched Jack line a six-quart tin pail with the mixture of flour, water and baking powder.

"That ain't thick enough!" he commented. "The crust ought to be an inch thick."

"You go out and feed the mules!" ordered Jack. "When I want any help in making a chicken pie I won't call on you!"

"Anyway," Jimmie insisted, "it ought to be an inch thick."

Jack laid the pieces of chicken in the bed of dough—the chickens having been cooked tender long before Ned was out of his blankets—and put in salt, pepper, a small piece of butter—out of a glass can!

—and then poured in some of the liquid the chickens had been stewed in.

"If there should happen to be a drumstick you can't get in," Jimmie volunteered, "I can eat it for breakfast!"

"So that's why you wanted the crust so thick!" cried Jack. "You wanted to crowd the chicken out so you could stuff yourself with a hen for breakfast! Run along and play you'r a baker's wagon delivering goods on the Bowery!"

"You're the wise little man—not!" Jimmie grunted and set about cooking ham and eggs for breakfast.

"How long will it take that chicken pie to cook?" asked Teddy.

"Couple of hours," replied Jack. "Sometimes it takes longer."

Jack prepared a great bed of coals, drew up dry wood to make more, and set the pail of chicken pie in the heavy double oven to cook.

"I'm making this 'specially light and sweet," he said, poking the coals up to the oven, "because we're going to have a prince of the royal blood to breakfast."

"Where is he?" asked Jimmie, with a grin, "Down by the mules! He brought these chickens to us—or his chaperon did! Rather thoughtful of him! Say, Frank," Jack added, "will you go down to the corral and take a lot of snapshots of the kid? I want to send some home to Chicago, just to convince the boys I've been dining with royalty."

"Dining with Mike III.," Frank laughed. "It is dollars to dills that the boy trying to get on Uncle Ike's back is fresh from the Washington slums!"

"Look you here, little man," Jack began, but just at that moment Ned, Bradley, and the boy appeared on the slope, headed for the camp. The boy was seated on the back of Uncle Ike, who, for a wonder, was marching along sedately, as if accustomed to being made the plaything of children.

"I wouldn't have believed it of him!" Jimmie muttered. "I wouldn't have trusted a kid on that wild animal's back any sooner than I would have trusted eggs to a hay-baler. Uncle Ike's sure going into a decline!"

The boy came riding up ahead of the others and shouted to Jimmie:

"Gardez! A cheval!" he shouted, urging the mule into a trot.

"That's your kid from the Washington slums!" Jack laughed, scornfully. "Talking French!"

"What does he say?" demanded Jimmie.

"He says for you to be on your guard—to look out for yourself—as he is coming on horseback. I don't know much French, but that is easy!"

Bradley hastened to the boy's side and said something to him in a tone which the others could not hear, the lad coloring slightly as he listened.

"He's jawing him for speaking French!" Jimmie commented.

"It looks like it," Jack observed. "Oh, I reckon we've got the prince all right. I wonder when we are going to start back to Washington with him, and if Ned will pinch that blonde beauty who brought him in?"

Uncle Ike stopped at the campfire and stuck his nose into Jimmie's pocket, looking for sugar. Mike III., as some of the boys insisted on thinking of the little fellow, dropped off and seized the animal by the tail and began to pull. Frank ran to get the child out of his dangerous position, but Uncle Ike merely looked around to see what it was that was pulling his tail winked one eye at Frank, and went on searching pockets.

"That mule sure gets my goat!" grinned Jimmie. "What do you think of his standing still while his tail is being pulled?"

By this time Jimmie had prepared breakfast, and the boys gathered about the fire with tin plates on their knees, and devoured ham and eggs, baked beans, and bread and butter and coffee with a mountain relish. Mike III. ate what was given to him at the first helping and then clamored for more. Bradley whispered something in his ear, but the boy pushed him off with a scowl:

"Alles-vous en!" he cried, angrily.

Jack snickered and Frank looked as if he had made a mistake in his estimate of the boy and knew it! Bradley drew the boy away, but Jimmie hastened to replenish his plate.

"Let the kid have all he wants!" he said. "We can cook more. We're going to have a chicken pie for dinner, and he'll like that."

"Seems to me it is about time Jack was looking after that pie," Frank suggested.

"Pretty near forgot it!" Jack admitted, going to the oven and opening the door so as to look inside at the dainty.

Something took place when he did that! The square piece of metal flew back on its hinges with a thump, and out of the oven flew the cover of the tin pail in which the chicken pie had been tucked. It shot across the fire and struck Jimmie under the ear and then rolled back into the blaze!

"Jerusalem!" cried the boy. "What you shootin' at me for?"

No attention was paid to what the boy said, for at that moment a wave of dough, spotted here and there with pieces of chicken, puffed out of the pail and tumbled over Jack's stooping shoulders and on into the fire, where it continued to grow until the fire half consumed it.

"Catch the chicken!" yelled Frank. "He's running away."

Jack tried to keep the dough in the oven, but it rolled out and covered his hands and arms with a sticky mess. The little fellow screamed with delight.

"Oh, oh, *de mal en pis!*" he shouted.

"Grab the chicken!" shouted Teddy. "We can finish breakfast on that!"

While the mess was being cleared up, Frank asked Jack:

"How much baking powder did you put into that dough?"

"Only one can!" was the reply, and Frank went away and rolled on the ground!

"Say," Jimmie whispered to Jack, who was scraping the chicken pie off his clothes, "what did the kid say when he pushed Bradley away, and when the pie busted?"

"First he said 'be off with you' or 'let me alone' next he said 'from bad to worse' Or something like that. Look at Bradley. He's calling him down for it, right now. I'm going, to talk French to that kid when Bradley goes away. I'm going to know about this three Mike and this prince business!"

CHAPTER XII

THE BLACK HAND GAME

Shortly after breakfast, and after what remained of the chickens had been eaten, Bradley and his charge left the camp, after inviting the boys to visit them in the cabin in the valley. Bradley appeared anxious to be friendly, and seemed absolutely frank in his talks. The only suspicious thing they noticed in him was his jealous care of the boy—his reproaches when the lad had indulged in a word or two of French!

"You bet I'll visit you at the cabin!" Jack said, as the two disappeared over the summit. "I'll be there with the lingo, too! I can soon find out from the boy what he knows of the French language! Of course I'll be down to the cottage!"

"Bradley will see that you don't talk with the boy alone!" Jimmie declared.

"I'll catch him doing it!" was Jack's reply.

"What do you think about it, Ned?" asked Frank. "Is that the prince, or is it Mike III.? You may have all the guesses you need."

"First," Ned said, turning to Jack and Frank, "tell me what the boy said when he spoke in French."

Jack repeated the interpretations as previously given, and Ned remained in a thoughtful mood for a long time. Then he went into the tent, without answering any questions, and began overhauling the stock of reading matter brought along.

When he found what he wanted to he threw himself on the bunk where he had slept and read steadily for an hour or more. At least he held to the book for that length of time, turning the leaves rapidly at times, and then not at all for several minutes.

"What's he up to?" asked Teddy. "Something on his alleged mind!"

"I'll go and find out what he's reading," Jimmie volunteered.

The boy entered the tent, but was back in a moment with a broad grin on his face.

"It is a French dictionary!" he gasped. "Ned is learning French, so he can talk with the prince in his native tongue!"

"The prince isn't French!" Jack declared. "He belongs away in the East somewhere. French is the polite language of Europe, so of course, he's been taught it!"

After a time Ned came to the door of the tent and beckoned to Jimmie.

"Suppose we go and get some pictures of the mountains," he said, when the boy entered. "We haven't taken a snap-shot since we came here.

"I'm strong for it!" Jimmie declared. "We might go and take a few snaps at the counterfeiter's den. That will be fine!"

"What's that?" demanded Frank Shaw, poking his nose into the tent. "Going to take pictures of the counterfeiters den! I'm in on that. We'll take a bunch of pictures—enough for a first-page layout—and send 'em in to dad's newspaper. Hot stuff! What? And I'll write the biography of Uncle Ike, and send it in with the rest. His picture ought to go in the center of the layout. He'll be a hero, all right."

"All right!" Ned agreed. "We'll go and take the pictures, and we'll send them in when you get the story written! Will that answer?"

"Sure it will!"

So Ned, Jimmie, and Frank started away laughing, for all knew Frank would never write the story, toward the counterfeiters' cave. When they came in sight of the ridge which jutted out of the slope to make the canyon, and under which the workroom was situated, they saw a man moving northward, keeping close to the jagged summit of the lesser elevation, and looking sharply about as he advanced.

"That may be one of them," Jimmie suggested.

"I don't believe it!" Frank contradicted. "What do you think, Ned?" he added.

"Never saw the outlaws," Ned answered, "so I can't decide the question. Still, I doubt if one of the counterfeiters is within fifty miles of this spot now."

"That's the idea!" Frank said. "Of course the shooting of last night would draw out the natives. There'll be dozens around the caves to-day."

The boys walked on to the canyon, taking snap-shots of everything they saw. The slope, the canyon, the valley to the west, the green valley to the south, the shallow cave from which the entrance to the workroom gave, all were transferred to films to await development. When at last they entered the shallow cave they paused.

"There may be some of them in here yet," Frank suggested.

"Not to-day!" Ned replied. "There are too many strangers about!"

They entered cautiously. There was now no fire on the stone hearth, and the atmosphere of the place was damp and chill, as well as dark. Here and there a break in the rocky roof above—the ceiling of the apartment was very near to the surface of the outcropping ridge—let in a shaft of light, but for the most part the apartment was in heavy shadows.

Ned took out his electric light and turned it enquiringly about the room. Counterfeit money still lay scattered over the floor. The melting pot and the dies were on the cold iron shelf where they had been

left, and even a coat hung against the wall.

"They got out in a hurry," Jimmie declared.

"And they are not likely to come back in a hurry!" Ned added.

Frank paced the apartment off, set his camera tripod, and got out his powder.

"You boys stand over on the other side," he requested, as he moved back to his tripod, "and when I give the word you, Jimmie, touch off this flash."

"What do you want a view of that corner for?" asked Jimmie. "You are too close, anyway, to get a good picture."

"I'm going to have a picture of every corner, and the middle, and the roof, and the chimney, and everything about the blooming place!" Frank declared.

"Wait a minute!" Jimmie shouted. "I'll hide in the passage we went out of last night, and when you are ready to spring the print I'll look out, with a fierce expression on my pretty face. That will make the picture look like the real brigandish thing. What?"

"All right," laughed Frank, "get in there! It is only an excuse for getting your mug into dad's newspaper, but we'll let it go."

Frank and Ned busied themselves for half an hour or more, taking pictures and looking over the implements used in the manufacture of spurious coin. At length, when they returned to the outer cave, they remembered that Jimmie had not returned from the west passage to the workroom, and Ned went there to look for him. He was not there, nor was he in any of the niches or shallow openings in the rocky walls. Ned called to him, but he did not reply. Then Frank came running into the passage and joined in the hunt. In vain! Jimmie was nowhere to be found.

"Wherever he is," Frank said, after a long search, "he has his camera with him."

"I didn't see him have one," Ned replied. "You must be mistaken."

"It was the baby camera he had," Frank explained. "He carried it under his coat. The little monkey has doubtless gone off on a picture-making tour of his own."

"That is just like him," Ned agreed, "so we'll go on about our business and let him present himself when he gets ready."

"He seemed to take quite an interest in that child," Frank suggested, "and he may have gone on to the cabin."

"We may as well go that way and thank the old lady for the hens Jack didn't make into a pie," Ned observed. "I'd like another look at that child myself."

"Is it the prince, or is it Mike III.?" laughed Frank.

Ned smiled, but made no reply. They walked on down the slope and connected with the valley at the south end of the ridge. When they came to the cabin they found Mrs. Mary Brady sitting in the doorway, the child playing on the ground—beaten hard by years of wear—in front of her. She arose as they appeared, and the boy darted off into the fenced garden farther to the south, looking back with a grin from behind the stake-and-rider fence.

"Good day to you, young gentlemen," the old lady said. "I hope you passed a pleasant night! The mountain air is good for those who seek sleep."

Then it occurred to Ned that neither Bradley nor the child had referred in any way to the shooting of the night before, though, if at the cabin, they must have heard it. He regarded the old lady keenly as he said:

"Has any one seen anything of the outlaws to-day?"

"The outlaws?" repeated the other.

"You heard nothing in the night?" Ned asked.

"I thought I heard a gunshot now and then," was the indifferent reply, "but they are too common here to attract attention. Did the shooting disturb you?"

Ned did not believe the old lady had slept through the furious fusilades of shots of the night before. What her motive was in ignoring the matter he could not understand, but he decided to set himself right with her and also with her mountain friends by telling of the events of the night.

If they were to remain long in that section, it was quite necessary, he thought, that the natives should understand that the boys of the Camera Club were not there to spy on counterfeiters or the moonshiners, if any there were in that region.

So he told her that the boys had blundered on the workroom of the counterfeiters, had been suspected of being spies sent by the government and seized, and finally had been released by strategy. He added that they were not there to molest the people of the district, whatever their occupation might be, but to take pictures and have a long vacation in the health-giving mountain air.

"And I hope you'll pass the word along," he closed, "so that your friends will not regard us as enemies. We are anxious to meet as many of them as possible, and to be on good terms with them."

This was strictly true, as the boys were not there to convict any of the natives, whatever their offenses might be, but to deal with the strangers who had abducted the prince from his home in Washington. Ned was certain that no one belonging in that region had had a hand in the crime, although he suspected that some of them might innocently harbor the outlaws he was in quest of.

The old lady listened to Ned's story and his explanation with a startled face.

"I'm sure," she said, "that no one belonging here, was interested in the counterfeiting gang you boys came upon. I am sure, too, that no one will blame you for what you did. We are law-abiding people, but our mountains constitute a secure refuge for some who are not worthy of protection."

Ned was more than pleased at the outcome of the matter, for he was sure the old lady would take pains to set the matter before her friends in the correct light. The conversation soon changed to other subjects. The child did not return, and directly Frank saw him walking along a distant hillside, hand-in-hand with Bradley.

"Mr. Bradley seems to stick close to Mike," he said, tentatively.

"Never lets him out of his sight," was the reply, and Mrs. Brady seemed to resent the face as stated. She evidently had little of the lad's companionship.

When the boys reached the camp Jimmie had not returned, but their chums were gathered around a sheet of letter paper which had, no one knew how, been thrust into the tent. Jack's face was deadly white as he handed it to Ned.

"We are up against a black hand game," he said. "Jimmie has been stolen!"

CHAPTER XIII

THREE DAYS TO MOVE IN

Ned took the paper into his hand and read:

"You boys are not wanted in the hills. We give you three days to get out. On the morning of the fourth day, if you are still here, we shall send you your friend's right hand. On the fifth day you will receive his left hand. On the sixth day his right foot. On the seventh day his left foot. On the eighth day his head. If you obey this command he will be restored to you, in good health, at Cumberland."

"Is it a joke?" asked Frank, white to the lips.

"It must be!" cried Jack. "No one would mutilate Jimmie."

"It is a coarse joke!" Teddy cut in.

"I'm afraid it is no joke, boys," Ned said. "I'm afraid we'll have to go."

"But we'll come back again!" shouted Oliver. "We'll come back with a whole company of Boy Scouts! There are enough Boy Scouts in New York to tear these mountains up by the roots!"

"But I don't understand how they got him," Teddy wailed. "He went away with you."

"He went into a hidden passage to make a picturesque effect," Frank said, "and did not return. We thought it one of his jokes, and paid little attention to his absence. We might have rescued him if we had known."

"Of course he was seized in that passage," Dode said. "Did you get the picture he was to be in?"

"Sure we did!" cried Frank. "I'll see if he was there when the camera opened."

As he spoke the boy made a rush for his suitcase, took out his development tank, printing frame and other tools, and set to work on his film roll. He used two powders instead of one, and in ten minutes was ready for the printing.

In a few minutes more he was at work in the tent, with the boys gathered around him. The developer had worked perfectly, notwithstanding the haste, and the printing was well advanced in the soft light of the tent. Directly he had the picture taken in the cave under view—the snapshot of the wall showing the entrance to the secret passage.

"Quick work!" Ned declared. "What does it show?"

They all gathered around the print, each trying to get the first glance at it.

"There's Jimmie!" Teddy shouted. "He was looking out of the door when the picture was taken! I can almost see his freckles!"

"There he is, sure enough!" Frank cried. "The little monkey!"

Ned took the print and examined it carefully, while the others waited for him to express any discoveries he might make.

"Did you see anything back of Jimmie?" he asked of Frank.

"Just the dark wall," was the reply.

Ned passed the print to him and left the tent.

"Yes," Frank said, with a threat in his voice, there's a face looking over Jimmie's shoulder. "Oh, I wish we had known!"

"Can you see the face plainly?" asked Teddy.

"Quite plainly," was the reply. "The door was open, as you see, and Jimmie stood with his hand on the edge of it, looking at the camera, his head in the room."

"Yes; that makes the picture good," Teddy observed.

"And there was a slant of light from the passage, and the head of the outlaw shows in that. He's an ugly looking brute!"

"Observe the alfalfa on his map!" exclaimed Teddy.

"That picture may send him to prison!" Frank cried. "I hope so!"

He put the tank, the printing frame, the print, and the other articles away in his suitcase and went out to where Ned was standing.

"Did you see the face behind the boy?" asked Frank—"get a good look at it?"

"Yes," was the reply. "It shows that this is not a joke! Did you notice the face closely?"

"I think so."

"What about the beard?"

"Quite a growth, I should say."

"Anything else odd about it?" persisted Ned.

"Not that I saw," was the wondering reply. "What about it?"

"It was a false beard! The man was disguised!"

Frank's face looked, for an instant, as if he had received a blow.

"And I was counting on that beard," he said, "as a means of identification!"

"Keep the print safe," Ned advised. "It may be useful in that way yet."

"Well," Frank declared, "we've got to go away! We can take no chances on Jimmie being murdered. Isn't that your idea?"

"We certainly will take no such chances," Ned responded. "Up to this time we have been successful in getting out of trouble, though, and we may be able to rescue the boy without giving up the search for the abducted lad."

"Here's another question," Frank said, "was that note sent by the counterfeiter, or are the men interested in the abduction of the prince resorting to such tactics?"

"I have an idea that the abductors are the ones who are doing it," Ned answered.

"It may be moonshiners," suggested Frank.

"I don't think there are any illicit stills in this district," Ned replied.

"Well, we're up against a desperate gang now, anyway," Frank said, "and it looks as if they held the high cards! If we had only suspected what was going on in that passage, we might have rescued the boy before they got him away!"

"I believe we'll do well to watch Bradley," he suggested.

"But Bradley was at the cabin when we got there."

"Oh, he had plenty of time to get Jimmie away and get back to the cabin!" Frank insisted. "We remained at the cave half an hour after Jimmie left us, and we took our time in getting to the cottage."

"Also we took a great many snap-shots at the scenery," Ned went on. "Now, I wish you would take all the films out of the cameras and develop and print a picture of each."

"I'll go right at it," Frank replied, turning back to the tent.

"And if any of the boys were taking pictures about the tent, or the corral, have them developed. It may be that one of the snap-shots will show the person who slipped the note into the tent."

"I don't see how it was ever done without the man being seen," Frank exclaimed.

"But it was done," Ned replied, "and we've got to find out when and how if we can."

When Frank left for the tent Ned started on toward the summit. He had traveled only a short distance when Frank came puffing after him.

"Here's another print Jack and Teddy took," he said. "It shows something in the cave we never noticed. See if you can tell what it is."

Ned glanced at the print and returned it.

"There is another opening in the wall at the east side," he said. "The picture shows it. I noticed something there, but neglected to investigate."

While the two talked Jack came up the slope, his camera over his shoulder.

"I think it is about time for me to be having an outing," he said. "I've been in the camp most of the time since we've been here."

"Come along, then," Ned replied. "I'm going back to the cave, and it may be just as well to have some one with me."

Frank went down the slope to the tent and Ned and Jack hastened down the slope on the other side. They were busy with their thoughts and for a long time neither spoke.

"Of course it is the abductors?" Jack asked, presently.

"I have no doubt of it," was the reply.

"Do you connect the man Bradley with it?" was the next question.

"There is no proof against him," Ned replied.

"But you must have some idea about it," persisted Jack.

"For all we know," Ned remarked, "he may be entirely innocent in the abduction matter. He may have brought the real grandchild here."

"The grandchild!" repeated Jack. "Here's the old question once more: 'Is it the prince, or is it Mike III.?'"

"I have the answer to that question written down in my memorandum book," Ned said. "I don't want to show it to you now, because I may be mistaken. When the case is closed I will show you the entry. Then you may laugh at me if you feel like it."

"I'd like to see it now," Jack coaxed.

"I want all you boys to think for yourselves," Ned went on. "Don't get a theory and pound away at it. If you do, you'll overlook everything which doesn't agree with that theory. If I should show you what I have written, you might look only for clues calculated to prove it to be correct, or you might look only for opposing clues."

A second examination of the counterfeiters' cave revealed nothing of importance except that the broken wall on the east side showed a small room into which Jimmie and his captor might have fled after the abduction. Still, there was no proof that they had done so, Ned explained.

"Why didn't the little fellow yell?" asked Jack.

"I think he would have yelled if that had been possible!" Ned said.

The boys left the cave in a short time and passed south, toward the valley and the cabin. Instead of going directly to the cabin, however, Ned kept away to the west and came out south of it, in the section where Bradley had walked with the child.

After a time Jack wandered away to the east, so as to come up on that side of the cabin. Although the boys had circled the building, no sign of life had been seen.

While Ned was yet some distance away he saw Jack standing on the slope of the valley watching the front door. He walked back and looked in at a small window in the rear wall. The child lay asleep on a bed in one corner of the room, and Mrs. Brady sat by his side. Bradley occupied a chair not far away.

"Quite a domestic scene!" Ned muttered.

While the boy watched through the window, the old woman arose and left the cabin by the front door. Then Bradley arose, went to a suitcase in a corner by the hearth, took therefrom a small green paper parcel, and went to the cupboard, hanging on the north wall.

After feeling about for a time he took out a cup, filled it with warm water from a kettle on the fire and stirred the contents of the green package into it with a brush which he took from a pocket. Ned could not see the contents of the cup, but when the man held the brush up to the light he saw that it was soaked in what seemed to be a black dye. It appeared too thick to suit the taste of the man, and he poured in more water out of the kettle.

Then, with the brush wet in one hand and the cup in the other, Bradley drew closer to the bed where the child slept. Ned watched for a few seconds more, then the footsteps of the old lady were heard approaching the door, ringing on the hard earth at the front of it. Ned made another entry in his memorandum book and turned away.

CHAPTER XIV

POINTING OUT THE TRAIL

After leaving the window at the rear of the cabin, Ned moved to the north side, where there was no

window at all, and stood there, huddled against the wall, until he heard the old lady enter the house and close the door. Peering around the corner to see that no one was in sight, he crossed the open space swiftly and approached the grove where he had seen Jack.

Jack was not in sight, but a round hole cut in the bark of a tree told the direction in which he had gone. In the Indian sign language used by the Boy Scouts this meant:

"This is the trail. Keep on in this direction."

Wondering what had taken Jack away so suddenly, Ned followed on until he came to an open space where no trees were growing. He, however, kept straight ahead, taking snapshots as he came to desirable scenes.

A hundred yards from the edge of the grove he came to a small round stone sitting on top of a large one. Then he walked faster and with more confidence. This, too, said:

"This is the trail! Keep on!"

It was now after noonday, and the sun poured fiercely down into the valley between the great ridges. There were patches of forest here and there, and now and then the boy came to a field which had been planted to corn. Still, he came upon no human being. The two cabins he saw seemed empty and deserted.

Weary and hungry as he was, Ned kept on, now reading the trail sign from a tree, now from a stone, now from a bunch of grass tied at the top, with the ends of the blades sticking straight up. He walked a couple of miles without turning to the right or left, and then found a new signal. The hole in the bole of the tree where the sign stood was accompanied by a long cut in the bark of the left side.

This, as plainly as a voice from the thicket could have done, said:

"Turn to the left and keep on in that direction until you are further instructed."

The turn to the left led Ned up the slope. So the field of action was likely to be in the mountains again! The signs were closer together now, and Ned followed them with faith that he was on the right track.

But who had made the trail? Was it Jimmie or Jack? Probably the latter, Ned concluded, for Jimmie would not be likely to have had an opportunity of so blazing his trail, while Jack was free to do so at will.

But why had Jack gone away on the trail alone? Why had he not called to him, Ned, in order that they might proceed together?

It was possible that the boy might be following some person whom he suspected of the abduction, still that did not seem to be likely, as any one tracking another in the broad light of day, in such a country as that, over open places and rocky elevations, would be almost certain to be discovered. Ned feared the boy was being led into a trap.

Finally, almost at the edge of the timber, Ned came to a third sign. There were three holes cut in the bark of a tree, facing the trail he had followed, and on the right side was the familiar slit in the bark.

"Turn to the right and be careful, for there may be danger ahead!"

That is what the talk on the tree said!

To the right lay a rim of trees, facing the bare face of the mountain. Between the trees and the summit lay a long stretch of rocky slope, in some places actually inaccessible to one not an expert in mountain climbing.

Obedying the signal, Ned turned to the right and kept under the shelter of the trees. It was very still there, save for the sharp raspings of insects hiding in the foliage and the sleepy call of birds in the sky and in the tops of the trees.

The boy made his way through the underbrush for some distance without finding any sign. At a loss what course to pursue, he decided to do nothing! So he sat down in a thicket and waited. And while he waited he took snapshots!

His thought, sitting there in suspense, was that Jack might have waited for him at some point on the trail! At best the boy could have been only a half hour ahead of him. He waited an hour, until the sun began to touch the tops of the distant western mountains, and then climbed cautiously up a tree and

looked about.

Then there came a rustling in the bushes farther to the south, and the low, angry growl of a black bear came up to him! Ned began sliding down the tree at once.

That was the call of the Black Bear Patrol! He knew now that Jack was not far off. At the bottom of the tree he found the boy waiting for him!

"Say, but I've had a long wait!" Jack complained.

"Why didn't you signal before, then?" demanded Ned.

"Why, I thought you'd come right on, come on and meet me!"

"And you never knew I was here until I climbed the tree?"

"Of course not. How should I?"

"Well," Ned observed, "we'll know better next time. I presume I should have made a sign myself—the call of the pack, for instance."

"Of course," Jack replied. "Now," he went on, "do you know what's doing here?"

"I'm in quest of information," Ned grinned. "What have you found?"

"I've discovered that the Brady cabin is being watched!"

Ned couldn't understand that, and said so. Jack went on: "When I stood in front of the house, two men came out of the canyon and walked down to the tree belt and stopped. They stood there a long time, talking, and then started off in this direction and I followed them."

"Are they mountaineers?" asked Ned. "People of this section?"

"Certainly not! They are to all appearances city people, at least in dress."

"You couldn't hear what they were saying?" asked Ned.

"No, but I could get some idea of their thoughts from their gestures. One was kicking about something, and the other was trying to pacify him."

"Well, where did they go? Where did you see them last?" asked Ned.

"They went up the slope, and disappeared behind that chimney of rock. I've got pictures of that rock!"

"This looks like a three-cornered game!" Ned mused.

"What do you mean by that?" asked Jack. "Where are the three interests?"

"We'll probably have to come back here tonight," Ned went on, without answering the question. "We can never get up that slope in daylight without attracting their attention."

"We must be at least four up-hill miles from camp," Jack calculated.

"All of that," answered Ned. "It is a long walk there and back."

"Then why not remain here?" asked Jack. "I'm hungry, but I'm more in need of rest than food just now. We can lie here in the thicket until night, and then creep up the slope and see what's doing."

"I was about to suggest that," Ned observed, "but I thought you'd be ravenous for the sight of a camp dinner!"

"I have a hunch," Jack declared, after a time, "that Jimmie is somewhere in this section! I don't know why, but when I saw those men, strangers, evidently, walking so stealthily over the country I got the hunch! Then I followed them, because I thought I might get a clue to the boy's whereabouts by so doing."

"If the boy is here," Ned replied, grimly, "we'll find him!"

"Of course we'll find him! That's what we are here for!"

The boys thus encouraging each other crawled deeper into the thicket and lay down. They were more

than tired, worse than hungry, but they never thought of sleep, or of leaving their post of observation. The afternoon passed slowly, the boys taking snapshots now and then.

"The boys will be thinking we've been geezled!" Jack said. "I wish they knew where to find us. There's no knowing what they will do, they're so anxious about Jimmie. And if they scatter over the country others may be captured."

"They usually show good sense in emergencies," Ned commented.

When the first tint of twilight came, the boys crept to the edge of the thicket and sat looking out on the mountain. There was the broken way to the summit, and there was the chimney rock behind which the men had disappeared, but no human being was, for a long time in sight.

Then a small figure came swinging down the slope, off to the north, and presently came opposite to where the boys lay. Jack seized Ned by the arm and pointed.

"Is it the prince, or is it Mike III?" he asked.

Ned got out his field glass and studied the face and figure until, whistling some childish discord, the boy turned back and disappeared in the direction of the cabin.

"What is that boy doing off here alone?" asked Jack, then.

"Keep watch of the chimney rock," Ned advised.

"But what do you think of it?" demanded Jack. "How did that boy get up here?"

"If you see any one moving up there," Ned went on, provokingly, "let me know."

"Oh, look here!" Jack insisted, half angrily, "what's the use of shutting up like a clam? What is your idea about that boy? We've never seen him before except in Bradley's company. Do you think he ran away? Why can't we go and get him and hold him until Jimmie is released?"

"So you think the men who have taken Jimmie are the men who are conducting the abduction game?" asked Ned.

"Yes, don't you?"

"I have written the answer to that down in my little book," smiled Ned, "and when the right time comes I'll show it to you."

"Well, if we are going to catch the boy we'll have to be moving."

"We are not going to catch the boy."

Jack threw himself down on the ground in disgust.

"You're the Secret Service man," he said, "and I presume you know what you are about, but it looks to me as if you had been reading a dream book, or something like that."

"Why should we catch the child?" asked Ned.

"To hold him! To be able to say to the outlaws that we hold the top hand!"

"And trade the child for Jimmie, as you suggested?"

"Why, of course!"

"That would make a failure of our mission, me son!"

"But it would save Jimmie's life."

It was now growing quite dark in the valley, especially where the tree growth was heavy, but upon the slope objects might still be clearly distinguished some distance away. While the boys watched the child came out of the thicket to the north and began ascending the mountain, walking with a light, springing step, as if out for exercise after a long and tiresome confinement.

"Now keep your eye on the mountain," Ned requested.

In a moment a column of smoke arose from behind the chimney rock. The boys watched it intently and the child with it, for he was now approaching the rock.

"Cooking supper!" remarked Jack. "I wish they would pass it around!"

"Does it take two fires to cook supper up there?" asked Ned, with a smile.

Jack half arose in his excitement, but Ned drew him down again.

"Jimmie's up there!" he whispered. "There's the Boy Scout call for help!"

CHAPTER XV

A NIGHT ON THE SUMMIT

"Now," Ned said, as the signal columns died down, "we'll hike back to camp with our pictures and get supper! How does that strike you?"

Jack turned toward Ned impatiently. There was not light enough for his face to show clearly, but Ned knew how the boy was scowling!

"And go off and leave Jimmie here?" Jack said. "I'd like to know what you're thinking of! Why have you changed your mind? I'm going to stay here until it gets good and dark and then go up there."

"You may spoil all my plans if you attempt to reach him to-night," Ned replied, in a matter-of-fact tone. "On the way back I want to stop at the cabin a moment."

"All right," Jack grumbled. "I suppose I'll have to go with you! When are you thinking of rescuing Jimmie? After they send us one of his hands?"

"Don't be sarcastic," laughed Ned. "You'll understand it all before long."

Jack was not at all pleased with the idea of returning to camp, and said so repeatedly as they walked along both keeping in the thicket as far as possible, but Ned seemed to take no offense at his remarks.

"What I can't get through my head," Jack finally said, changing the topic of conversation, "is why they let us travel through here without nipping us."

"I have an idea," Ned answered, "that they are pretty busy just now."

"Well, what was the use of our going at all if we sneak away as soon as we get where we might accomplish something?" demanded the boy, reverting to the old subject.

"You did a good job in finding and following them," Ned replied, ignoring the question, "and another good job in showing me the way. We have accomplished more than you think! I'm anxious for the end to come, so you'll know just how much you have accomplished! There is the cabin light," he added.

The boys walked boldly up to the door and Ned knocked. Mrs. Brady looked out with a welcoming smile on her faded face. She invited them in and tried to appear pleased at their visit, but Ned saw that she was under a great mental strain.

Judd Bradley sat by the hearth, with the child by his side. He smiled when Ned nodded to him and pointed to a chair.

"Pardon my not arising," he said. "The fact is that I'm a bit leg-weary to-night. This little chap ran away to-day, and I had a long chase after him!"

"We were worried about him," Mrs. Brady added.

"Aw, what's the matter wid youse folks, anyway?" demanded the boy, in a strident tone. "I didn't promise to sit in a chair an' play wid a cat all day!"

"I've had quite a busy day myself," Ned observed, "for one of the boys has been abducted by the counterfeiter, as I suppose, and we've been looking for him."

"Have you found him?" asked the old lady, anxiously.

"No," was the reply. "He must be securely hidden."

"The poor little fellow!"

Ned glanced casually at Bradley and saw that he was all interest.

"It seems," he went on, "that the counterfeiters blame us for what took place last night, and want us to leave the district. If we do they will send the boy out to us unharmed, at least that is what they promise."

"I don't see how they can blame you for the trouble of last night," Bradley said, and Ned caught a tone of irony in his voice.

"That's what I can't see," Ned went on, "but it seems that they do."

"And so they have ordered you out of the hills?" asked Bradley. "That's too bad, just as we were getting well acquainted. But, then, you don't have to go!"

"I think we'll go," Ned replied. "There are other localities where we can take pictures, and we can't afford to take any chances on the boy being injured."

"Sorry to have you go," Bradley remarked, "but that may be the wisest course."

"We think so," Ned replied. "Anyway, we're going day after to-morrow, in time to meet Jimmie at Cumberland. I think we can get packed up and out by that time."

"Shall we see you again before you go?" asked the old lady, anxiously.

"Oh, I presume so. I am going now to leave a note in the cave, saying that we are going out, and then on to camp."

When the boys stepped outside the cabin the old lady followed as far as the threshold standing with her gray head outside.

"I'm sorry," she said. "If there is anything I can do—"

Jack stood a couple of yards away, whistling shrilly. At a word from Ned the old lady stepped out into the open air, half closing the door after her. From the inside came the heavy tread of Bradley approaching the door.

But before the visitor gained the threshold Ned and Mrs. Bradley had exchanged half a dozen short sentences, and when Bradley looked out she was saying.

"I shall look for you if you ever come this way again."

"I'll surely be back, some bright day!" laughed Ned, and the two boys walked on.

"Well," Jack said, as they left the cabin behind, "of all the fire-proof, enthusiastic, gilt-edged, slicky-slick members of the Ananias club I ever heard mentioned, you certainly take the bakery! What did you go and tell Bradley we were going out for?"

"Because," Ned answered, "we are going out."

"Not by day after to-morrow?"

"I hope so! We ought to get ready by that time!"

"I don't ask any more questions!" grumbled Jack. "I don't know hot from cold! I'm deaf and dumb and blind from this minute on. Uncle Ike has a classical education in comparison with what I know. Go to it, Neddie, boy!"

They stopped at the cave and Ned wrote a note to the effect that they were going out inside the limit set, placed it in a conspicuous place on the shelf with the dies, and then the two boys set out for camp. It was a long, hard climb, but they made it before the boys were in their bunks.

"You're a nice party!" Frank exclaimed, as Ned came up. "We thought you had been pinched! There's plenty of hot supper in the oven for you, but you don't deserve a thing! Square yourself!"

"Don't ask him a single question!" grumbled Jack. "He won't tell you a thing! We've been within sight of a signal from Jimmie this afternoon, and we've had a chance to tell the outlaws where they can go, but he's muffed every play! I'm going to eat and go to bed!"

Jack really was out of temper, so no objections were made to his going to his bunk as soon as he had

finished supper! Ned laughed good-naturedly at the boy's remarks and thought no more about them.

Frank came and sat down by Ned while the latter was eating a hearty supper.

"The worry doesn't seem to affect your appetite!" the boy laughed. "Have you solved the riddle, that you are so calm through it all? If you have, just tell me this:

"Is it the prince, or is it Mike III.?"

"I've written the answer to that in my little red book," laughed Ned.

Frank eyed the other with a grin, but made no reply for a time, then he merely said:

"You are up to your old tricks! Well, what is on for to-night?"

"Why," Ned answered, "if you would like a stroll by moonlight, I think we might get a good view of the south country from the top of the mountain."

"I don't know what you're up to," Frank answered, springing to his feet, "but I'm game for anything. I've been eating my heart out all day."

"What about the prints?" asked Ned.

"They are remarkably good," Frank replied, "but there are no special features. In one picture, taken down in the canyon, there is a face that we did not see, though."

"What sort of a face?"

"A strange one to me. But I'll show them all to you in the morning. When are you going out for that stroll in the moonlight?"

"In two hours. That will be about midnight. Between now and that time I'm going to get a little sleep. Wake me at twelve, will you—and, by the way, say nothing to the others about it. They'll all want to go! We can notify whoever is on watch when we get ready to start."

Ned hastened to his bunk and lay down. Five minutes later, when Frank looked in, he was studying a French dictionary by the light of his electric candle. Ten minutes later he was sound asleep. At twelve the boys were ready to start, and Teddy, who was on watch, was warned to keep wide awake and listen for noises from the south.

"If you hear shooting," Ned said, "two of you jump on Uncle Ike and charge along the summit to the south. Make all the noise you can! Don't go down the slope, but keep to the summit."

"Now where?" asked Frank, as they walked over the rocks and wound around jutting crags. "If you'll give me time I'll take some moonlight pictures for Dad's newspapers. He must be expecting some by this time!"

"Poor old Dad!" laughed Ned. "By this time he must have given up sitting around the New York postoffice, waiting for your pictures to come!"

"I'm going to send him some on this trip, sure!" declared the boy. "He deserves them, you know, and his newspaper needs them! Besides, we are planning another Boy Scout trip, and I shall want a whole lot of money!"

"I see!" cried Ned. "You are casting an anchor to windward!"

"In other words," grinned Frank, "I'm laying the foundation for another appropriation! I'm going to send on some of the pictures of the counterfeiters' den!"

The summit of the ridge was by no means a level pathway. There were peaks, canyons, gulleys and twistings to east and west which caused the boys to travel two miles or more for every mile they advanced toward the point where the two men Jack had followed had taken refuge.

It was about two o'clock in the morning when they came in sight of the chimney rock which Ned had noted on the trip of the afternoon. It rose from the west slope of the mountain like a tower, tall, bulky, forbidding.

Looking down upon it from the east, Ned saw that there was a small canyon in between it and the slope, much the same as the formation near the cave of the counterfeiters. It was evident that the rock had been cast down from the summit, and had caught there—on a projecting ridge of stone.

"Looks like a fortress!" Frank whispered as the rock sparkled in the light of the moon. "Notice the campfire in the canyon?" "There were two there this afternoon," Ned said, "and we thought one of them was there simply to make the second column—the Boy Scout call for assistance."

"If Jimmie isn't tied up hand and foot," Frank suggested, "if he is allowed to move about, under guard, and help in the cooking, he could easily build two fires, and the outlaws wouldn't know what he was up to. That is how Dode came to signal to us, you remember. The counterfeiter never suspected that he was making Indian talk!"

"I think it was Jimmie," Ned declared. "He would find some way to make the signal, if he wasn't tied hard and fast! Anyway," the boy added, "I'm going down the slope right now to see if he is there!"

CHAPTER XVI

THE CALL OF THE PACK

Ned and Frank stood in the shadow behind a protecting rock and peered down into the moonlit canyon for a long time. At first there was no one in sight below, but presently a man came out by the fire, which was burning low now.

It appeared to the boys that he must have crawled out from under the chimney rock itself! He appeared so suddenly that they knew that, at least, there must be an underground hiding place in which he had been concealed when they had first come in view of the canyon and the rock.

The man mended the fire, gathering up the ends of the logs and limbs which had burned through in the middle and placing them back on the coals. Then he opened a box which he had brought from some out-of-sight place and took out canned food and cooking utensils. He was evidently going to get an early breakfast.

Presently a second man joined the first arrival, and they sat down by the fire to wait for water in a great pot to boil. At least, the boys supposed that they were waiting for it to boil.

"I'd like to know what they are talking about," Frank said. "I'm going to see if I can get close enough to them to find out."

"I was just thinking of that myself," Ned responded, "so we may as well be on our way. Keep your gun handy, but don't shoot unless one of them seizes you."

"I'll take good care they don't get hold of me," Frank answered. "Say," he went on, "if Jimmie is there, he must be in some hole under that rock—the one they came out of! If they turn away, I may be able to get in there and see."

"Wait until there is little danger of detection," Ned advised. "We don't know how many men there are in the party, remember."

The boys walked softly back to the north, keeping ridges and outcropping rocks between the canyon and themselves, and then crept softly down the slope so as to come out at the north end of the little cut. The men they were watching were frying bacon and boiling coffee now, and appeared to be thoroughly occupied with their tasks.

In a few moments both boys were within hearing distance. The men were not talking much, however. In fact, they both seemed to be harboring a grouch, from the infrequent low, grumbling complaints which the boys overheard.

"I'm through with the bunch after this!" one of the men said. "I'm not going to do all the work and let some one else draw all the money."

"It is time we got out of here anyway," the other said. "Those fresh boys were around here this afternoon."

"Why didn't you plug them if you knew they were here?" demanded the other.

Frank nudged Ned in the side with his fist.

"Cheerful sort of people!" he said. "I'm looking to see something start soon."

"I didn't know at the time that they were here!" the man replied, with a snarl. "I'm no Indian sleuth. After they left I started through the grove and found their tracks. Good thing for them that I saw their tracks instead of their heads!"

"Well," the other grunted, "if we are agreed that it is time for us to get out, why don't we get out? I'm not going to take all the chances! Why don't the others come? They won't come, and that's all there is to it. They're waiting for us to do the job! Then they'll claim the pay."

By this time the bacon was crisp and the coffee was simmering fragrantly in the pot and the two men fell to with an appetite. Frank watched them eat with an appetite of his own, rubbing his stomach and trying to show how near the point of starvation he was, although it had been only a short time since he had eaten a hearty meal!

"They don't trust us!" one of the men muttered, at length.

"We haven't got a thing on them, if they see fit to welch on us," the other admitted.

"But if we obey orders, they will have so much on us that we won't dare say a word, even if they make us walk back and buy our own meals on the way!"

"Is it agreed, then, that we're going to cut it?" asked one. "If it is, we may as well go now as at any future time."

"All right."

"Now?" asked the other.

"Why not? It will soon be daylight."

"Good idea, for we can't be seen trailing that kid along with us in the broad light of day," was suggested. "Let's move right now!"

"Now," whispered Frank, "do they mean Jimmie, when they speak of the kid, or some one else? And if they are speaking of some one else, here's a question: Is it the prince, or is it Mike III.?"

"It seems to me," Ned whispered back, "that I've heard something like that before."

"Well, get the kid out and feed him!" one of the men commanded. "We've got to keep him with us until we get pay for what we have already done."

"Now we'll know!" Frank suggested, as one of the men turned toward the rock. "If it is Jimmie we'll soon know it. What?"

They were not long kept in doubt. Jimmie shot out of a hole under the rock like an arrow in full flight and squatted down by the fire. Frank snickered when he saw the boy, and turned hastily away toward a ledge which showed back to the north.

While Ned was wondering what the boy was up to, the long, vicious whine of a wolf reached his ears. The call died away slowly, and was followed by silence, then by the snarling call of the pack!

The men by the fire started to their feet and seized their revolvers. Jimmie jumped away from the blaze and held up his hands, bound tightly together.

"Cut me loose!" he cried. "Are you going to let the wolf come and eat me?"

"There are no wolves in these mountains," declared one of the men.
"That was a signal of some kind!"

"I've seen wolves since we came in here," Jimmie declared, telling the exact truth, at that, only the wolves he referred to belonged to the Wolf Patrol, Boy Scouts of America! "They're fierce wolves, too!" he added.

Frank crawled back to Ned's side and lay laughing at the commotion the signal had caused in the little camp. The men hastened their packing, and one of them who had been about to give Jimmie his breakfast snatched the bread and bacon away and put them in a pack he was making up.

"Here!" the boy shouted. "You give me the eats! Think I'm going to travel over these mountains with me tummy abusing me for not doing the right thing by it?"

"You're lucky to have any tummy!" snarled one of the men.

"Aw, give the kid his breakfast!" commanded the other.

The men quarreled and growled at each other while the packing was going on, and Jimmie sat looking around for some sign of the Boy Scout who had given the signal. In half an hour they were ready, and then Jimmie was ordered to move on.

"If you try to run away," he was informed, "you'll be chased by a bullet. We have no time to fool with you! Just keep a pace or two in advance, and march straight ahead and you'll have no trouble. Get along, now!"

"But where's the prince?" asked Frank. "I thought we were going to find the royal prince here!"

"The prince of what?" asked Ned. "The prince of the slums or the prince of a little patch of ground over the sea?"

"Blessed if I know," Frank commented. "See me throw a scare into those bums!"

The men stopped still in their tracks when the ugly snarl of a bear came to them out of the darkness. Frank did himself proud in the manner in which he put out the bear talk. The men were surely frightened.

"Now there's a bear!" wailed Jimmie, although Ned thought he caught a note of fun in his voice. "Don't you know these hills are full of bears? We saw some at our camp last night," he added, "eating bread and honey!"

"Bear nothing!" shouted one of the men. "There ain't a bear within a hundred miles of this place! This is some trick!"

Again the fierce, angry snarl of the bear! Ned caught Frank by the arm to keep him quiet, but the boy finished the bear talk he had begun.

Then Jimmie hastened matters by breaking away and running toward the rock from which the sound had proceeded. Both men took after him, but a shot from Frank's gun caused them to halt. They stood still for an instant, their figures tense and tall, and then turned and ran, almost tumbling over each other in their fright!

They did not stop at slight declivities. They leaped gulleys and almost fell into canyons which split the summits. In vain Ned called to them to halt, that they would not be injured. They ran like race horses, and were soon out of sight. Frank and Jimmie were rolling on the ground in their delight.

Ned looked grave and annoyed. Without speaking he looked over the camp where the men had cooked the breakfast and then returned to the boys.

"I am sorry for that," he said, mildly. "I wanted to put those men through the third degree! We should have held them up and put on the handcuffs."

"You didn't say so!" observed Frank sheepishly.

"No use to talk about it now," Ned declared. "Perhaps Jimmie knows what we expected to learn from them."

"All I know is that the bums got me at the cave and tied me up," Jimmie said.

"How many men have you seen in the party?" asked Ned. "Just those two. They were always talking about some one else coming in, but I never saw any one else."

"What did they talk about?" asked Ned.

"They were trying, most of the time, to make me admit that the Camera Club was a secret service organization," laughed the lad. "Of course I denied it!"

"What did they say about a child?"

"Not one word! I kept my ears open for that kind of talk!"

"Did they have a boy with them at any one time?" asked Ned.

"This afternoon, or yesterday afternoon, rather, I saw a kid moving about on the slope. I was cooking, and built two fires so as to make a signal. Did you see it?"

"Yes, we saw it," answered Ned, "but did not reply to it for the reason that we feared discovery. We wanted to come here in the night and release you and capture the two outlaws! But what sort of a child was it that you saw?"

"Why, it was the kid from the cabin. Say, Ned," he added, with a wink at Frank, "is that the prince, or is it Mike III.?"

"Cut it out!" roared Frank. "We've heard enough of that."

Ned laid a hand on the shoulder of each boy.

"That shot attracted attention," he whispered, "or the runaways are coming back. I hear some one tramping over rock, and a moment ago I caught the gleam of a gun barrel."

"Then it's me for a hole to crawl into!" whispered Jimmie. "I've had troubles of my own for the past few hours! Say, but I'm hungry, boys."

The boys left their place of retreat just as a couple of bullets spattered on rock.

CHAPTER XVII

JUST A LITTLE DARK WASH

More shots were fired, but the boys were soon out of range. A flush of pink was showing in the sky now, and the sun would be up in half an hour. Jimmie looked longingly toward the camp, and Ned turned his footsteps that way.

"Speaking of quitters," Jimmie said, as they moved along, "the two men who geezled me take the bun! They quarreled all the time because some one else didn't come and do something they wanted done! No wonder they ducked when one shot was fired!"

"About the boy you saw yesterday afternoon," Ned asked. "Are you sure it was the lad who was brought to our camp?"

"Of course it was!"

"Dressed just the same?"

"Just exactly."

"Why didn't you take a picture of him?" asked Frank.

"Huh, don't you ever think I didn't," was the reply. "I've got it in my camera now. When we get to camp I'll develop it and print some. I've got pictures of the men, too, and about everything around the hole in the ground where they hid me."

"That is as it should be!" Ned declared. "But how did you do it!"

"They are easy!" was all the reply Jimmie made.

A quarter of a mile away from the chimney rock Ned paused and looked back.

"I can't understand where those men went to," he said.

"My friends do you mean?" asked Jimmie with a grin. "They're going on a hop yet."

"No; the men who did the shooting," said Ned.

"Well," Jimmie went on, in a minute, "there is a place somewhere near the rock where some friends of the men who ran are camping. I heard them talking together."

"You little rascal!" Ned exclaimed. "Why didn't you tell me that before?"

"Oh, you won't find them there now!" Jimmie advised. "I'll bet they ducked when we got away. They won't remain around here now."

"Are they counterfeiterers?" asked Frank.

"They're bums from the city, brought here in connection with the abduction of the prince!" laughed Jimmie.

"How did you manage to cook and take pictures when you were tied up like a fish for shipment?" asked Frank.

"They didn't tie me up for a time, for I gave them a lot of talk about liking their society," was the answer. "They just watched me. When it came night and they wanted to sleep, they put the harness on!"

"That was careless of them," declared Frank, "not to tie you up tight."

"They're just cheap bums," Jimmie insisted. "They couldn't kidnap a bird in a cage."

The sun was up when the boys reached the camp, and Teddy was getting breakfast.

The arrival of Jimmie was hailed with manifestations of joy, as may well be supposed. The boys clustered around him excitedly, and even Uncle Ike, from the corral, sent forth a he-haw greeting. The breakfast Teddy prepared for him was a wonder!

The meal was scarcely finished when Bradley came sauntering into the camp. He stopped suddenly when he saw Jimmie. Watching him closely, Ned saw that he was dismayed as well as astonished. However, he soon came forward with a set smile on his face and took the boy by the hand.

"You're lucky," he said, "to get out of the clutches of the counterfeiterers so soon. I was afraid something serious might have happened to you. How did you do it?"

"Ned came after me," was the only reply the boy made.

"We've decided to go away," Ned explained, "and so they gave him up, after a short argument."

"With a gun!" whispered Jimmie to the others.

Bradley loitered about the camp for a long time, asking questions and talking of a great many things which did not interest the lads at all.

"And so you are going out to-morrow?" he asked, arising to go.

"We expect to," Ned replied soberly.

"Perhaps I'll meet you outside somewhere," Bradley laughed.

"I hope so!" Ned replied, whispering an aside to Frank.

Frank walked away toward the tent, and directly, while Bradley's face was in clear outline, Ned heard the click of a shutter and knew that the snapshot had been made.

When Bradley at last started away Ned called the boys together and asked them if it wouldn't be a good idea for them to take a prisoner—just to equalize things!

"Bradley?" asked Frank and Jimmie in chorus.

"That's the man," laughed Ned. "Do you think you could head him off and hide him in some out-of-the-way hole in the ground?"

"What for?" demanded Jack. "I don't see what you want to do that for."

"Just for the fun of it!" Jimmie exclaimed. "I'll guard him after he is taken!" he added, with an appealing look at Ned.

"Well," Ned went on, nodding at Jimmie, "I have an idea that if two of you work down the slope and come out ahead of him you can coax him to throw up his hands easily enough."

"Then, after that, if you leave it to me," Jack continued, "you'll go down to the cabin and get the prince and start away with him!"

"You're sure it is the prince?" asked Ned.

"Of course! I should think any one with sense could see that. Just see how suspiciously the kid is watched! Of course, if you want to take the abductor along too, why that will be all right, but I'd get the prince first!"

"That's good advice," Ned declared, seeking to conciliate the boy, "and I'll go down to the cabin now and look after that end of the game!"

"If things work this way," laughed Oliver, "I guess we *will* get away to-morrow!"

"Why don't you let me go with the boys and help capture that stiff?" asked Jack, speaking to Ned. "He may be armed and perfectly willing to shoot."

"We have messed things up a bit here," Ned answered, "so whatever we do must be done at once. I have another little errand to do while they capture Bradley!"

"Oh, we'll get him, all right!" Frank insisted.

"You bet we will!" Jimmie added. "I'll tie him up tight, too! He won't take no pictures while he is my prisoner."

"Perhaps he won't have a baby camera hidden under his coat! laughed Frank.

"What are you going to say to him, boys, when you take him?" asked Teddy.

"We ain't going to say anything," Jimmie answered, "We're just going to get him!"

"Be careful, boys," was all Ned said as Frank and Jimmie left on their dangerous mission. "Be careful!"

After they had disappeared up the slope Ned turned to Jack.

"You saw one act of the play yesterday," he said to him. "Suppose you come with me now and see another act."

Jack came forward with outstretched hand and downcast face.

"Say, Ned," he said, "I'm sore at myself!"

"What's that for?" Ned asked, shaking the hand heartily and lifting the boy's face by taking him by the chin. "Why are you sore at yourself?"

"Because I acted like a dunce when we left chimney rock without signaling to Jimmie," was the reply, "and because I grumbled like a bear with a sore head when you suggested that Bradley be captured."

"You had a perfect right to express your opinion, my boy," Ned said.

"Yes, but I might have known that you knew what you were about. To be honest, I could hardly believe my eyes when I saw you bringing Jimmie back."

"The least demonstration on our part at that time," Ned said, then, "might have caused the men who were guarding Jimmie to shift their quarters. Besides, I wanted Bradley in the toils before I made the final break."

"But he wasn't when you released Jimmie," Jack suggested.

"He will be before the final card is laid down," Ned replied. "But come," he went on, "we must be moving if we get to the cottage before the trouble begins."

"I'm all in the dark," Jack said, "but I'm willing to take your judgment now."

Ned and Jack hastened away, traveling down the slope to the west and south so as to get to the cottage in the quickest possible time. When they came in sight of the structure they saw Mary Brady sitting in the doorway, her head bent forward, her face buried in the palms of her hands.

She arose at the sound of their footsteps and advanced with outstretched hands to meet them. There were tears on her face and her manner was excited.

"You came too late!" she cried, wringing Ned's hand. "They have taken him away."

"When?" asked Ned, leading the old lady into the cabin.

"Oh, I don't know when! Sometime in the night. I awoke and saw that the bed was empty and called to Bradley. He arose and has been looking for him ever since."

"He was just up at our camp—looking!" Ned said, with a wink at Jack.

The old lady now went to a cupboard and brought forth a glass in which a dark fluid rested. A small black brush stood against the side of the vessel.

"I found this for you, as you asked," she said.

Ned examined the contents of the glass and made a mark on a white paper with the brush. The color transmitted to the paper was a light brown, not black.

"You washed the boy, as I asked you to?" Ned then enquired.

"I tried to," was the reply, "but Bradley said he would take him out and give him a swim in the run down in the valley. He wouldn't let me touch him."

"Well, what did the pillow case show this morning?"

The old lady pointed to the white paper.

"It was stained like that," she said.

During this talk Jack had been standing looking from Ned to the old lady with all shades of expression on his face. Now he spoke.

"Say, Ned," he almost gasped, "what is the meaning of all this?"

"Wait a minute!" Ned said, facing the old lady again. "And you listened to their talk when they sat together last night?"

"Indeed I did, sir, and its the first time I ever played the spy!"

"What was Bradley saying to him?" asked Ned, then.

"He was saying French words over and over for him to repeat!"

Jack dropped into a chair and looked helplessly at his chum.

"Foolish little French phrases, like one finds at the back of any dictionary?" asked Ned. "He was repeating them so that the boy could say them after him?"

"Yes, sir, that is just it."

"Now, Jack, what about your prince of the royal blood?" asked Ned.

"I gather from what I hear that he was painted," said Jack, with a shamed look in his eyes. "Painted!"

"Sure he was!" cried the woman. "Painted and taught foolish little French words to say! But he is Mike's boy! I know that!"

"This is like the Arabian Nights!" Jack cried.

"Worse!" Ned declared, "for all my plans have gone wrong with the disappearance of the boy."

CHAPTER XVIII

BRADLEY BECOMES INDIGNANT

Frank and Jimmie hastened down the slope to the west, after toiling up and crossing the broken summit, and soon caught sight of the man they had been instructed to take prisoner. Bradley was

walking swiftly, his haste not at all matching the leisurely air he had affected at the camp.

"How do you feel now?" asked Jimmie, wrinkling his nose at Frank.
"How does it seem to be a bold, bad gunman?"

"I think it is a little shivery," Frank answered. "When I get back to New York," he went on, "I'm going to write a story for Dad's newspaper entitled: 'Desperate Desmonds I have Shot Up in the Hills.' That title ought to make a hit on the East Side, south of First street!"

"I feel like a second-story man, and a gopher-worker, and a train-robber, and a confidence operative all rolled into one!" Jimmie admitted. "This holding people up is new exercise for us! Say, will you agree to let me push the gun into his face?"

"We'll both have guns, you little highway-man!" Frank replied. "You needn't think I'm going to look on and miss all the fun!"

"Then you let me tie him up!" coaxed Jimmie. "I won't tie him very tight, just so he can't breathe, and so his blood won't circulate!" "You're the fierce little bandit!" declared Frank.

"Well, the gang he belongs to tied me up!" complained the boy. "I'm going to get even on this geek! We can walk right down on him at any time now. He'll never suspect that we're pirates."

"First," Frank observed, "I'd like to know where he is going so fast."

"He may go so fast that he'll get to friends before we harness him!" warned Jimmie. "Then we couldn't get him at all, but might, instead, get geezled ourselves."

"There seems to be a little sense left in that head of yours," Frank laughed, "even if your friends do think it is solid bone! So we'd better skip along and take him under our protection before we have an army to fight. Say, but won't he take a tumble to himself when he finds himself stuck up by two boys?"

Not withstanding their half-humorous talk concerning what they were about to do, the boys both realized that they were facing a serious situation. They had every confidence in Ned's judgment, still they had no knowledge of Bradley which seemed to them to warrant the bold step they were about to take.

Jimmie was under the impression that Bradley belonged to the coterie which had taken him prisoner, but he had no proof of it. Bradley had been, apparently, accepted by Mrs. Mary Brady, and that seemed a good recommend for him. Still, there were the instructions, and they were resolved to carry them out. Neither expressed to the other his secret thought on the subject.

"Where are we going to hide him, after we take him?" asked Jimmie, after a time, during which the lads had managed by hard work to decrease the distance between themselves and Bradley. "How about the old counterfeiters' den?"

"That's the first place his friends will look for him! No, sir, we've got to find a little retreat of our own, and one of us must guard him. Do you know how long Ned wants to keep him?" asked Frank.

"Don't know a thing about it," was the reply. "I don't even know why he wants him captured, or what proof he has against him."

The boys were now not far away from Bradley, and, hearing the rattle of broken rock behind him, he turned and looked back at the boys, who were swinging along with their hands in their pockets. He waited for them to come up.

"Taking a little walk, eh?" he questioned, as the boys came to the level space on the mountainside where he had paused.

Bradley seemed to be entirely unconscious of danger, for he turned his back to the boys presently, after a few short sentences had passed between them, and moved forward, as if to continue his way down the slope.

"Just a minute!" Frank said, sharply, and he faced them.

Two automatic revolvers were within a foot of his head, and the eyes of the boys back of them declared that the situation was not the result of a joke.

"Hold out your hands!" Jimmie ordered. "We want to see if you're toting any smoke-wagons! Push 'em out, Mister!"

Bradley did not hesitate a second. His hands went out like a flash. There was a smile on his lips as Jimmie removed his revolver, but his jaw was threatening.

"And so you are just common thieves?" he said.

"Aw, quit it!" Jimmie answered. "We're taking care of you so you won't fall over a precipice and hurt yourself."

"You'll find very little money on me," Bradley went on. "I've sent in to the city for a couple of hundred. You ought to have waited a few days."

"We don't want your money," Frank cut in, "all we want is the benefit of your society for a time."

Bradley flushed angrily when Jimmie adroitly snapped a pair of handcuffs on his outstretched wrists, but he made no protest.

"Now you can put down your hands," Jimmie announced. "They'll get stiff if you hold 'em out too long. Now, sit down and pick out your hotel. You may have a room in most any section of this district. Immaterial to us where we put you!"

"What does it mean?" demanded Bradley. "I presume you boys know what you are doing. There's law in this state, as wild as this country looks to be. You'll get years behind prison bars for this."

"Before I forget it," Jimmie asked, with a wink at Frank, "I want you to tell me something. Will you?"

"That depends. What is it you want to know?"

"This: Is the boy down at the cabin the prince, or is he Mike III?"

The eyes of both boys were fixed keenly on Bradley's face as the question was put. So far as they could see, it did not change a particle in color or expression.

"That's a queer question for you to ask," he said. "You'd better asked Mrs. Brady whether it is her grandson or not! And I don't know what you mean, talking about a prince. I haven't seen any prince about here—except the prince of the son of thieves!"

"So you won't tell, eh?" asked Frank.

"The boy I brought in is Michael Brady, son of the son of Mrs. Brady."

Sitting on the level space half way down to the outcropping ledge which held the workroom of the counterfeiters, Bradley looked anxiously in the direction of the canyon.

Jimmie noted the look and took out his field glass. People were moving about in the canyon, and down in the valley to the south, where the cabin stood, something out of the ordinary seemed to be going on.

"You are expecting friends?" asked Frank.

"They are liable to come any minute," was the cool reply.

"Then we'd better be going," Jimmie cut in. "There are men in the canyon, and in the valley, and they may be coming up here to find out why you don't meet them, as per agreement! Are they good waiters? If they are, you may find them still in the valley after you've served a couple of terms in a Federal prison!"

"Be careful what you say," warned Bradley. "I'm in your power now, but there'll come a time when I won't be. Remember that!"

Jimmie's glass showed him that the men below were starting up the slope.

"We'll go back toward camp," he said to Frank. "I guess the fellows down there are watching us through glasses. If you don't mind," he added, turning to Bradley with a provoking laugh, "we'll stow you away in a hole in the rocks somewhere until they get tired of looking for you!"

"Go as far as you like!" was the reply.

Frank and Jimmie stepped aside and conversed together in low tones, trying to make up their minds what to do with the prisoner. It had taken little trouble to capture him, but it seemed to them that it would be no easy matter to hold him.

"There's a cute little dip in the summit not far from the camp," Frank said, at length. "A boulder tumbled out of the slope, and there's a cave big enough to hide three in, only there is a part of it which has no roof."

"Don't mind that!" Bradley said, in a sarcastic tone. "We won't have a long residence in any place you select now."

"The summit is spotted with queer little openings where soft rock has been washed out," Frank said, "and we can locate not far from the camp if we want to."

"I suppose you boys are doing this under the orders of this Nestor boy?" asked Bradley. "When you get to him, kindly ask him to call on me. I want to know what all this means."

"Let's see, what was it you said about the child you brought in with you?" asked Jimmie, wrinkling his freckled nose until it did not seem possible to ever get it out straight again, "what was it you said his name was? Was it Prince Abductable or Mike the Third?"

Bradley scowled but said nothing. The boys now set off up the slope with their prisoner. Now and then they turned to look into the canyon and the valley below.

The men they had observed in the canyon were slowly ascending. There were four of them, and it seemed to the boys that they were examining every foot of the ground they covered. Bradley looked downward, too, and a smile came to his face as he did so. It was plain that he expected help from that quarter.

The boys walked as swiftly as possible, and soon came to the summit, where a view of the camp was had. The corral where the mules were feeding was also in sight, farther down, and Teddy was seen making friends with Uncle Ike.

The camp looked so quiet and deserted that Jimmie took out his field glass again and looked closely. The flap of the tent was up, and the boy could see for some distance into the interior.

Trunks and boxes were open, their contents scattered about the floor. A figure lay still on the floor, as if asleep. Jimmie could not see the face, but from the size and expression of the shoulders he imagined it to be Dode.

Oliver was not to be seen. Then, while the boy watched, with a premonition of approaching evil in his mind, he saw two men move out into the center of the tent. They were looking through handfuls of papers, or pictures, or something similar. Jimmie could not determine at that distance just what they were carrying.

"Look here, Frank," the boy said, "just take a look at the tent."

Not a word to arouse the interest of the prisoner was said. Frank looked and handed the glass back to his chum. Jimmie knew what his chum feared as well as if he had put that fear into words. Bradley was smiling calmly.

"They have raided the tent!" Jimmie whispered, and Frank nodded.

"And they are destroying our plates and prints," Jimmie went on, "and so we'd better be getting down there to see about it."

CHAPTER XIX

NED PLAYS THE MIND-READER

Jack stood in the little cabin in the valley and looked Ned expectantly in the face.

"Tell me," he finally said, "tell me why they painted this boy?"

"To get us off the trail of the prince," replied Ned.

"But it seems that they failed," suggested Jack. "You know?"

"I suspected from the very first," Ned answered. "Yesterday afternoon I knew."

"Well, it may be all right," Jack muttered, "or the man who brought him here may need a new wire on his trolley, but I can't see why they should bring this counterfeit prince here at all."

"They knew that we were coming here," Ned explained, resolved to give his chum a full understanding of the situation. "They knew we were coming here in quest of the prince. How they knew I can't make out, but they knew."

"They might have heard more than we supposed from the attic over the clubroom," Jack suggested.

"If the story of the maid and the coachman is straight," Ned continued, "they heard little that night. But they knew! They might have bribed some of the servants. I don't know. They might have been in that room before that evening."

"At any rate, when the Boy Scout Camera Club started for West Virginia by way of Washington the friends of the abductors knew what was going on. Now, it is my opinion that the prince had been headed for the mountains before the conspirators became aware of our connection with the case."

"I begin to see daylight!" Jack cried.

"Well, the prince being on his way to the hills and we having a good idea as to the locality of his place of hiding, the conspirators conceived the idea of giving us a false little prince to play with!"

"They're no fools!" Jack exclaimed. "No fools at all!"

"Now," Ned went on, "some of the conspirators knew Mrs. Brady's son in Washington. They knew of his many promises to his mother to return to the mountains. They knew of his recent promise to her to come home and bring the boy with him. They were doubtless very intimate with Mike Brady, Senior, for they knew all the little details of the life his mother was living."

"So they got him to permit them to bring the boy to his grandmother. They knew he would be looking for a prince in the hills, and so they gave us a false one to engage our attention! Rather clever, that, Jack."

The old lady was now regarding Ned with eyes which expressed awe as well as wonder.

"How did you find it all out?" she asked. "How do you know what took place in the minds of those wicked men?"

"After they took possession of the boy they began bribing him to play the part he has played here so imperfectly. They taught him cheap little French phrases from the dictionary, and touched up his already dusky complexion so as to make him look darker than ever. Yesterday I saw Bradley at work on his face with a brush!"

"And the lad played his part!" the grandmother declared. "I don't know how Bradley led him along, but the boy was willing to do as he was told. I never saw such a wild little chap so thoroughly subdued before. He wouldn't even tell me the truth when I took him in my old arms last night and talked to him."

"But he evidently told Bradley what you said to him," Ned continued, "for he got the child away in the night. Then he came to camp this morning to see if he could find out how much I knew. He's probably tied up by this time!"

"You have had him arrested," asked the old lady. "Then he'll never tell where the boy has been hidden, and he'll die of starvation—die almost within sound of my voice."

"We'll find him," Ned answered, grimly. "We can make Bradley talk, I imagine."

"And while this has been going on," Jack said, "the true prince, the boy we came here to find, has doubtless been carried to some other part of the country?"

"I don't believe it!" Ned replied. "The conspirators would naturally expect us to shift our search for him back to Washington, or Chicago, or New York, wouldn't they? As soon as we discovered that this boy was not the person we sought, they would expect us to leave the hills at once, wouldn't they? Well, if they anticipated such a move on our part, what is more natural than that they should take advantage of this alleged idea on our part and leave the prince right here?"

"That is just what they would do!" cried Jack. "That is just what they have done. I wondered why you

told Bradley we were going out! I had no idea that you knew so much about the case."

"Bradley knew that I knew the boy to be an imposter," Ned went on. "He intended we should make the discovery in time—after he had watched the grandson for a few days, sized up the situation generally, and dropped out of sight. He intended me to know in a couple of weeks, after he was out of harm's way. But I discovered the trick too quickly for him."

"When did you first suspect?" asked Jack.

"That first morning. The boy's French was from the back of the book, and there was too strong an atmosphere of Washington about him—an atmosphere which does not savor of the quiet life of the prince of the blood. Then when I watched him closer I saw that he had been painted. Oh, it was all plain enough."

"So you think the prince is here—in these hills?" asked the old lady.

"I can't say, now," Ned replied. "I am sure that he was here yesterday. I think I saw him! But the escape of the two men who captured Jimmie muddled things up a lot. I wanted to put them through a little examination."

"After their escape I could not pose longer as a lad after snapshots! I can't say as I deceived the conspirators when I laid the capture of Jimmie to the counterfeiters. I think I did fool them when I said we were going out of the hills in order to protect the captive."

"Well, when we released Jimmie and let the two guards escape, that part of the game was off. If I could have held the men it would have been different."

"Perhaps Bradley can be made to tell where the prince is," suggested Jack.

"I hardly think he knows," Ned replied. "He has not, I think, been taken fully into the confidence of the men higher up, any more than have the men who guarded Jimmie."

"He certainly knows where my grandson is," exclaimed the old lady, "and I'll tear his heart out but I'll make him tell me. He took him away!"

"I am not so certain of that, either," Ned mused. "I don't know just how far the criminal head of the conspiracy has trusted him."

"You'll do all you can to find my boy, won't you?" pleaded the old lady.

"Don't worry about the boy," Ned urged. "We'll find him. If Frank and Jimmie have had good luck Bradley is under arrest now, and something will be brought out to lead to his discovery. Besides, with the disguise penetrated, there is no longer any motive for holding him, unless he knows too much, which is not likely."

"If his father was here he might help," suggested the old lady.

Jack, who had been looking steadily out of the window for some little time, now turned to Ned with a smile on his face.

"I know now what you wrote in your little red book!" he said.

"Are you certain of that?"

"Why, of course. You wrote the answer to the question: 'Is it the prince, or is it Mike III?' Didn't you, now?"

"Yes, I did!" was the reply. "I was almost positive before, but I knew that day."

"And now we are just where we began," Jack said. "We've solved one phrase of the case, but we haven't found the prince."

"That will come later," Ned declared, confidently. "Well," he went on, "we have finished our work here for the present. We have learned of the disappearance of the grandson and we have confirmed my previous belief, that the boy was sent in here to draw our attention from the abducted child. So we may as well go back to camp and see what the boys have been doing."

The old lady still clung to Ned piteously, begging him to restore her boy, and Ned promised to do all

in his power to place the lad in her arms.

"If my son would only come!" the woman kept saying.

"If you'll give me his address," Ned promised, "I'll see him when I get back to Washington, if he is not already here or on his way here."

The address was given and the boys started on the return trip to camp.

"Now, Jack," Ned said, when they were on their way up the slope, "do you know where the nearest telegraph station is?"

"There's one over on the south fork of the Potomac," Jack replied.

"You are good friends with Uncle Ike?" Ned then asked, with a laugh.

"Sure I am. Uncle Ike is a friend of every person who carries sugar in his pocket."

"Well, when we get back to camp I'll give you a night message. You must take the mule and get it to the station. You may not be able to get there to-night. If you can't, send it when you do get there. Wait for an answer. When you get it tell Uncle Ike it is important and get here with it as soon as possible. You've got a hard trip ahead of you, boy!" he added. "I'm game!" laughed Jack. "If there's any of this prince trouble leaked out," he added, "what shall I say?"

"Tell the old story. Say that we are in the hills for art's sake, and that we have been annoyed by counterfeiters! Nothing serious, understand? Not a word about our real mission here. You notice that even the men we are battling with want it understood that it is the counterfeiters who are trying to drive us out."

"There must be something mighty strange about this abduction game," Jack grinned. "No one will even admit that there is a prince in the case."

When the boys came to the vicinity of the summit, south of a point in line with the camp and the canyon where the counterfeiters had been discovered, they stopped and took a good survey of the landscape.

"We can probably learn more about what has been going on," Jack suggested, "by hiking straight for the camp. I'm anxious to be off on that trip. Uncle Ike will like it—not! But I'll make him like it! I'll give you a good imitation of a boy sailing over the mountains on the freight deck of a mule!"

"I was wondering," Ned said, composedly, though his eyes were troubled, "whether we had any camp left! If you'll look off to the north, you'll see four men crouching in a dent in the slope. Rough-looking chaps, eh?"

"I see!" Jack whispered. "Have they seen us? That's the question now."

"If they saw us," Ned continued, "they would either be making for us or trying to get out of sight. No; they are watching the camp. See! They are where they can look over the summit."

"If they haven't been to the camp I'll think ourselves lucky," Ned said.

"They probably haven't!" Jack cried. "But look there, they are going on a rush right now! Must be Bradley's friends. What?"

CHAPTER XX

SHOOTING ON THE MOUNTAINSIDE

Bradley smiled cynically as he looked down toward the tent. He could not, of course, distinguish the figures as plainly as Jimmie could with the glass, but he knew from the excited manner of the boys that something unusual was taking place.

"You have visitors at the camp?" he asked coolly, as the lads motioned to him to move on. "I shall be

glad to meet them, you may be sure."

He held out his manacled hands suggestively as he spoke.

"You're not invited!" Jimmie grunted. "We've got private date with those people. You might muss things up, if we permitted you to go with us!"

"Very well," Bradley replied. "They'll know where I am. But, for fear they'll not recognize me, at this distance, I'll just give them notice that I'm here."

Jimmie and Frank both sprang forward to prevent the promised outcry, but Bradley proved too quick for them. The cry that rose from his lips was long, shrill and significant in its insistence. It was finally stopped by Bradley being thrown to the ground, where he lay with the old sarcastic smile on his face.

"You've done it now!" Frank gritted. "You ought to be shot."

"You are none too good to commit a murder—to kill an unarmed and defenseless man."

"If you don't keep that twirler of yours reefed I'll tie it up!" Jimmie declared, with a threatening motion.

He might have gagged Bradley there and then only that Frank called his attention to the camp. The two men who had been seen inside were now hiding on the west side of the tent, and Teddy was coming up the slope from the corral. Oliver was nowhere to be seen, and the supposition was that he had been captured by the outlaws.

"We've got to tie this robber hand and foot and gag him!" Frank cried. "We've got to get down to the camp right away!"

"Perhaps," Bradley observed, with a provoking laugh, "you'll also tie and gag the men who are coming up the hill from the canyon."

The four men were now nearly half way up the slope from the cut, and having heard the cry, were making good time in the ascent. The situation looked anything but peaceful!

The boys were anxious and excited, and Bradley counted on this when he made the next move. The men on the west slope had of course heard his call, he reasoned, and were hastening up to his rescue.

Believing this, he took a desperate chance when he sprang away from the boys, dropped to the ground and went bumping over the broken slope, handcuffed as he was. Jimmie had his automatic out in a moment, but by that time Bradley was concealed by one of the boulders which lay on the declivity.

It was useless to try to recapture the fellow, for the men coming up the slope had seen something of what had taken place, and were now on the run wherever the nature of the ground permitted. Besides, they were already within shooting distance, and the boys would be directly under fire if they sought to bring Bradley back.

"It is a hopeless case!" Frank cried. "We can't get him!"

"The best thing we can do, then, is to get to the camp," Jimmie observed.

"Then duck low and cut away to the north!" Frank cried. "Perhaps we can make most of the distance under cover. Say," he added, as they moved along, northward on the slope toward the east, "did you ever see anything like that? That Bradley is some wise guy when it comes to a pinch!"

"He's daring!" Frank commented. "He will make us trouble yet!"

"I believe," Jimmie went on, "that he's the fellow that got into the attic over the clubroom of the Black Bear Patrol. When he was down on the ground, sitting looking over the country, I saw a scar on his head, a sharp cicatrice, three-cornered. You know how he got that?"

"The maid threw a large pair of shears at some one that night," Frank said. "You remember we found blood and a blonde hair on one of the blades."

"Just the sort of hair that gink carries on his dome!" Jimmie added.

The men coming up the west slope had not yet reached the summit, and the men below were still hiding behind the tent. Teddy was approaching the fire.

"They'll get the kid in a minute!" Jimmie said.

"I don't know about that," Frank replied. "He seems to me to be getting suspicious. Notice how he stops and looks around—probably looking for Oliver or Dode."

It was clear that the men waiting behind the tent were becoming impatient, for they moved along and made ready to spring upon the boy. Teddy, however, was not advancing.

Something about the tent had warned him that it was in the hands of the enemy. With a shout of warning to Oliver and Dode, if they chanced to be free and within hearing, he turned and dashed toward the corral.

While the two men were getting under way in pursuit, Frank and Jimmie came out on an easier slope and moved rapidly downward. Teddy was soon out of sight, and then the men turned back.

At that moment a shot came from the summit, and the boys turned to see the four men whom they had observed on the slope heading down for the camp.

"They've found Bradley, of course!" Frank said.

"Yes," answered Jimmie, "there's no use of playing double now, for they know that we are next to their game."

"Shall we rush for the camp?" asked Frank.

"Nothing doing," Jimmie answered. "We can't do a thing there, and we are under cover here! Bradley has, of course, told them that we are here, but they won't be able to find us for a long time. If they get too gay with the things at the camp we'll send a few bullets down. Looks like things were coming their way now, eh?" he added.

"We can't hold the top hand all the time," Frank grunted. "Ned will come along directly and even things up a little. I wish he was here now!"

The four men were now scrambling along the slope, looking for the two boys as they walked, slid and jumped down. The two men who were at the camp had turned back from the pursuit of Teddy at the sound of the shot, and were now awaiting the approach of their friends.

"I suppose they'll burn the tent and drive the mules off!" wailed Jimmie. "I'd like to have a machine gun up here a little while!"

"I reckon they won't!"

This from Frank as a shot came from the slope to the south. The men who were rushing from the camp paused and looked at each other.

While they waited, uncertain as to what they ought to do, another shot came, this time from the corral. Teddy was evidently getting into action!

"Just for luck!" Jimmie shouted.

He fired two shots as he spoke, and two more came from the south and one from the corral. The four men beckoned to their companions at the tent—if such they were—and made a break for the summit which they had just left.

"Whoo—pee!" shouted Jimmie. "Look at the racers!"

At sound of the voice one of the men turned and fired a shot at the rock against which the boy lay. It broke off a splinter but did no harm to the boys.

Frank left cover and ran up the slope.

"Come one!" he cried. "We'll get Bradley yet!"

Jimmie was not long in catching up with him. When they gained the summit the four men were losing no time in their journey to the canyon. They were on their feet only a part of the time.

The boys saw Bradley rise from a sheltering rock and start after them, but he fell in a moment. Handcuffed as he was, he could not keep pace with them. The fugitives paid no attention to his calls for assistance. It was every man for himself at that moment. Bradley sat hopelessly down to await the arrival of the boys.

Just as they gained the spot where he sat Ned and Jack came out of the jungle of broken rocks to the south and looked smilingly down at the prisoner.

"Good day!" laughed Jack.

Bradley forced a smile and turned away.

"You took that trick!" he said.

Jimmie stepped forward and put his fingers into the blonde hair of the captive.

"Where did you get this scar?" he asked, and Ned at once bent forward.

"I fell down and stepped on it!" Bradley answered, still smiling.

"I'll tell you how you got it," Jimmie went on. "You sneaked into a room in New York where you had no business to be and a girl threw a pair of shears at you!"

"That's a fine story!" snarled Bradley. "I never was in New York.

"Bring him along, boys," Ned said. "We'll go on down to camp and see what's been done to our tent and things by this man's friends."

When they once more came to the summit, Teddy was standing outside the tent with Oliver and Dode and the two outlaws were nowhere to be seen. After that Bradley complained at the rate of speed the boys insisted on.

"Your friends must have thought they had butted into an ambush!" Jimmie said to the captive. "Have they had much training in running? They bobbed along like professionals, it seemed to me."

"You'll see how fast they can run!" Bradley growled. "They'll go fast enough to send you all over the road."

"Now about this grandson," asked Ned, falling back. "Mrs. Brady wants to know where he is. No use for you to hide him, now that we all know he was disguised to look like the prince stolen from Washington. Why did you paint him if not to imitate this other boy we speak of?"

"I don't know anything about the boy," was the reply. "He was taken without my knowledge, and that is on the level. I was ordered to do the paint act."

They trudged on for some minutes in silence, and then Bradley asked:

"What is it about this prince you are always talking about? What is there about the prince? Where is he? Why is he supposed to be in this section?"

"You don't know a thing about him, do you?" asked Ned, laughing, "and yet you painted a boy to represent him?"

Bradley only scowled.

"When I find him," Ned continued, "I'll present him to you!"

When the boys reached the tent they found Oliver and Teddy mourning over the destruction of a large number of films and plates. Many pictures, developed and printed with great care, had also been torn or burned.

"Well," Jimmie declared, "they didn't get their hands on the films in my baby camera. I've got a few good ones left."

"Now, Jack," Ned said, "suppose you connect with Uncle Ike and make for the nearest telegraph office? Don't break your neck, and the neck of the mule, but get there as soon as you can. And get back as soon as you receive an answer."

"Why can't I go with him?" asked Jimmie. "I guess I want a mule ride."

"Go it, if you want to!" Ned laughed. "That will leave us one mule to run away on if things get too hot for us here!"

CHAPTER XXI

TOLD BY THE PICTURES

"You'll think we took great care of the camp!" Teddy said, flushing, to Ned, as Jack and Jimmie, followed by the cheers and good wishes of their chums, started away.

"Aw, it wasn't Teddy's fault at all," Oliver declared. "He went down to tell Uncle Ike what a gentleman and a scholar he was, and I was supposed to watch the tent."

"And I was to help him," wailed Dode. "See how well I did it!"

He swung a hand around at the mess on the ground.

"So, while Teddy was down at the corral, Dode and I sat down to develop some snapshots. We never looked out at all! After we had a lot of pictures ready to show on your return, we heard a noise outside and thought Teddy had come back."

"And there is when we got it!" Dode cut in.

"Yes, there, is where we got it in the neck," Oliver went on, while Teddy grinned. "The gun I looked into seemed about as large as the tunnel under the Hudson, and I became the good little boy without further argument."

"I thought the gun I saw was a room in a cavern!" grinned Dode.

"So they performed with their ropes and gags, and we lay there like two little kittens while they tore up our work and smashed things generally. And the way they wrecked the trunks and boxes was a caution."

"What did they talk to each other about while they were searching?" asked Ned.

"Nothing much. They seemed to be too busy looking for papers. From what I could make out; I reckon they thought you had some official document with you."

"I have," laughed Ned, "but they did not find it."

"After they had made all the trouble they could," Oliver went on, "they spoke of burning the tent, and I guess they would have done one it, too, if other things hadn't attracted their attention just at that time!" he added, with a wink at Ned.

"Well," Ned observed, "I'm sorry we lost the pictures, but there may be some of the valuable ones left. We'll look them over right now."

"Jimmie left the films from his baby camera," Teddy remarked. "We can see what he got while he was in the hands of those cheap skates!"

Nearly all the snapshots taken by Ned and Jack on the afternoon they had come to the hiding place of Jimmie's captors had been printed by the boys, and most of them had been destroyed, plates and all. Stationing Oliver and Dode out on the slope to watch for any approach which might be made, Ned gave his attention to the pictures.

"The worst of it is," Frank declared, "that the good ones were the ones the boys printed, and the ones which were burned up."

"I don't know about that," Ned said. "The camera sees things the human eye does not see! What we want now is a knowledge of the country near the spot where Jimmie was held. We took plenty of pictures around there, and Jimmie took some, too, so we may be able to find what we want."

"I'll work over the baby camera pictures while you handle the others," suggested Frank, and the two boys were soon busy at their tasks. Finally Ned handed a torn print to Frank, pointing out a single feature as he did so.

"You see the tree in the foreground?" he asked.

"Yes, of course."

"Now follow along back to the bush at the left and in the rear."

"I see the bush," Frank said.

"What else do you see there?"

Frank bent closer over the print.

"Is that a face there?" he asked.

"It certainly is a face."

"But it looks too small for a human face. It may be caused by some odd arrangement of the leaves. Besides, it is very indistinct."

"Sure, because it is in the shade. It is almost a miracle that we see it at all. I'll get a better print of it soon and enlarge it. Then we shall know more about it. Now, look lower down. What do you see there?"

"Say," cried Frank, "that's a child's face up there! Here is the leg below. Now, what do you think of that?"

"That is doubtless the boy Jack and I saw," said Ned.

"The grandson?" asked Frank.

"The prince, unless I am much mistaken," Ned said, coolly.

"So you saw him?" asked Frank.

"We saw a child," was the reply. "He came toward us for a few steps and then ran back! Now we'll look over the remaining pictures and see what we can find."

"That wasn't the grandson, was it?" asked Frank.

"Mike III. was at the cabin that afternoon," was the reply.

Presently Ned came to another torn print showing the mountain slope directly in front of Chimney rock. He passed it over to Frank with an odd look in his eyes.

"Look right in the foreground, between those two stones," he said.

"What is it between the stones?" asked the boy.

"Looks to me like a coat."

"Do you really think it is?"

"Sure thing!" laughed Ned. "I'm going over there directly and see if it is still there."

Frank looked puzzled.

"But how did it come there?" he asked. "Why should it be left there?"

"I have known children to throw off coats or jackets on a hot day," smiled Ned. "I imagine that princes are not different from other children."

Ned went on with his examination of the pictures. At last he came to one which was badly torn, almost half of it being missing.

"There," he said. "This is a picture taken right there at Chimney rock. Do you see the face above it?"

The face referred to was not that of either of the two men Jimmie had been captured by, or of Bradley, who sat scowling just beyond reach of their voices.

"That is the man we want," Ned said, with a sigh. "If we had the other part of the picture we should see the boy looking over the rock, close at the man's side."

"Very close!" Frank observed. "They seem to have hold of hands. Doesn't that look like a closed hand down lower?"

"That is just what it is!"

Ned laid the picture aside and Frank brought out those which had been made from the films taken from the baby camera. There were half a dozen of them and all were remarkably good.

"Look here," Frank said, "the kid took a picture of the slope back of the rock. Our pictures do not show that. Look up a short distance!"

Not very far up the slope hung a huge boulder which seemed on the verge of falling.

"If you'll notice the point of contact with the ground," Frank went on, "you'll see that the boulder is propped up by wedge-like stones put under it."

"Exactly!" Ned said. "And that means that the boulder has fallen or been pried out of its nest, and that the cavity behind it is regarded as a good hiding place."

"Do you think the prince could have been there?"

"Not when Jack and I were in that section. We saw him out on the slope."

"But he went back that way?"

"Yes."

"Tell you what!" Frank exclaimed. "I'm going to take these pictures home to Dad, and let him print them in his newspaper."

"You'll have to write a story to go with them."

"Oh, I suppose so, but stories aren't read when there are pictures. The cuts tell the story. Dad will like the photographs."

After a time Ned came to the picture of a man with the head torn off! In destroying the print the outlaws had contented themselves by merely ripping it into two pieces. The head part was not to be found.

"What's the dangling things in front of the man's breast?" asked Frank.

"Legs!" replied Ned.

"I never knew a man to wear his legs up there!" laughed Frank.

"But you have known men to lift kids to their backs and let their little legs hang down in front for handles? What?"

"Never thought of that?" Frank exclaimed.

"If we only had the face!" Ned worried.

Then he paused a moment and went back to the print carrying the strange face.

"Here it is!" he said. "See! This is the same man. There are the boots and the buttons. The camera caught the man twice."

"I don't know why you didn't see some of these things when the pictures were made," laughed Frank. "Next time I go out taking snapshots I'm going to study the landscape, so I can choose subjects for my pictures!"

"All this means," Ned began, "that we were watched when we were taking the pictures that afternoon. These people were looking at us! We might as well have been walking through an open street."

"But why didn't they do something to you, then?" demanded Frank. "They captured the ones who entered the workroom."

"Those were counterfeiters, not abductors."

"Well, then, they caught Jimmie and lugged him away?"

"In an effort to drive us out of the country, yes."

"Then why didn't they capture you?"

"Because they thought they had us scared so we'd go, and so didn't want to show their hand. Remember that it was the counterfeiters who were supposed by us to have taken Jimmie."

"I understand. When you found that the boy at the cabin was not the one you were looking for you were supposed to go away so as to save Jimmie's life, and leave the true prince here in hiding."

"That is just it."

Bradley now called out to the boys that he had something to say to them, and they hurried to his side.

"I want you to get the widow's grandson and take him to her," he said. "I was used decent, and I don't like to have her suffer."

"Where is the boy?" asked Ned.

Bradley open his eyes wider in wonder.

"Do you really think I took him away?" he asked.

"Not a doubt of it!" Frank declared.

"Well, I didn't," Bradley insisted. "I don't know where he is, but I think I can point out the likeliest place to hunt for him."

"Down at Chimney rock?" asked Frank.

"In that section, yes. And, look here. You will need to be in a hurry, for the men who have him are anxious to get rid of him—and they are unscrupulous!"

CHAPTER XXII

A RECRUIT FROM THE ENEMY

"So you know the men who have taken the boy we call Mike III.?" asked Ned.

"I know him too well," was the bitter answer. "He's one of the men who use their friends up to the limit and then drop them!"

"You say 'him,'" Ned suggested. "Is there only one in this outrage?"

"There are several, but all bow to the will of the leader. I can't tell you anything more about it! I don't like the way I have been treated, or I wouldn't have said as much as I have."

"I thought your motive was to secure the return of the boy to his grandmother?"

"I want that done, of course, but I wouldn't have suggested it to you only for the high and mighty airs of the man placed over me."

"Why don't you tell me who this man is?" asked Ned. "Why don't you tell me the object of this abduction of the prince? Why not tell me where to find this little chap you seem honestly interested in?"

"I don't know anything about any prince!" insisted Bradley.

"Look here," Ned said, "I believe I can tell you just how this man you hate looks. If I describe him, will you tell me if I am right?"

"I will tell you nothing, except that you ought to look in the vicinity of Chimney rock for the grandson—not at the rock, but close to it! That is more than I ought to tell you."

"This man you speak of," Ned went on, recalling the features of the face caught above the rock by the camera, "has a very slim face, a prominent nose, a wide, thin-lipped mouth, high cheek boned, small eye-orbits, and eyebrows which tip up at the outer corners. He is fond of children, and will play with any child he comes across. He is also fond of mountain climbing, and delights in long tramps over the hills."

Bradley looked at Ned with the old cynical smile on his face.

"Where did you run across him?" he asked eagerly,

"That is enough!" laughed Ned. "You needn't say another word. We have two snapshots of him—one without a head. In one he has hold of the hand of a child, and in the other he has the child on his back, with the little fellow's legs hanging down over his shoulders. A man would not be apt to ride children about on his shoulders unless he was fond of little ones generally, would he?"

"I presume not," Bradley admitted.

"And he wears in both pictures a mountain-climbing costume," Ned went on. "He evidently likes the errand he was sent here on!"

"The man I referred to a few moments ago as unscrupulous does," Bradley said.

"But if he likes children he won't be apt to injure this Mike III., will he?"

"He is a man who will do anything for expediency's sake. Now go away and leave me to my very entertaining thoughts! If I ever get out of these hills alive, and free, I'll never leave Manhattan island again."

"I remember you saying that you had never set foot in New York!" laughed Ned. "You'll have to make your stories consistent if you want them believed!"

"Never mind all that now," Bradley replied. "You get busy restoring that child to Mrs. Brady! Say, boy, but he is a bright-one!"

"Learned French quickly, didn't he, and consented to being blacked up like a negro minstrel, in order to pose as a prince?" asked Ned. "I reckon, however, that the credit does not all belong to the lad. He seems to have had a good instructor."

"If you'll release me," Bradley offered, after a pause, "I'll go and get the boy."

"That's an easy promise to make," laughed Ned.

"But I'll go and get him and bring him to you, and you can return him to his grandmother. Then you may put these bracelets on me again if you like. But, boy, let me tell you this: You've got nothing on me! I haven't done a thing in this state at least, to render myself liable to punishment. I supplied, for good pay, certain information in New York, and I brought the boy you call Mike III. on here from Washington, where I know his father well."

"You must have known what you were doing it for?"

"I did know—for money!"

"But you must have known that the boy was to personate some one else?"

"I didn't care about that. I had my orders! See here, boy, if you ever work with these highbrow rulers of petty kingdoms, you'll soon find out that you're to obey and not ask questions! Do you get me?"

"That's enough!" laughed Ned. "You haven't betrayed your employer, but you have told me all I wanted to know."

The boys unlocked the handcuffs and laid them aside.

"I believe you'll do the right thing," he said. "Go and get the boy. If you need any help let me know."

Bradley arose and stretched out his arms luxuriously.

"That's the first time I ever stood in the accused row," he said, "and it will be the last! But, see here, boy, I can't get the kid in a minute! I'll go to the mother and tell her what I'm doing, if I live to get there!"

"You think your ex-friends may seek to terminate your lease of life?"

"They surely will—now. And, here's a pointer for you, look out for yourself."

"I think I can fix you out so they will receive you with open arms," Ned grinned. "Here. I'll put these cuffs on again, with one arm locked carelessly. You can draw the bar out when you pull right hard. Now, eat what you need and take a run up the slope. We'll follow you with a serenade of bullets. When you join the outlaws down in the canyon you'll be a hero."

"That's a fine notion!" said Bradley, actually smiling.

"And don't come back here with the boy. Send him home to the old lady. Then, if you want to help me in the work I'm on—"

"I don't, and I won't!"

"Don't blame you a mite! I never did like a traitor! If you won't help me, then cut sticks for New York. Some day when you are in better mood, come to the Black Bear Patrol clubroom. You know where it is! Well give you a look into the place without sending you up to the attic!"

Bradley's face twisted into a laugh, but Ned did not seem to notice the fact.

"I'm not saying anything more about the prince, understand, or the attic, or the French, or the black stain, but perhaps you'll tell me the whole story some day!"

And so, handcuffed again, Bradley was taken back to the tent, where he was given a hearty meal. Then he carefully made his way out and ran for the summit. Ned and his chums sat back and laughed at the tumbles he took in his eagerness to deceive any one who might be watching the camp. Now and then he fell down behind a rock and lay there for a moment, peering out in the direction of the tent.

Just before he gained the summit, Ned and the others ran out of the tent with shouts of alarm and dashed up the slope, firing as they went. At that time Bradley's speed might have shown a world record if it had been set down! He cleared the summit, shouting for assistance from anyone who might be below, and half rolled down toward the canyon. Ned fired a few shots and went back to the tent.

"What's the game?" asked Frank, as Ned sat down and roared. "This man Bradley seems to be It—Tag!"

Ned explained the situation and Frank immediately began taking notes for a story for his father's newspaper.

"If I had had a motion picture machine here," Frank declared, "I could have made a fortune out of the films! It was glorious, the way the old boy tore up the rocks on his way down. Think he'll return?"

"I think he will," was the reply.

"But if he doesn't?"

"Then we shall have to find the boy ourselves, just as we are going to find the prince! That is the next job, you understand."

"And geeze the man who stole him—that's in the job, isn't it?"

"Nothing said about that, but I hope to get him and have the goods on him, too. When I present him to the chief he can do whatever he likes with him."

"But how are you going to get the goods on him?" asked Oliver.

"I'll manage that easily," laughed Ned. "The first thing is to catch him. Now, Frank, you saw where Bradley went?"

"Why, he headed for the old counterfeiter den."

"Think you can keep track of him for a short time?"

"Can I? You know it!"

"Then take Dode with you, so as to be in communication with the camp, and follow him! Don't show yourself if you can help it, but if you are discovered keep busy with your camera. We are here only to take pictures, you know!"

"So you don't trust that chap, after all?" asked Frank.

"Yes, I trust him, but he won't betray the men he has been working with. In order to get the boy he'll have to go to the man I want."

"All right!" Frank laughed. "Come on, Dode! I might have known that Ned was next to his job. I'll come back just before sunset to report, if not before. If you love me have a supper fit for six of us ready for me!"

The two boys started away, and Ned, Teddy and Oliver went back to the pictures. After an hour or more Ned went down to the corral, as if looking after the mule. He saw no one on the way there, but when he reached the level spot, rich with June grass, he saw that it had had visitors during the day.

The grass was beaten down flat behind a boulder on the edge of the fertile spot, and there were

cigarette stubs and half-burned matches scattered about. The lush grass still carried the odor of tobacco, and the boy knew that the watcher had not been long absent from his post.

He went back to the camp, and, much to the surprise of Teddy and Oliver, began packing.

"What's doing now?" the boy asked.

"Why," laughed Ned, "haven't I agreed to get out of here to-morrow or next day?"

"Yes, but—"

"We're going to pack, anyway," Ned said, "whether we leave or not! There are people watching every move we make, and I want to convey to them the idea that we are going at once."

"If they are watching us," Oliver suggested, "they doubtless saw Jack and Jimmie leave the camp."

"They undoubtedly did," Ned admitted.

"And will follow them, I'm afraid."

"I've been wondering whether the boys got out of the hills in safety," Ned went on. "They were well mounted, and should have been able to dodge the outlaws. Besides, Jimmie and Jack are, as the boys say on the Bowery, inclined to be 'foolish in the head—like a fox.' So they are probably safely out by this time."

"But, still, I'm worrying about them!" Oliver replied.

CHAPTER XXIII

RACING MOTORS ON THE WAT

"Some day," Jimmie said, as he urged Uncle Ike down an eastern slope of the Alleghany mountains, "I'm going to have this mule put in a book."

"If he keeps up his stealing," Jack declared, "he is more likely to be put in jail. That mule is certainly a bad actor."

"Huh!" grunted Jimmie. "He's got a sugar tooth, or he wouldn't steal!"

The boys drew up when nearly to the valley through which runs the North Fork and looked over the landscape. There was another range of mountains straight ahead, and beyond that the valley of the South Branch, for which they were headed.

"Looks like another climb and good-night!" Jack complained. "And Ned wanted this sent to-night. That's a right smart climb ahead of us," he added.

Jimmie coaxed Uncle Ike back to four feet again and patted him on the head before making any reply. Then he pointed to the south.

"Over there," he said, "is the Virginia line. The ridge ahead of us does no cross that. I know because I looked up this section once when Ned and I were thinking of running away for a rest."

"You always need a rest!" grinned Jack. "Why don't you make Uncle Ike stand still, like Dill Pickles, this old mountain ship of mine does?" he added.

"Why do you call him Dill Pickles?" asked Jimmie. "He looks more like a razor-back with sails set in front."

"He's Dill Pickles because he's got a good disposition gone sour," Jack explained. "He's just about shaken the life out of me now. Doesn't look it, does he?"

"Better call him Bones!" Jimmie advised. "As I was saying," he went on, "the ridge ahead of us drops

down this side of the Virginia line, and we can dodge a climb by going around it."

"And get lost!" Jack grumbled.

"Lost—not. We follow down this valley—or up this valley, rather—until the ridge drops down. Then we go straight east until we come to the South Branch. And there you are."

"Here we go, then!" Jack shouted. "Set your sails and come along."

Uncle Ike wanted a test of speed and endurance right there, but Jimmie held him back. It might be that they would be obliged to return to the camp that night.

They soon left the high places and wound among foothills. Below lay a fertile valley, with handsome and well-tilled fields.

"We're making a hit with these mules!" laughed Jimmie, as they passed along, the people staring at them from gates, doors, windows and fence-tops. "If these ladies and gentlemen ever see us again they'll be sure to know us."

It is not a great distance from the place where they came to the river to the city they sought, and the ground was covered in a couple of hours. The sun was still shining when they passed through a busy street, certainly the center of observation.

When they entered the telegraph office Jack took out the message and handed it to the clerk at the desk without looking at it. The clerk studied it a moment and asked: "Day rates? This seems to be a night letter."

The boys eyed each other keenly for a moment, and then Jimmie said: "I'd have it sent right off if I were you. Ned wouldn't have said anything about its being a night letter if he had had any idea we'd get here so soon."

"All right," Jack said. "Send it now. We'll wait for a little while to see if there's an answer."

"It is in cipher," the clerk said, "and will take some time to send."

"I never looked at it," Jack cried. "I don't even know where it is going."

"To the Secret Service chief, Washington," said the clerk. "Are you boys out here on secret service business?"

"We're out here to take pictures," Jimmie cut in. "We have nothing to do with that dispatch. It was given to us by an acquaintance to send out."

"He wanted to make sure it got into the right hands," Jack said. "Will you call Washington and see if he's there—the chief?"

"You'll have to pay for the message."

Jack laid a banknote of large denomination down on the desk.

"Ask for the chief," he said, "and tell him to wire any instructions he may have for the sender in cipher if he wants to, but to give any instructions he may have for us about the delivery of the message in plain United States!"

"Come back in half an hour," said the clerk, "and I'll probably have something for you. I suppose this cipher message is an important one?" he added, suspiciously.

"Don't know what it is," Jack answered, truthfully.

The clerk evidently did not believe the boy for he stood at the desk gazing after him with a look of distrust on his face. The lads were no sooner out of the office than a thin, angular gentleman, dusky of face and very black and bright of eye, entered and walked up to the clerk.

"I sent a message here by a couple of boys," he said, "and I wish to withdraw it."

"You'll have to find the boys, then, and have them withdraw it," replied the clerk.

"But can't I recall the dispatch—my own dispatch?" demanded the other, exposing a \$100 banknote in his palm. "It is worth something to me to get it back."

The clerk was angry at the plain attempt at bribery, so he turned back to a table and took up the

message the boys had left.

"We have a message here," he said, "which may be recalled under proper conditions. Kindly tell me what your dispatch says."

"Which one did they file?" asked the other. "The one to Washington or the one to New York?"

The clerk laid the paper back on the desk.

"Give me the address you sent your message to at Washington," he said.

"It was the secretary of state," was the reply.

"And the message? Give me a few opening words."

"Read them!" snarled the other. "Can't you read English?"

"The message is in cipher!" said the clerk, "You also have the address wrong. You are evidently a fraud. Get out!"

When the boys returned to the office in half an hour the clerk called them over to the desk at once and told them of what had taken place.

"How did he ever follow us out without our seeing him?" asked Jimmie.

"He must have shot through the air," the other declared.

"Are you sure you kept a good lookout?" smiled the clerk.

"Well, we looked about a good deal," Jimmie admitted, "and I can't say as I thought of being chased up. What did Washington say?"

"You boys are to wait here until you receive instructions. The cipher message is now going on the wire."

The boys sat down in a restaurant not far from the telegraph office and ordered porterhouse steaks, French potatoes, and all the side dishes that were on the menu.

"We may have to ride to-night," Jack said, "and may as well prepare for it."

"I don't like the idea of our being followed here," Jimmie observed. "We'll be apt to come across that chap on the way back. The funny part of it all is that we never suspected there was a sleuth out after us!"

"We ought to have known," Jack grumbled. "Somehow everything has gone wrong with us. If we ride back in the night we'll probably have a skirmish."

After eating they went back to the telegraph office. The clerk was waiting for them, that being the usual hour for his supper.

"Here's your orders," he said, with a smile, "right from the chief himself. He seems to know who you are all right!"

Jack took the dispatch and read:

"Remain where you are until motor cars now on the way from Cumberland reach you. Our men say the cars can make good time clear to the foothills. The cipher message will arrive shortly. Be on your guard."

It was signed by the chief of the Secret Service department.

"What do you know about that?" asked Jack, passing the message over to Jimmie.

"How far is it to Cumberland?" he asked of the clerk.

"Something like eighty miles," was the reply.

"Are the roads good? Can a motor car make good time to-night?"

"The river roads are fairly good. A fast car ought to get here in three hours."

"I see that Chinese-looking guy that wanted the message catching us if we go back in an automobile!"

Jimmie laughed.

"But a motor car," Jack interrupted, "is an easy thing to wreck on a mountain."

"What do you think was in that dispatch?" Jimmie asked of Jack, as they sat in the telegraph office waiting.

"Something which brings out motor cars and secret service men," Jack answered. "I guess it made a hit at Washington."

"Perhaps he wired that he was going to bring the prince in!" laughed Jimmie. "Well, if he did, he'll do it, and that's all I've got to say about it."

Twice that evening a dark face appeared at the window of the telegraph office and peered in at the boys. Each time the owner of the dark face hastened away after a short inspection of the lads and conferred with two men in a dark little hotel office.

Shortly after ten o'clock two great touring cars, long, lean racers, ran up to the curb in front of the telegraph office and stopped. The street was now well-nigh deserted, but what few people were still astir gathered around the machines.

There were three husky men in each machine, and in each car was room for one more person. Only one man alighted and entered the office. When he saw the boys waiting he beckoned to them.

"Got your cipher?" he asked, and Jack nodded.

"Then come along. We'll get to the high climb before the moon comes up."

"Do you know the way?" asked the clerk.

"Only from verbal description," was the reply, "but we can find it."

"I'm off duty," the clerk said, "and I know every inch of the way. I was reared in the mountains west of the short ridge. I'd like a little adventure, too!" he laughed.

"What about the mules?" asked Jimmie, determined that Uncle Ike should be cared for.

"Get them into a barn, quick," said the chief, sharply. "We must be off."

When Jimmie came back the clerk and Jack were crowded into one seat in the rear machine, while a vacant seat in the front car was waiting for him. The party was off with a snort of motors and faint cheers from the little crowd which had gathered.

The river road was fairly good, and in an hour they were at the foothills, around the south end of the short ridge. The driver drew up there, and in the clear air, from the north came the sound of galloping horses.

"Get out and under cover, boys!" the chief commanded.

CHAPTER XXIV

THE MAN-TRAP IS SET

Ned, Oliver and Teddy remained in camp all the afternoon—waiting. They were not, of course, anticipating the immediate return of Jack and Jimmie, but they were looking every moment, after a couple of hours had passed, for some signs of the boys who had been sent out in the wake of Bradley.

"I'll bet a cookie," Teddy exclaimed, as the sun set over the ridge to the west, "that Frank and Dode have bumped into something hard!"

"I may have made a mistake in not going on that trip myself," Ned mused, "but I had an idea there would be business for me at the camp. I don't know what to make of this lack of attention on the part of our enemies!"

"It may be," Oliver suggested, "that they have taken alarm and ducked with the prince."

"That is just what I fear," Ned answered. "It will spoil all my plans if they move now; still, I admit that they've had enough unpleasant experiences here to make them long for a quieter retreat!"

The boys prepared supper, taking pains to provide enough food for Frank and Dode, but they did not come. The meal over, Ned made ready for a trip down the mountain.

"I'm going to Chimney rock," he said to the boys. "I should like to have one of you with me, but two ought to remain here. I'm going to take some rockets with me. If I do not return before midnight, one of you advance along the summit to the south, provided with rockets. If one of my rockets is seen, the watcher must send one up to notify the boy in camp. Then both must make a run for Chimney rock, traveling so as to come upon it from the up-hill side. Is that clear?"

"Perfectly," Oliver declared. "You are going to bring this prince back with you?"

"Perhaps!" laughed Ned. "I may have to bring Frank and Dode back with me!"

There was only the light of the stars when Ned reached the vicinity of Chimney rock, coming in from the slope to the north and moving with extreme caution. There was a dull glow in the dip back of the rock, the glow of coals nearly burned out.

The men who had captured Jimmie at the cave of the counterfeiter had fled before the shooting, and Ned had no idea that they had returned, or would return. Any fire built by them would have long since turned to ashes.

"The party having direct charge of the prince has been here," the boy mused, "though why they should come here is a puzzle to me, as they have, or had a camp of their own not far away. Still, the theory of hiding in a place which has been searched is an old one, and these fellows may have adopted it.

"They certainly adopted a theory something like it," the lad thought, as he watched the dying embers from a distance—from the secure shadow, if the stars may be said to have cast a shadow that night, of a great rock—"when they decided to remain here after the disguise of the widow's grandson had been discovered. They took it for granted that no one would look for the real prince where the disguised one had been found! They might better have taken him away!"

Ned knew very well that the men having charge of the abducted boy had hidden farther up the slope. His idea was that at the time the pictures were taken the men in charge were watching the two who had ran away.

From what Bradley had said, it was not likely that he, Bradley, had been permitted to associate with the actual custodians of the stolen lad. This had been the main source of his complaints.

Ned believed that a portion, at least, of the men sent into the hills as custodians of the prince had followed Jack and Jimmie out. While trembling for the safety of the two boys, Ned had figured on cutting the force of the enemy in two before making an attempt to seize the little prisoner.

Even now, he figured, the force left on the ground had been again divided, for he was positive that the camp was being watched. For this reason he had caused the packing to be done, thus giving the impression that his party was going out at once.

The boy lay in the dark spot under the boulder for a long time, watching, listening, for some indication of human life in that vicinity. He had a half notion that Bradley would head that way, and that the boys would follow him.

"If Bradley does come here," Ned thought, "my trap will be set right! That is, if the dusky little chap from over the sea has not been taken away. If he has, the trap will not serve; still, I shall be able to console myself with the thought that it was at least well set!"

Every clue the boy had gained pointed to the spot where he lay. That had undoubtedly been the point of communication between the leader and his subordinates—with Bradley and the men who had taken Jimmie prisoner.

"That was rather clever," Ned mused, "taking the boy while at the cave of the counterfeiter in order to give the impression that the coiners had seized him!"

Ned realized, too; that the capture of the grandson just at that time had been a master stroke on the part of the conspirators. The lad would have talked too much when he became satisfied that he was safe from all coercion.

Ned lay in his hiding place for what appeared to him to be a long time before he heard anything to indicate that his man-trap had been set in the right spot. Then the voice he heard caused him to spring quickly up to his feet. It was the low, soft, plaintive voice of Mary Brady.

"I haven't seen anything here I could talk about," the old lady was saying. "I wouldn't think of betraying anyone who put my boy in my arms. I've seen him with you—I've been waiting about here for a long time. Bring him out to me and I'll go home and never trouble you any more."

"Now," thought Ned, "how did the old lady manage to find the boy here?"

"You shouldn't have come here," a low, well-modulated masculine voice said. "You have put your own life and the life of the boy in danger by so doing. How long had you been watching and listening before I saw you?"

"A long, long time."

"And you heard much of what was said?"

"I heard a good many words, but I don't remember now what they meant."

The voices came clearly from farther up the slope, and a little to the south. The figures of the speakers could not be seen by the watcher.

"Come up to the camp," the masculine voice said, presently. "I'll turn the boy over to you, but you can't go back to your cabin to-night."

"Are you going to keep me here against my will?" asked the trembling old voice.

"You have seen and heard too much," was the almost brutal rejoinder.

There was a rattle of pebbles as footsteps moved along the rocky surface of the slope. From above came the shrill cry of a child.

"I don't know of any better time to move up and take a peep at the camp of the man who crossed the sea to steal a child," Ned mused. "I wish Frank and Dode would come, but if they don't I'll have to take chances on going alone."

Keeping those in front of him as guides, Ned crept along the slope. More than once a loose pebble rolled with a great noise from under his feet, but those ahead seemed to pay no attention to these evidences of pursuit.

When, perhaps, two hundred paces up the slope the sounds above the boy ceased. The night was still, save for the rustling and creeping of the creatures of the air and the forest. For a long time not a sound indicative of the presence of human life was heard, then a woman's cry of fright came from above.

Ned was about to hasten forward when a voice came to his ears from the darkness.

"We can't permit either of them to leave!" the low, well-modulated voice he had heard before that night said. "Even if we get away with the prince, their stories would ruin us. There is no knowing how soon the gabblings of the old woman might reach the ears of the adherents of the prince."

"Then you propose—"

"Nothing that will not come to them in due course of time! They can go to sleep in the snug inner room and never wake again. They will not know when the change comes. They will sleep forever in their mountain tomb."

"I am opposed to murder," said another voice, harsher, more decisive.

"And so the trap was well set!" mused Ned. "The princeling is still here! Well, the battle may not bring victory to me, but I will at least know that I planned it right, acting on the best information at hand."

It was plain, from what the first speaker had said, that the camp of the conspirators was in a cave, for he had spoken of a snug inner room. The entrance to this cave was undoubtedly closely guarded.

The boy crept along cautiously. The slope was steep, with here and there a ledge which had to be surmounted or circled, always at great risk. In a few hours the moon would be up, and then the work he had before him would be more difficult.

"I must get into the cave before the moon rises!" he thought. "But how?"

When he came to the precipice in the side of the mountain from which the cave opened, he saw the black spot which marked the entrance. It was not large, and, close in front, sitting with his back against the rock, was a guard!

Ned lay down to wait. When the moon rose it would cast the shadow of the mountain on that spot. For a few hours more he might wait for his chance.

Directly he heard a call which brought him to an alert attitude in an instant. It was the call of the wolf pack, sharp, vicious, warning!

There was a movement at the mouth of the cave, and a quick light showed for only a second. Then came a sound of footsteps negotiating the gravelly slope.

Ned dropped back to the west. The call had come from that direction. It might have been uttered either by Frank or by one of the boys left at the camp.

Presently the snarl was heard in a dark crevice toward which the boy was descending. Ned dropped down faster than, and soon heard Frank's voice.

"Are you alone?" he asked.

"Yes; and you?"

"Bradley and Dode are here."

Bradley moved forward and took Ned by the arm.

"Be careful!" he warned. "Those men would toss dynamite down here and take their own risk of death if they knew."

"We've had a run for our money!" Frank panted. "We've been everywhere. The cabin is deserted, and the lower camp and the counterfeiter cave are bare of life. Bradley caught us following him, and so we joined with him in his search for Mike III."

"Mike III.," Ned answered, "is up there in the cave with the abductors, and Mrs. Brady is with him. We've got to act quickly."

"They'll be murdered!" Bradley whispered. "What can we do?"

"They'll be spared for a short time," Ned answered, "but we must be on the move."

CHAPTER XXV

THE CONFESSION OF A PHOTOGRAPH

"There's a ravine off to the right where the machines may be hidden," the clerk said, when the racing automobiles stopped at the foot of the hills.

"Show the way, then, quick," hastily commanded the leader. "We want to see what sort of people they are who ride at break-neck speed in the darkness."

The machines were driven into the ravine referred to, and the secret service men and the boys secreted themselves in a clump of undergrowth close to the roadside. The horsemen came on swiftly, and would have passed only that the detectives closed in about them, three in front and three in the rear.

"What is the meaning of this?" demanded the dark little man who had shown himself at the telegraph office.

The two men with him whispered together but said nothing in the way of protest.

"Dismount!" ordered the leader.

The men hesitated, and a bullet cut the air within a fraction of an inch of the right ear of the leader. There was now no delay in reaching the ground.

"You shall pay for this!" shouted the little dark man.

"Of course," laughed the leader.

Jimmie pulled at the sleeve of the chief.

"That is one of the men I saw in the mountains," he declared. "He is the second one in command, as far as I could determine."

"What does the boy say?" demanded the other.

"What are you doing here?" asked the chief, impatiently.

"We are hunting in the hills."

"Hunting at this season?"

"Hunting and resting. Please now do we go on?"

The chief made a significant motion, and before the three men knew what was going on they were securely handcuffed. They roared at their captors and at each other in a foreign language for a moment and then sat down stolidly at the side of the road.

"You, Jerry, and you, Sam, take them back to the town and lock them up," ordered the chief. "Perhaps you, Charley, would better go with them. Ride and make them walk!"

"Locked up!" shouted the dark little man. "What for?"

"Treason to your country," was the short reply.

For a moment there was no word spoken, then the three men arose to their feet and approached the chief, standing with a hand on his revolver.

"There is money," one of the men said. "Plenty of money."

"Cut that out!" ordered the chief, curtly.

"Not in the thousands!" the other went on, "In the millions!"

"If they renew this proposition on the way in," ordered the chief, "gag them!"

In a moment the three men were away with their prisoners, the sound of the horses' feet dying away in soft echoes from the hills.

Then the chief turned to the clerk.

"Does our auto ride end here?" he asked.

The clerk shook his head.

"A few rods further on," he said, "you can turn into the bed of a half dry stream which runs out of the hills almost at the rocky wall of the mountain itself."

"And the bottom of the stream?" asked the chief.

"Sand and fine gravel. The grade is not steep."

"And how far from the summit shall we be when we get to the end of the water route?" asked the chief.

"Not more than three miles, but it is a stiff climb."

"Get under way then," was the order, and the motors sang their tune in the hills once more.

"What time does the moon rise?" the chief asked, after a few moments of splashing in the bed of the stream, which at that season of the year was not more than three inches deep, except in places, which were avoided.

"About twelve," was the reply.

"We must be well up the hill before that," the chief declared.

When they came to the end of the water course the machines were hidden in a canyon not far away

and the men and the boys proceeded on up the slope.

In the meantime Ned and those with him were listening for the sound of footsteps in their immediate vicinity. The call of the pack had aroused the suspicions of the guard, and it was evident that he had left his place at the entrance of the cave to learn the meaning of it.

After a brief wait Ned heard the sound he was listening for and clutched Frank eagerly by the arm.

"Move away to the right and repeat the wolf call, only lower," he directed. "When you have done so dodge back here-quick! The guard may shoot!"

"What are you going to do?" whispered Bradley. "Be careful! Those Orientals are dangerous people to handle! Be careful!"

"I guess we won't start anything we can't finish," Frank grinned.

The boy did as requested, and Ned moved up the slope. Bradley sat watching the dim figures disappear and wondered what sort of company he had fallen into.

When the call of the pack came from the spot indicated by Ned, there was a rush of footsteps. The guard evidently, was advancing toward the suspicious sound.

The next event was so sudden, so unexpected, so startling, that Bradley almost held his breath for an instant. There was a choking gurgle, a blow, and a noise of falling bodies. Then Ned and the guard rolled into the little dip where the others were hiding.

Frank, back by this time, threw himself on the struggling mass and the guard was soon handcuffed and gagged. Then Frank sat back and laughed until Dode tried to gag him with a handkerchief.

"Come!" Ned whispered, giving the boy a poke in the ribs. "We're going into the cave now! Are you going, Bradley?" he added, turning to the blonde fellow.

"If you forget what took place at the club-room in New York, I'll—"

"You're on!" whispered Ned. "Now—quick and cautious!"

The old lady, sitting dejectedly with her grandson in her arms, in a rough cave-room, saw the boys creeping forward. Ned held up a warning hand and waited. The old lady, evidently knowing what was wanted, pointed to a small opening to the south.

"They are in there, two of them, asleep!" she whispered a moment later, when Ned had reached her side. "The others are away!"

"And the other boy?" asked Ned, anxiously.

"He is with them," was the gratifying reply.

It was Frank who accompanied Ned into the sleeping chamber where the heads of the conspiracy lay asleep. It was Frank who snapped the manacles on the wrist of the one who was lying across the entrance as a guard.

The supreme head of the wicked conspiracy struggled, half awake, as Ned slipped the handcuffs on and searched him for weapons. But it was all over in a moment, much to the amazement of Bradley, who, attracted by a gleam of light, looked through the low opening to see the searchlights of the Boy Scouts lighting up two angry faces. The prince—the real prince this time!—was asleep on a costly rug not far away. Later, when awakened, his attention was at once attracted to Mike III., who made a pretty good playfellow for him for the time being.

For there was little sleep in the Boy Scout Camera Club camp that night. When the boys, the old lady, the prince and the others came out of the cave, just as the moon was showing above the rim of the world, a rocket was mounting the sky to the north.

"One of the boys!" Ned exclaimed. "I reckon something is wrong there!"

But nothing was wrong there—nothing at all, so far as the boys were concerned. Oliver and Teddy had succeeded in capturing the man who was watching the camp. Pretending to fall asleep by the fire, they had lain in wait for the spy and captured him just as he was in the act of setting fire to the tent.

Dode accompanied Mrs. Brady and her grandson to the cabin, where, at her request, he remained a welcome guest for many days.

When the stories of the night had been told Jack, Jimmie, and the three secret service men made their appearance, puffing from their long climb. Then new stories had to be told, and the prince was by no means slow in telling of his adventures in the hills.

"The boy lies!" the leader of the conspirators declared. "I had nothing to do with the boy! I was not here when he was brought in. I came on separate business with one of the men already here, and did not know of the lad's presence here until to-night, and even then I did not know who he was."

"All the others will swear to that," Bradley said, "in an attempt to save the man's life by sacrificing their own."

"Never mind," Ned said, "you can testify to his interest in the abduction."

"I don't know a thing about it," was the reply. "I was hired to watch you in New York, and to bring Mike III. in here. I never saw this man while here—never saw the prince. I don't even know how they got Mike III. from his father! They kept me in ignorance of all their moves."

"Well," laughed Ned, "then we'll fall back on the confession that has been made."

"Confession!" repeated the others. "Who has confessed?"

"The photograph!" smiled Ned, taking out the two pictures in which the man and the prince were shown. "The pictures show this man in the company of the prince, and the prince will tell the rest. This closes the case."

"When are you going out?" asked the chief of the secret service men.

"Why," replied Ned, "I promised the outlaws that I would get away to-morrow morning. I'm going to keep my word!"

"You'd better go out with us and travel in the machines, then," said the other.

"And leave Uncle Ike?" demanded Jimmie. "Not for me! I'm going to ride that blessed mule to Cumberland, and ship him to New York."

And he actually did! While the others were riding at their ease in the racers, Jimmie was urging his mule along the country road, alighting now and then to let him thrust a soft muzzle into a pocket in quest of sugar.

At Cumberland Ned met Mike II., who was going in to spend a long time with his mother and the boy. He had sent the son in by a Washington friend, he said! That was all! Dode, he said, would be asked to remain there permanently. No one even knew how much the father knew of the trick to be played with his son.

And so, save for a few raveled ends, the story of the Boy Scout Camera Club is told.

Bradley was given a position by Oliver's father, and became very friendly with the boys. He insists to this day that he did not know about the abduction of the prince.

The conspirators were turned over to their own government, and there the record ends, though none of them was ever seen out of prison again!

Those who wish to follow the Boy Scouts farther can do so by reading the next book of this series, entitled: "The Boy Scout Electrician; or, the Hidden Dynamo."

End of Project Gutenberg's The Boy Scout Camera Club, by G. Harvey Ralphson

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